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THE MAN OF THE FOREST

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[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER The Man of the Forest \(Xist Classics\) VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIX](#)

---

[CHAPTER XX](#)

[CHAPTER XXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV](#)

[CHAPTER XXV](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI](#)

## CHAPTER I

At sunset hour the forest was still, lonely, sweet with tang of fir and spruce, blazing in gold and red and green; and the man who glided on under the great trees seemed to blend with the colors and, disappearing, to have The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) become a part of the wild woodland.

Old Baldy, highest of the White Mountains, stood up round and bare, rimmed bright gold in the last glow of the setting sun. Then, as the fire dropped behind the domed peak, a change, a cold and darkening blight, passed down the black spear-pointed slopes over The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) all that mountain world.

It was a wild, richly timbered, and abundantly watered region of dark forests and grassy parks, ten thousand feet above sea-level, isolated on all sides by the southern Arizona desert—the virgin home of elk and deer, of bear and lion, of wolf and fox, and the birthplace as well as the hiding-place of the fierce Apache.

September in that The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) latitude was marked by the sudden cool night breeze following shortly after sundown. Twilight appeared to come on its wings, as did faint sounds, not distinguishable before in the stillness.

Milt Dale, man of the forest, halted at the edge of a timbered ridge, to listen and to watch. Beneath him lay a narrow valley, open and grassy, from which rose a faint murmur of running water. Its music was pierced by the wild staccato yelp of a hunting coyote. From The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) overhead in the giant fir came a twittering and rustling of grouse settling for the The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) night; and from across the valley drifted the last low calls of wild turkeys going to roost.

To Dale's keen ear these sounds were all they should have been, betokening an unchanged serenity of forestland. He was glad, The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) for he had expected to hear the clipclop of white men's horses—which to hear up in those fastnesses was hateful to

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him. He and the Indian were friends. That fierce foe had no enmity toward the lone hunter. But there hid somewhere The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) in the forest a gang of bad men, sheep-thieves, whom Dale did not The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) want to meet.

As he started out upon the slope, a sudden flaring of the afterglow of sunset The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) flooded down from Old Baldy, filling the valley with lights and shadows, yellow and blue, like the radiance of the sky. The The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) pools in the curves of the brook shone darkly bright. Dale's gaze The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) swept up and down The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) the valley, and then tried to pierce the black shadows across the brook where the The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) wall of spruce stood up, its speared and spiked crest against the pale clouds. The wind began to moan in The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) the trees and there was a feeling of rain in the air. Dale, striking a trail, turned his back to the fading afterglow and strode down the valley.

With night at hand and a rain-storm brewing, he did not head for The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) his own camp, some miles distant, but directed his steps toward an old log cabin. When he reached it darkness had almost set in. He approached with caution. This cabin, like the few others scattered in the valleys, might harbor Indians or a bear or a panther. Nothing, however, appeared to be there. Then Dale studied the clouds driving across the sky, and he felt the cool dampness of a fine, misty rain on his face. It would rain off and on during the night. Whereupon he entered the cabin.

And the next moment he heard quick hoof-beats of trotting horses. Peering out, he saw dim, moving forms in the darkness, quite close at hand. They had approached against the wind so that sound had been deadened. Five horses with riders, Dale made out—saw them loom close. Then he heard rough The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) voices. Quickly he turned to feel in the dark for a ladder The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) he knew led to a loft; and finding it, he quickly mounted, taking care not to make a noise with his rifle, and lay down upon the floor of brush and poles. Scarcely had he done so when heavy steps, with accompaniment of clinking spurs, passed through the door below into the cabin.

"Wal, Beasley, are you here?" queried a loud voice.

There was no reply. The man below growled under his breath, and again the spurs jingled.

"Fellars, Beasley The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) ain't here yet," he called. "Put the hosses under the shed. We'll wait."

"Wait, huh!" came a harsh reply. "Mebbe all night—an' we got nuthin' to eat."

"Shut up, Moze. Reckon you're no good for anythin' but eatin'. Put them hosses away an' some of you rustle fire-wood in here."

Low, muttered curses, then mingled with dull thuds of hoofs and strain of leather and heaves of tired horses.

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Another shuffling, clinking footstep entered the cabin.

"Snake, it'd been sense to fetch a pack along," drawled this newcomer.

"Reckon so, Jim. But we didn't, an' what's the use hollerin'? Beasley won't keep us waitin' long."

Dale, lying still and prone, felt a slow start in all his blood—a thrilling wave. That deep-voiced man below was Snake The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) Anson, the worst and most dangerous character of the region; and the others, undoubtedly, composed his gang, long notorious in that sparsely settled country. And the Beasley mentioned—he was one of the two biggest ranchers and sheep-raisers of the White Mountain ranges. What was the meaning of a rendezvous between Snake Anson and Beasley? Milt Dale answered that question to Beasley's discredit; and many strange matters pertaining to sheep and herders, always a mystery to the little village of Pine, now became as clear as daylight.

Other men entered the cabin.

"It ain't a-goin' to rain much," said one. Then came a crash of wood thrown to The Man of the Forest (Xist Classics) the ground.

"Jim, hyar's a chunk of pine log, dry as punk," said another.

Rustlings and slow footsteps, and then heavy thuds attested to the probability that Jim was knocking the end of a log upon the ground to split off a corner whereby a handful of dry splinters could be procured.

"Snake, lemme your pipe, an' I'll hev a fire in a jiffy."

"Wal, I want my terbacco an' I ain't carin' about no fire," replied Snake.

"Reckon you're the meanest cuss in these woods," drawled Jim.

Sharp click of steel on flint—many times—and then a sound of hard blowing and sputtering told of Jim's efforts to start a fire. Presently the pitchy blackness of the cabin changed; there came a little crackling of wood and the rustle of flame, and then a steady growing roar.

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