The STRENGTH of the PINES

By
EDISON MARSHALL

Author of
"The Voice of the Pack"

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THE KILLER CHEATED

SYNOPSIS.—At the death of his foster father Bruce Duncan, in an eastern city, receives a mysterious message, sent by a Mrs. Ross, summoning him peremptorily to southern Oregon—to meet "Linda." Bruce has vivid but baffling recollections of his childhood in an orphanage, before his adoption by Newton Duncan, with the girl Linda. At his destination, Trail's End, news that a message has been sent to Bruce gets to Simon Turner. Leaving the train, Bruce is astonished at his apparent familiarity with the surroundings, though to his knowledge he has never been there. On the way Simon warns him to give up his quest and return East. Bruce refuses. Mrs. Ross, aged and infirm, welcomes him with emotion. She hastens him on his way—the end of "Pine-Needle Trail." Bruce finds his childhood playmate, Linda. The girl tells him of wrongs committed by an enemy clan, the Turners, on her family, the Rosses. Lands occupied by the clan were stolen from the Rosses, and the family with the exception of Aunt Elmira (Mrs. Ross) and herself, wiped out by assassination. Bruce's father, Matthew Folger, was one of the victims. His mother had fled with Bruce and Linda. The girl, white small, had been kidnaped from the orphanage and brought to the mountains. Linda's father had deeded his lands to Matthew Folger, but the agreement, which would confute the enemy claims on the property, had been lost. Bruce's mountain blood responds to the call of the blood-feud. A giant tree, the Sentinel Pine, in front of Linda's cabin, seems to Bruce's excited imagination to be endeavoring to convey a message. Bruce sets out in search of a trapper named Hudson, a witness to the agreement between Linda's father and Matthew Folger. A grizzly, grizzly known as the Killer, is the terror of the vicinity. Dave Turner, sent by Simon, bribes Hudson to swear falsely concerning the agreement. The Killer strikes down Hudson. Bruce, on his way to Hudson, wounds the Killer, driving him from his victim. Hudson, learning Bruce's identity, tries to tell him the hiding place of the agreement, but death announces him. Dave decoys Linda and Aunt Elmira from their home. The man insults Linda and is struck down by the aged woman. Elmira's son has been murdered by Dave, and at her command, after securely binding the desperado, Linda leaves them alone. Returning, Bruce finds a note, supposedly from Linda, telling him she has been kidnaped by the Turners. Bruce falls into Simon's trap, and is made prisoner. Charging Bruce with attempting to rape Linda, Simon threatens the man with a beating. Bruce, however, is saved by the girl, who appears and calls Simon to account. Simon orders Bruce out of his house. The girl refuses, telling him she loves Bruce. Enraged, the man brutally strikes her and leaves.

CHAPTER XXII—Continued.

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But the curtain of this drama in the mountain home had not yet rung down. Half-unconscious, she listened to his steps. He was out in the moonlight, vanishing among the trees. Strange fancies swept her, all in the smallest fraction of an instant, and a voice spoke clearly. With all the strength of her will she dispelled the mists of drowning unconsciousness that the pain had wrought and crept swiftly to the little desk placed against the wall. Her hand fumbled in the shadow behind it and brought out a glittering rifle. Then she crept to the open doorway.

Lying on the floor, she raised the weapon to her shoulder. Her thumb pressed back a strong and unfaltering against the hammer; and she heard it click as it sprung into place. Then she looked along the barrel until she saw the swinging form of Simon through the sights.

There was no remorse in that cold gaze of hers. The wings of death hovered over the man, ready to swoop down. Her fingers curled tighter about the trigger. One ounce more pressure, and Simon's track of wickedness and bloodshed would have come to an end at last. But at that instant her eyes widened with the dawn of an idea.

She knew this man. She knew the hatred that was upon him. And she realized, as if by an inspiration from on High, that before he went to his house to sleep he would go once more into the presence of Bruce, confined somewhere among these ridges and suffering the punishment of having opposed his will. Simon would want one look to see how his plan was getting on; perhaps he would want to utter one taunting word. And Linda saw her chance.

She dropped the rifle and darted back her own room. There she procured a weapon that she trusted more, her little pistol, loaded with six cartridges.

If she had understood the real nature of the danger that Bruce faced she would have retained the rifle. It lacked with many times the smashing power of the little gun, and at long range was many times as accurate, but even it would have seemed an ineffective defense against such an enemy as was even now creeping toward Bruce's body. But she knew that his critics, saving each of the Turners she thought she might have to face, it would serve her much better than the more unwieldy heavier weapon. Besides, she knew how to wield it, and all her life she had kept it for just such an emergency.

