

The Strength Of The Pines

by Edison Marshall
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Illustrations by Irwin Myers



Copyright by Little, Brown, and Co. He started to go, and she ran after him with outstretched arms. "Oh, Bruce," she cried, "Come back soon—soon. Don't leave me to die alone."



"Oh, Bruce," she cried, "Come back soon—soon. Don't leave me to die alone."

Bruce," she cried, "come back soon—soon. Don't leave me to die alone. I'm not strong enough for that—"

He whirled, took two paces back, and his arms went about her. He had forgotten his injury long since. He kissed her cool lips and smiled into her eyes. Then at once the furies hid him.

The girl climbed up into the branches of a fir tree. In the thicket beyond a great gray form tacked back and forth, trying to locate a scent that a second before he had caught but dimly and had lost. It was the Killer, and his temper was lost long ago in the whirling snow.

His anger was upon him, partly from the discomfort of the storm, partly from the constant, gnawing pain of three bullet wounds in his powerful body. Besides, he realized the presence of his old and greatest enemy—those stall, slight forms that had crossed him so many times, that had stung him with their bullets, and whose weakness he had learned.

And then all at once he caught the scent plain. He lurched forward, crashed again through the brush, and walked out into the open, feet open. Linda saw his vague form, and at first she hung perfectly motionless, hoping to escape his gaze. She had been told many times that grizzlies cannot climb, yet she had no desire to see him raging below her, reaching, possibly trying to shake her from the limb.

He didn't seem to see her. His eyes were lowered; besides, it was never the grizzly way to search the branches of a tree. The wind blew the message that he might have read clearly in the opposite direction. She saw him walk slowly across the snow, head lowered, a huge gray ghost in the snow furies not one hundred feet distant. Then she saw him pause, with lowered head.

In the little second before the truth came to her, the bear had already turned. Bruce's tracks were somewhat dimmed by the snow, but the Killer interpreted them truly. She saw too late that he had crossed them, read their message, and now had turned into the clouds of snow to trace them down.

For an instant she gazed at him in speechless horror; and already the furies had almost obscured his gray figure. Desperately she tried to call his attention from the tracks. She called, then she rustled the branches as loudly as she could. But the noise of the wind obscured what sound she made, and the bear was already too absorbed in the hunt to turn and see her. As always, in the nearing presence of a foe, his rage grew upon him.

Sobbing, Linda swung down from the tree. She had no conscious plan of aid to her lover. She only had a blind instinct to seek him, to try to warn him of his danger, and at least to be with him at the death. The great tracks of the Killer, seemingly almost as long as her own arm, made a plain trail for her to follow. She too struck off into the storm-swept canyon.

And the forest gods who dwell somewhere in the region where the pine tops taper into the sky, and who pull the strings that drop and raise the curtain and work the puppets that are the players of the wilderness dramas, saw a chance for a great and tragic jest in this strange chase, over the snow. The destinies of Bruce, Linda and the Killer were already converg-

ing on this trail that all three followed—the path that the runaway horse made in the snow. Only one of the great forces of the war that had been waged at Trail's End was lacking, and now he came also.

Simon Turner had ridden late into the night and from before dawn; with remorseless fury he had gounded on his exhausted horse, he had driven him with un pitying strength through coverts, over great rocks, down into rocky canyons in search of Bruce and Linda, and now, as the dawn broke, he thought that he had found them. He had suddenly come upon the tracks of Bruce's horse in the snow.

If he had encountered them farther back, when the animal had been running wildly, he might have guessed the truth and rejoiced. No man would attempt to ride a horse at a gallop through that trailless stretch. But at the point he found the tracks most of the horse's terror had been spent, and it was walking leisurely, sometimes lowering its head to crop off the shrubbery. The trail was comparatively fresh, too; or else the fast-falling snow would have already obscured it. He thought that his hour of triumph was near.

But it had come none too soon. And Simon—out of passion-filled eyes—looked and saw that it would likely bring death with it.