The pain of the blow was quite gone now, except for a strange sickness that had overpowered her. But she was never colder of nerve and surer of muscle. Cunningly she lay down again before she crept through the door, so that if Simon chanced to look about he would fail to see that she followed him. She crept to the thickets, then stood up. Three hundred yards down the slope she could see Simon's dimming figure in the moonlight, and swiftly she sped after him.

CHAPTER XXIII

The shadow that Bruce saw at the edge of the forest could not be mistaken as to identity. The hopes that he had held before—that this stalking figure might be that of a deer or an elk—could no longer be entertained. Men, as a rule, do not love the wild and wailing sobs of a coyote, as he looks down upon a camp fire from the ridge above. Sleep does not come easily when a gaunt wolf walks in a slow, inquisitive circle about the pallet, scarcely a leaf rustling beneath his feet. And a few times, in the history of the frontier, men have had queer tinglings and creepings in the scalp when they have happened to glance over their shoulders and see the eyes of a great, tawny puma glowing an odd blue in the firelight. Yet, Bruce would have had any one of these, or all three together, in preference to the Killer.

The reason was extremely simple. No words have ever been capable of expressing the depths of cowardice of which a coyote is capable. He will whine and weep about a camp, like a soul lost between two worlds, but if he is in his right mind he would have each one of his gray hairs plucked out, one by one, rather than attack a man. The cunning breed to which he belongs has found out that it doesn't pay. The wolf is sometimes disquietingly brave when he is fortified by his pack brethren in the winter, but in such a season as this he is particularly careful to keep out of the sight of man. And the Tawny One himself, white-fanged and long-clawed and powerful as he is, never gets farther than certain dreadful, speculative dreams.

But none of these was true of the Killer. He had already shown his scorn of men. His very stride showed that he feared no living creature that shared the forest with him. In fact, he monarched himself the forest master. The bear is never a particularly timid animal, and whatever timidity the bear possessed was as utterly gone from the grizzly as reason is from a madman.

Bruce watched him with unwinking gaze, partly because the Killer was so distant that the slightest movement would fail to uncover his outline. Bruce had no conscious knowledge, as yet, that it is movement rather than form to which the eyes of the wild creatures are most receptive. But he acted upon that fact now as if by instinct. He was not lying in quite the exact spot where the Killer had left his dead the preceding night, and possibly his outline was not enough like it to attract the grizzly's attention. Besides, in the intermittent light, it was wholly possible that the grizzly would try to find the remains of his feast by smell alone; and if this were lacking, and Bruce made no movements to attract his attention, he might wander away in search of other game.

For the first time in his life, Bruce knew Fear as it really was. It is a knowledge that few dwellers in cities can possibly have; and so few times has it really been experienced in these days of civilization that men have mostly forgotten what it is like. If they experience it at all, it is usually only in a dream that arises from the germ-plasm—a nightmare to paralyze the muscles and chill the heart and freeze a man in his bed. The moon was strange and white as it slipped in and out of the clouds, and the forest, mysterious as Death itself, lightened and darkened alternately with a strange effect of unreality; but for all that, Bruce could not make himself believe that this was just a dream. The dreadful reality remained that the Killer, whose name and works he knew, was even now investigating him from the shadows one hundred feet away.

The fear that came to him was that of the young world—fear without recompense, direct and primitive fear that grew on him like a sickness. It was the fear that the deer knew as they crept down their dusky trails at night; it was the fear of darkness and silence and pain and heaven knows what cruelty that would be visited upon him by those terrible rending fangs and claws. It was the fear that can be heard in the pack song in the dreadful winter season, and that can be felt in strange overtones in the sobbing wail of despair that the coyote utters in the half-darkness. He had been afraid for his life every moment he was in the hands of the Turners. He knew that if he survived this night, he would have to face death again. He had no hopes of deliverance also—none. But the Turners were men, and they worked with knife blade and bullet, not rending fang and claw. He could face men bravely; but it was hard to keep a strong heart in the face of this ancient fear of beasts.

The Killer seemed disturbed and moved slowly along the edge of the moonlight. Bruce could trace his movements by the irregularity in the line of shadows. He seemed to be moving more cautiously than ever now. Bruce could not hear the slightest sound.

For an instant he had an exultant hope that the bear would continue on down the edge of the forest and leave him; and his heart stood still as the great beast paused, sniffing. But some smell in the air seemed to reach him, and he came stealing back.

In reality, the Killer was puzzled. He had come to this place straight through the forest with the expectation that food—flesh to tear with his fangs—would be waiting for him. And now, as he waited at the border of the darkness, he knew that a strange change had taken place. And the Killer did not like strangeness.