He realized his position fully. The storm was steadily developing into one of those terrible mountain blizzards in which, without shelter, no human being might live. He was far from his home, he had no blankets, and he could not find his way. Yet he would not have turned back if he could. The securing of the document by which Bruce could take the great estates from him was only a trifle now. He believed wholly within his own soul that the wilderness—without his aid—would do his work of hatred for him; and that by no conceivable circumstances could Bruce and Linda find shelter from the blizzard and live through the day. He could find their bodies in the spring if he by any chance escaped himself, and take the Ross-Folger agreement from them. But it was not enough. He wanted also to do the work of destruction.

Even his own death—if it were only delayed until his vengeance was wreaked—could not matter now. In all the ancient strife and fury and ceaseless war of the wild through which he had come, there was no passion to equal this. The Killer was content to let the wolf kill the fawn for him. The cougar will turn from its warm, newly slain prey, in which its white fangs have already dipped, at the sight of some great danger in the thicket. But Simon could not turn. Death lowered its wings upon him as well as upon his enemy, yet the fire in his heart and the fury in his brain shut out all thought of it.

He sprang off his horse better to examine the tracks, and then stood, half bent over, in the snow.

Bruce Folger headed swiftly up the trail that his runaway horse had made. It was, he thought, his last effort, and he gave his full strength to it. Weakened as he was by the cold and the wound, he could not have made headway at all except for the fact that the wind was behind him.

The snow ever fell faster, in larger flakes, and the track dimmed before his eyes. It was a losing game. Terrified not only by the beast that had stirred in the thicket but by the ever-increasing wind as well, the animal would not linger to be overtaken. Bruce had not ridden it overnight to have tamed it, and his plan was to attempt to shoot the creature on sight, rather than try to catch it. They could not go forward, anyway, as long as the blizzard lasted. Which way was east and which was west he could not tell. The blankets they might make some sort of shelter and keep life in their bodies until the snow ceased and they could find their way.

The cold was deepening, the storm was increasing in fury. Bruce's bones ached, his wounded arm felt numb and strange, the frost was getting into his lungs. There was no hope of the storm decreasing, rather it was steadily growing worse. The tracks grew more dim, and he began to be afraid that the falling flakes would obscure his own footprints so that he could not find his way back to Linda. And he knew, beyond all other knowledge, that he wanted her with him when the sleds were dropped down for good and all. He wanted her arms about him; the light would be easier then.

"Oh, what's the use?" he suddenly said to the wind. "Why not give up and go back?" He halted in the trail and started to turn. But at that instant a banner of wind swept down into his face, and the eddy of snow in front of him

was brushed from his gaze. Just for the space of a breath the canyon for a hundred feet distant was partially cleared of the blinding streamers of snow. And he uttered a long gasp when he saw, thirty yards distant and at the farthest reaches of his sight, the figure of a saddled horse.

His gun leaped to his shoulder, yet his eagerness did not cost him his self-control. He gazed quietly along the sights until he saw the animal's shoulder between them. His finger pressed back against the trigger.

The horse rocked down, seemingly instantly killed, and the snow swept in between. Bruce cried out in triumph. Then he broke out to a run and sped through the furies toward his dead.

But it came about that there was other business for Bruce than the recovery of his blankets that he had supposed would be tied to the saddle. The snow was thick between, and he was within twenty feet of the animal's body before he glimpsed it clearly again. And he felt the first wave of wonder, the first promptings of the thought that the horse he had shot down was not his, but one that he had never seen before.

But there was no time for the thought to go fully home. Some one cried out—a strange, half-snarl of hatred and triumph that was almost lacking in all human quality—and a man's body leaped toward him from the thicket before which the horse had fallen. It was Simon, and Bruce had mistaken his horse for the one he had ridden.

Even in that instant crisis he did not forget that he had as yet neglected to expel the empty cartridge from the barrel of his rifle and to throw in the other from the magazine. He tried to get the gun to his shoulder, working the lever at the same time. But Simon's leap was too fast for him. His strong hand seized the barrel of the gun and snatched it from his hands. Then the assailant threw it back, over his shoulder, and it fell softly in the snow. He waited, crouched.

The two men stood face to face at last. All things else were forgot-



The Two Men Stood Face to Face at Last.

ten. The world they had known before—a world of sorrow and pleasures, of mountains and woods and homes—faded out and left no realities except each other's presence.

All about them were the snow furies that their eyes could not penetrate, and it was as if they were two lone contestants on an otherwise uninhabited sphere who had come to grips at last. The falling snow gave the whole picture a curious tone of unreality and dimness.

Bruce straightened, and his face was of iron. "Well, Simon," he said. "You've come."

The man's eyes burned red through the snow. "Of course I would. Did you think you could escape me?"

"It didn't much matter whether I escaped you or not," Bruce answered rather quietly. "Neither one of us is going to escape the storm and the cold. I suppose you know that."

"I know that one of us is. Because one of us is going out a more direct way—first. Which one that is doesn't much matter." His great hands clasped. "Bruce, when I snatched your gun right now I could have done more. I could have sprung a few feet farther and had you around the waist—taken by surprise. The fight would have been already over. I think I could have done more than that, even with my own rifle as you came up. It's lying there, just beside the horse."

But Bruce didn't turn his eyes to look at it. He was waiting for the attack.

"I could have snatched your life just as well, but I wanted to wait," Simon went on. "I wanted to say a few words first, and wanted to master you—not by surprise—but by superior strength alone."

It came into Bruce's mind he could tell Simon of the wound near his shoulder, how because of it no fight between them would be a fair test of superiority, yet the words didn't come to his lips. He could not ask mercy of this man, either directly or indirectly, any more than the pines asked mercy of the snows that covered them.

"You were right when you said there was no escaping from this storm," Simon went on. "But it doesn't much matter. It's the end of a long war, and what happens to the victor is neither here nor there. It seems all the more fitting that we should meet just as we have—at the very beginning—"

—death—and death should be what the end for the one of us who survives. It's so like this d—d, terrible wilderness in which we live."

Bruce gazed in amazement. The dark and dreadful poetry of this man's nature was coming to the fore. The wind made a strange echo to his words—a long, wild shriek as it swept over the heads of the pines.

"Then why are you waiting?" Bruce asked.

"So you can understand everything. But I guess that time is here. There is to be no mercy at the end of this fight, Bruce; I ask none and will give none. You have waged a war against me, you have escaped me many times, you have won the love of the woman I love—and this is to be my answer." His voice dropped a note, and he spoke more quietly. "I'm going to kill you, Bruce."

"Then try it," Bruce answered steadily. "I'm in a hurry to go back to Linda."

Simon's smoldering wrath blazed up at the words. Both men seemed to spring at the same time. Their arms failed, then interlocked; and they rocked a long time—back and forth in the snow.

For the first time Bruce had full realization of Simon's mighty strength. With all the power of his body he tried to wrench him off his feet, but it was like trying to tear a tree from the ground.

But surprise at the other's power was not confined to Bruce alone. Simon knew that he had an opponent worthy of the iron of his own muscles, and he put all his terrible might into the battle. He tried to reach Bruce's throat, but the man's strong shoulder held the arm against his side. Simon's great hand reached to pin Bruce's arm, and for the first time he discovered the location of his weakness.

He saw the color sweep from Bruce's face and water drops that were not melted snow come upon it. It was all the advantage needed between such evenly matched contestants. And Simon forgot his spoken word that he wished this fight to be a test of superiority alone. His fury swept over him like a flood and effaced all things else; and he centered his whole attack upon Bruce's wound.