The smell that he had expected had dimmed to such an extent that it promoted no muscular impulse. Perhaps it was only obliterated by a stranger smell—one that was vaguely familiar and wakened a slow, brooding anger in his great beast's heart.

He was not timid; yet he retained some of his natural caution and remained in the gloom while he made his investigations. Probably it was a hunting instinct alone. He crept slowly up and down the border of moonlight, and his anger seemed to grow and deepen within him. He felt dimly that he had been cheated out of his meal. And once before he had been similarly cheated; but there had been singular triumph at the end of that experience.

All at once a movement, far across the pasture, caught his attention. It seemed that some one had come, taken one glance at the drama at the edge of the forest, and had departed. Bruce himself had not seen the figure; and perhaps it was the mercy of Fate—not usually merciful—that he did not. He might have been caused to hope again, only to know a deeper despair when the man left him without giving aid. For the tall form had been that of Simon coming, as Linda had anticipated, for a moment's inspection of his handiwork. And seeing that it was good, he had departed again.

The grizzly watched him go, then turned back to his questioning regard of the strange, dark figure that lay so prone in the grass in front. The darkness deepened over the forest as the moon went behind a cloud, and for a time Bruce could see the Killer no more.

Up to this moment the Killer had doubted. He remembered now. Possibly the upright form of Simon had suggested it to him; possibly the wind had only blown straighter and thus permitted him to identify the troubling smells. All at once a memory flashed over him—of a scene in a distant glen, and similar tall figures that tried to drive him from his food. He had charged then, struck once, and one of the forms had lain very still. He remembered the pungent, maddening odor that had reached him after his blow had gone home. Most clearly of all, he remembered how his claws had struck and sunk.

He knew this strange shadow now. It was just another of that tall breed he had learned to hate, and it was singly lying prone as his foe had done after the charge beside Little river. In fact, the still-lying form resulted the other occasion with particular vividness. The excitement that he had felt before returned to him now; he remembered his disappointment when the whistling bullets from the hillside above had driven him from his dead. But there were no whistling bullets now. Except for them, there would have been further rapture beside that dream; but he might have it now.

The Blade Glittered; but Linda Was Afraid to Look at It Closely.

The old hunting madness came back to him. It was fair game, this that lay so still in the grass, just as the body of the calf had been, and just as the warm body of Hudson in the distant glen.

The wound at his side gave him a twinge of pain. It served to make his memories all the clearer. The lurid lights flared in his eyes. Rage swept over him.

But he didn't charge blindly. He retained enough of his hunting caution to know that his stalk was the proper course. He moved farther out from the edge of the forest.

At that time the moon came out and revealed him, all too vividly, to Bruce. The Killer's great gray figure in the silver light was creeping toward him across the silvered grass.

* * * * *

When Linda came to her house, her first realization was the need of caution. It would not do to let Simon see her. And she knew that only her long training in the hills, her practice in climbing the steep, rocky ridges, would enable her to keep pace with the fast-walking man without being seen.

In her concern for Bruce, Linda had completely forgotten the events of the earlier part of the evening. Wild and stirring though they were, they now seemed to be the incidents of remote years, scarcely to be remembered in this hour of peril. But she remembered them vividly when, two hundred yards from the house, she saw two strange figures coming toward her between the moonlit tree trunks.

There was very little of reality about them. The foremost figure was both strange, but she knew that it could be no one but Elmira. The second, however—half-obscured behind the first—gave no interpretation of outline at all at first. But at the turn of a trail she saw both figures in vivid outline. Elmira was coming homeward over her cane, and she led a saddled horse by its bridle rein.

Still unseen by Simon in sight, Linda ran swiftly toward her. She didn't understand the deep awe that stole over her, a feeling that even her fear for her kin could not transcend. There was a quality in Elmira's face and posture that she had never seen before. Some of the were walking in her sleep, a dreamy and languor, her cane creeping through the pine needles of the forest. She did not seem to be aware of Linda's approach until she was only ten feet distant. Then she looked up, and Linda saw the moonlight on her face.

She was dreaming also, but she didn't know what it was. Her own eyes [illegible]. The thin lips were [illegible] looked as if she were [illegible] a strange peace in the soft light. Terrible [illegible] had recently died and [illegible] upon it. But Linda [illegible] to stop [illegible]

"Take Bruce."

Elmira answered in an [illegible]. "It's the horse that [illegible] rider rode here—and he [illegible] him any more."

Linda [illegible] them, passed it over the horse's head, and started to swing into the saddle. Then she turned with a gasp. A woman slipped something into her hand.