In a moment he had him down, and he struck once into Bruce's white face with his terrible knuckles. The blow sent a strange sickness through the younger man's frame; and he tried vainly to struggle to his feet. "Fight! Fight on!" was the message his mind dispatched along his nerves to his tortured muscles, but for an instant they wholly refused to respond. They had endured too much. Total unconsciousness hovered above him, ready to descend.

Strangely, he seemed to know that Simon had crept from his body and was even now reaching some dreadful weapon that lay beside the dead form of the horse. In an instant he had it, and Bruce's eyes opened in time to see him swing it aloft. It was his rifle, and Simon was aiming a murderous blow at him with its stock.

There was no chance to ward it off. No human skull could withstand its shattering impact.

But that war of life and death in the far reaches of Trail's End was not to end so soon. At that instant there was an amazing intervention.

A great gray form came lunging out of the snow furies. Their vision was limited to a few feet, and so fast the creature came, with such incredible, smashing power, that he was upon them in a breath. It was the Killer in the full glory of the charge; and he had caught up with them at last.

Bruce saw only his great figure looming just over him. Simon, with amazing agility, leaped to one side just in time, then battered down the rifle stock with all his strength. But the blow was not meant for Bruce. It struck where aimed—the great gray shoulder of the grizzly.

Then, dimmed and half-obscured by the snow furies, there began as strange a battle as the great pines above them had ever beheld. The Killer's rage was upon him, and the blow at the shoulder had arrested his charge for a moment only. Then he wheeled, a snarling, fighting monster, with death for any living creature in the blow of his forearm, and lunged toward Simon again.

It was the Killer at his grandest. Simon had no chance to shoot his rifle. In the instant that he would raise it those great claws and fangs would be upon him. He swung it as a club, striking again and again, dodging the sledge-hammer blows and springing aside in the second of the Killer's lunges. He was fighting for his life, and no eye could bemean that effort.

Simon himself seemed exalted, and for once it appeared that the grizzly had found an opponent worthy of his might. They were of one kind, and they seemed to understand each other. The lust and passion and fury of battle were upon them both.

The scene backed back to the young days of the world, when man and beast battled for dominance. Nothing had changed. The forest stood grave and silent, just the same. The elements warred against them from the clouds—that ancient persecution of which the wolf pack sings on the ridge at night, that endless strife that has made of existence a travail and a scourge. Man and beast and storm—those three great foes were arrayed the same as ever. Time swung backward a thousand-thousand years. The snow seemed to come from all directions in great clouds and furies and streamers, and time after time it wholly hid the contestants from



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Bruce's eyes. At such times he could tell how the fight was going by sound alone—the snarl of the Killer, the wild oaths of Simon, the impact of the descending rifle butt. Bruce gave no thought of taking part. Both were enemies; his own strength seemed gone. The cold deepened; Bruce could feel it creeping into his blood, halting its flow, threatening the spark of life within him. The full light of day had come out upon the land.

Bruce knew the wilderness now. All its primitive passions were in play, all its mighty forces at grips. The storm seemed to be trying to extinguish these mortal lives; jealous of their intrusion, longing for the world it knew before living things came to dwell upon it, when its winds swept endlessly over an uninhabited earth, and its winter snows lay trackless and its rule was supreme. And beneath it, blind to the knowledge that in union alone lay strength to oppose its might—to oppose all those cruel forces that make a battleground of life—man and beast fought their battle to the death.

Linda came stealing out of the snow—following the grizzly's trail—and crept beside Bruce. She crouched behind him, and his arm went about her as if to shield her. She had heard the sounds of the battle from afar; she had thought that Bruce was the contestant, and her terror had left a deep pallor upon her face; yet now she gazed upon that frightful conflict with a strange and enduring calm. Both she and Bruce knew that there was but one sure conqueror, and that was Death. If the Killer survived the fight and through the mercy of the forest gods spared their lives, there remained the blizzard. They could conceive of no circumstances whereby further effort would be of the least avail.

The scene grew in fury. The last burst of strength was upon Simon; in another moment he would be exhausted. The bear had suffered terrible punishment from the blows of the rifle stock. He recoiled once more, then lunged with unbelievable speed. His huge paw, with all his might behind it, struck the weapon from Simon's hand.

It shot through the air seemingly almost as fast as the bullets it had often propelled from its muzzle, and struck the trunk of a tree. So hard it came that the lock was shattered; they heard the ring of metal. The bear rocked forward once more and struck again. And then all the sound that was left was the eerie complaint of the wind.

Simon lay still. The brave fight was over. His trail had ended fittingly—in the grip of such powers as were typical of himself. But the bear did not leap upon him to tear his flesh. For an instant he stood like a statue in gray stone, head lowered, as if in a strange attitude of thought. Then the great grizzly uttered one deep note and half-turned about. His eyes rested upon the man; but he did not seem to see them.

Then he turned again and headed off slowly, deliberately, directly into the face of the storm.

(Continued Next Week)

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We are paying the highest market price for hides and furs, also pelts with freight less, we can pay you more than concerns in eastern cities. We are known as one of the largest dealers in the Northwest.

"Will it be an offense," asked the pedantic professor, "if I catch fish in this pond?"
"No; a miracle," answered the keeper.

"Maud introduced her fiancé to me yesterday. He's short and stout, with a bald head and pug nose; and he has four motor cars and a steam yacht."

Jealousy is the fear of your own inferiority.

A Brooklyn woman claims an auto has alienated her husband's affections. She doesn't give the car's name, but we suspect it's Lizzie.

A true man's allegiance is given to that which is highest in his own nature. He reverences truth, he loves kindness, he respects justice.

Life is a great and noble calling, not a mean and groveling thing to be hurried through as we can, but a lofty and exalted destiny.

Proposed law would keep children under 18 from working. That is one way to get them to work.

August is the healthiest month in the year except for very young children.

Obsolete warships, filled with rubble, are being used to strengthen the seawall at Dartmouth, England.

Antioch, in the 4th century, is believed to have been the world's first city to light its streets at night.

Phosphate Industry of Tunisia. Since the discovery of phosphate deposits in Tunisia in 1880 the industry has developed to such an extent that two of the largest phosphate mines in the world are now producing near the Algerian frontier.

Just to Ourselves. It is hard to be really just to ourselves. A great many of us are more lenient with our own faults than with those of other people, while not a few censure themselves far more harshly for a false step than they would think of censuring another. What we should strive for is to be neither too exacting nor too lenient where our shortcomings are concerned, but to give ourselves the benefit of simple justice.

CALIFORNIA JOB FOR "DAKOTA" MAN

Backed by his splendid training at Dakota Business College, Fargo, N. D., C. E. Halbert won a fine position with the First National Bank of Bishop, (Calif.). Some 226 bank officers are D. B. C. graduates. Many now employ "Dakota" help. F. J. Ruff, Asst. Cashier, Dodge State Bank, recently wired for a stenographer. Grace Weirauch was sent.

"Follow the Successful." Attend the school that has turned out two generations of winners. Send names of interested friends and get Success Magazine free. Write F. L. Watkins, 806 Front St., Fargo, N. D.

MUST PAY FIRE DAMAGE

Jury Decides First Test Case Against Federal Railway Administration.

Duluth—A verdict against the United States railroad administration was returned by a district court jury here in what is considered a test case involving millions of dollars of property destroyed by forest fires October 12, 1918.

Free Autolists as Christmas Present.

Detroit—Judge Charles L. Bartlett announced he planned to order the release, as a Christmas gift, of all prisoners held for violating the traffic laws.

Knutson is Congress Club Officer.

Washington—Representative Harold Knutson of St. Cloud, Minn., has been elected second vice president of the Congressional Country club, of which Herbert Hoover, secretary of commerce, is president.

Close Baltic Sea to Warships.

London—The Russian Soviet government is taking steps to gain adherents to converting the Baltic into a closed sea as regards warships of all nations except those whose shore lines touch the Baltic.