Linda looked [illegible] and saw it was the hilt of a knife that Elmira had carried with her when the two women had gone to live into the woods. The blade glittered; but Linda was afraid to look at it closely. "Too, might need it, too," the old woman said. "[illegible] well—I can't remember. But take it, anyway."

Linda [illegible] her. She thrust the blade into the leather of the saddle. Then swung to the horse.

She rode slowly until she began to hear the hoof beat of her [illegible]; then she drew up to a walk. And when she had crested the hill and followed down its long slope to the glen, the moon went behind clouds for the first time.

She had [illegible] of Simon at once. Something [illegible] to save Bruce had come to her after all. But she didn't [illegible]. There were light patches [illegible] and the moon might come out again.

She [illegible] the trail toward the cleared [illegible] that the Turners cultivated [illegible] to their very cliffs. It was a [illegible] high point, so she waited long [illegible] the moon to emerge again. [illegible] seemed to be, had it seemed to [illegible] for all at once its light [illegible] over the land.

[illegible] the distant square, but [illegible] catch no glimpse of Simon [illegible] the trees. Evidently he [illegible] walked in the direction of [illegible]. Then she looked up [illegible] the moon.

[illegible] of a mile away [illegible] of a miniature [illegible] the weird quality of the moonlight [illegible] which say shadow was [illegible] sharp, enabled her to discern [illegible]. It was Simon, and evidently he [illegible] had taken him [illegible]. Feeling that she was on the [illegible] track at last, she stood [illegible] forward again, keeping to the [illegible] of the timber at first.

[illegible] almost parallel to the dark [illegible] for nearly a mile; then turned [illegible] the tilted lands. She rode [illegible] and raised in the house [illegible].

When the distance had almost obscured him, she saw him stop. He waited a [illegible] then turned back. The moon [illegible] in and out of the clouds. [illegible] peering to the distance to convince [illegible] Linda rode slowly out into the [illegible].

Bruce [illegible] the timber, his inspection [illegible] done, and Linda [illegible] the general direction he had gone. A certain sense of impending [illegible] came over her as she headed on toward the distant wall of forest beyond.

Then, the clouds slowly dimming under the moon, the light grew with almost imperceptible encroachments. At first it was only bright enough to show her own dim shadow on the grass. The utter gloom that was over the fields lessened and drew away like receding curtains; her vision reached ever farther, the shadows grew more clearly outlined and distinct. Then the moon rolled forth into a wholly open patch of sky—a white sphere with a sprinkling of vivid stars around it—and the silver radiance poured down.

It was like the breaking of dawn. The fields stretched to incredible distances about her. The forest beyond emerged in distinct outline; she could see every irregularity in the plain. And in one instant's glance she knew that she had found Bruce.

His situation went home to her in one sweep of the eyes. Bruce was not alone. Even now a great, towering figure was creeping toward him from the forest. Linda cried out, and with the long strap of her rein lashed her horse into the fastest pace it knew.

Bruce did not hear her come. He lay in the soft grass waiting for death. A great calm had come upon him; a strange, quiet strength that the pines themselves might have lent to him; and he made no cry. In this dreadful last moment of despair the worst of his terror had gone and left his thoughts singularly clear. And but one desire was left to him: that the Killer might be merciful and end his existence with one blow.

It was not a great deal to ask for; but he knew perfectly that only by the mercy of the fiercest gods could it come to pass. They are usually not so kind to the dying; and it is not the wild animal way to take pains to kill at the first blow. Yet his eyes held straight. The Killer crept slowly toward him; more and more of his vast body was revealed above the tall heads of the grass. And now all that Bruce knew was a great wonder—a strange expectancy and awe of what the opening gates of darkness would reveal.

The Killer moved with dreadful slowness and deliberation. He was no longer afraid. It was just as it had been before—a warm figure lying still and helpless for his own terrible pleasure. A few more steps and he would be near enough to see plainly the [illegible] of his victim. [illegible] setting. And then the shadows suddenly rang with the undulations of his snarl.

Almost unconscious, Bruce did not understand what had caused his utterance. But strangely, the bear had lifted his head and was staring straight over him. For the first time Bruce heard the wild beat of hoofs on the turf behind him.

He didn't have time to turn and look. There was no opportunity even for a flood of renewed hope. Events followed upon one another with startling rapidity. The sharp, unmistakable crack of a pistol leaped through the dusk, and a bullet sung over his body. And then a wild-riding figure swept up to him.

It was Linda, firing as she came. How she had been able to control her horse and ride him into that scene of peril no words may reveal. Perhaps, running wildly beneath the lash, his starting eyes did not discern or interpret the gray figure scarcely a score of yards distant from Bruce; and it is true the grizzly's pungent smell—a thing to terrify much more and to be interpreted more clearly than any kind of dim form in the moonlight—was blown in the opposite direction. Perhaps the lashing strap recalled the terrible punishment the horse had undergone earlier that evening at the hands of Simon and no room was left for any lesser terror. But most likely of all, just as in the case of brave soldiers riding their horses into battle, the girl's own strength and courage went into him.

The bear reared up, snarling with wrath, but for a moment it dared not charge. The sudden appearance of the girl and the horse held him momentarily at bay. The girl swung to the ground in one leap, fired again, thrust her arm through the loop of the bridle rein, then knelt at Bruce's side. The white blade that she carried in her left hand slashed at his bonds.

The horse, plunging, seemed to jerk her body back and forth, and endless seconds seemed to go by before the last of the thongs was severed. In reality the whole rescue was unbelievably swift. The man helped her all he could. "Up—up into the saddle," she commanded. The grizzly growled again, advancing remorselessly toward them, and twice more she fired. Two of the bullets went home in his great body, but their weight and shocking power were too slight to affect him. He went down once more on all fours, preparing to charge.

Bruce, in spite of the fact that his limbs had been nearly paralyzed by the tight bonds, managed to grasp the saddlehorn. In the strength of newborn hope he pulled himself half up on it, and he felt Linda's strong arms behind him pushing up. The horse plunged in deadly fear; and the Killer leaped toward them. Once more the pistol crashed. Then the horse broke and ran in a frenzy of terror.

Bruce was full in the saddle by then, and even at the first leap his arm swept out to the girl on the ground beside him. He swung her toward him, and at the same time her hands caught at the arching back of the saddle. For the first fifty feet she was half dragged, but slowly—with Bruce's help—she pulled herself up to a position of security.

For the First Fifty Feet She Was Half Dragged.

The Killer's charge had come a few seconds too late. For a moment he raced behind them in insane fury, but only his savage growl leaped through the darkness fast enough to catch up with them. And the distance slowly widened.

The Killer had been cheated again; and by the same token Simon's oath had been proved untrue. For once the remorseless strength of which he boasted had been worsted by a greater strength; and love, not hate, was the power that gave it. For once a girl's courage—a courage greater than that with which he obeyed the dictates of his cruel will—had cost him his victory. The war that he and his outlaw band had begun so long ago had not yet been won.

Indeed, if Simon could have seen what the moon saw as it peered out from behind the clouds, he would have known that one of the debts of blood incurred so many years ago had even now been paid. Far away on a distant hillside there was one who gave no heed to the fast hoof beats of the speeding horse. It was Dave Turner, and his trail of ruin and wickedness was taken at last. [illegible] on the pine needles.

And the pines, those tall, dark sentinels of the wilderness, stopped to look down upon him in passionless contemplation, as if they wondered at the stumbling ways of men. Their branches rubbed together and made words as the wind swept through them, but no man may say what those words were.

BOOK THREE

COMING OF THE STRENGTH

CHAPTER XXIV

Fall was at hand at Trail's End. The spirit of autumn had come with golden wings.

A buck deer—a noble creature with six points on his spreading horns—got the first inkling of it when he stopped at a spring to drink. The air had been chill in his nostrils, but thanks to a heavy growth of hair that—with mysterious foresight—had begun to come upon his body, it gave him no discomfort. But it was a puzzling and significant thing that the water he went to drink had been transformed to something hard and white and burning cold on the tip of his nose.

It was the first real freeze. True, for the past few nights there had been a measure of tinkling, cobweb frost on the ground in wet places, but even the tender-skinned birds—always most watchful of signs of this kind—had disregarded it. But there was no disregarding this half-inch of blue ice that had covered the spring. The buck deer struck it angrily with his front hoofs, broke through and drank; then went snorting up the hill.

His anger was in itself a significant thing. In the long, easy-going summer days, Blackfall had almost forgotten what anger was like. He had been content to roam over the ridges, creeping the leaves and grass, avoiding danger and growing fat. But all at once this kind of existence had palled on him. He felt that he wanted only one thing—not food or drink, or safety—but a good, thrilling, heart-searing battle with another buck of his own species. An unusual consciousness had come upon him, and his soft eyes burned with a blue fire. He remembered the does, too—with a sudden leap of his blood—and wondered where they were keeping themselves. Being only a beast he did not know that this new belligerent spirit was just as much a sign of fall as the soft brush that was coming on the leaves. The simple fact was that fall means the beginning of the rut—the wild mating days when the bucks battle among themselves and choose their harems of does.

Bruce and Linda, facing more trouble, decide never to yield.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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