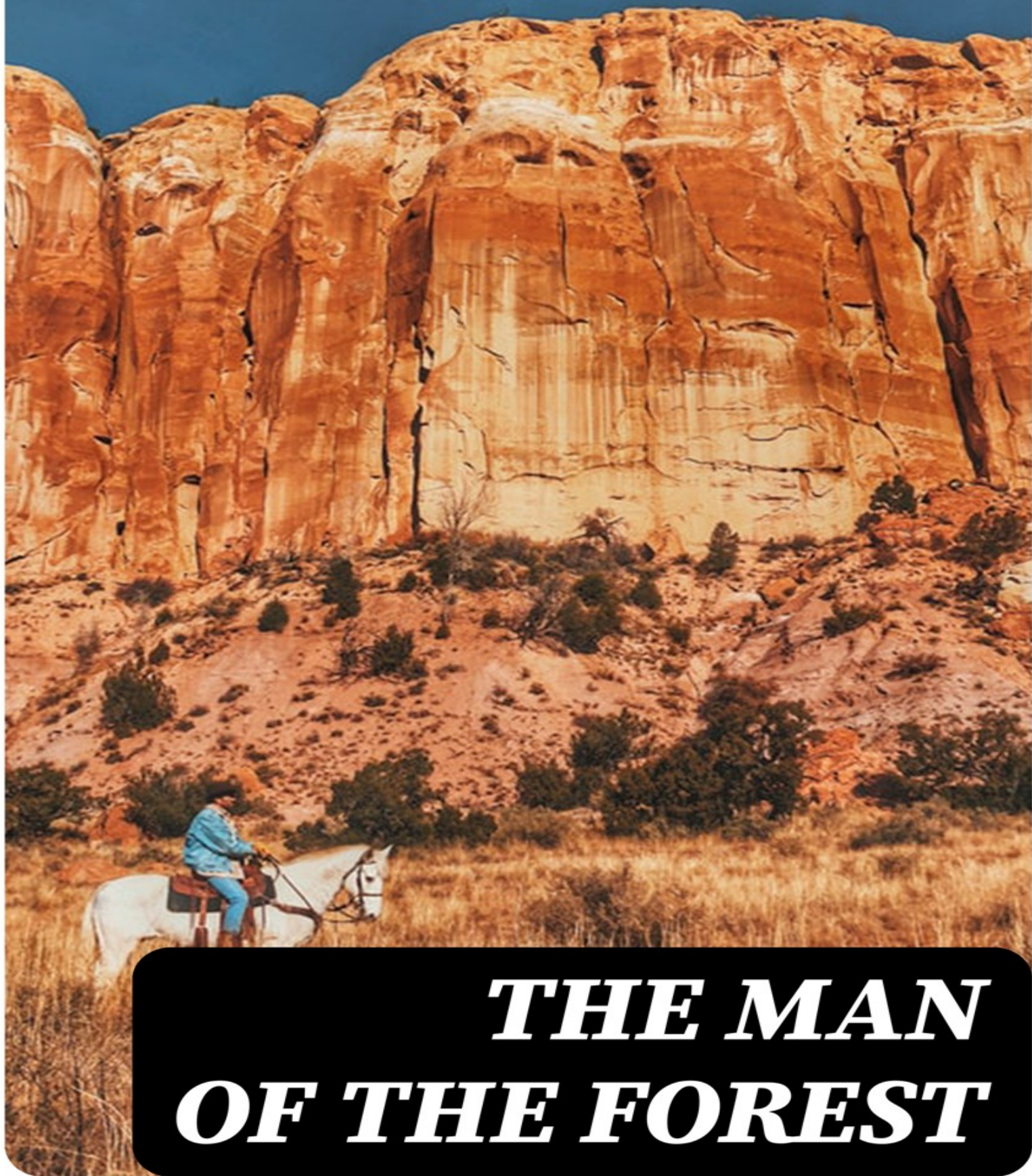


***ZANE
GREY***



***THE MAN
OF THE FOREST***

Zane Grey

The Man of the Forest

EAN 8596547385189

DigiCat, 2022

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CHAPTER I

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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 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 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 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 overhead in the giant fir came a twittering and rustling of grouse settling for the 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, for he had expected to hear the clipclop of white men's horses—which to hear up in those fastnesses was hateful to him. He and the Indian were friends. That fierce foe had no enmity toward the lone hunter. But there hid somewhere in the forest a gang of bad men, sheep-thieves, whom Dale did not want to meet.

As he started out upon the slope, a sudden flaring of the afterglow of sunset flooded down from Old Baldy, filling the valley with lights and shadows, yellow and blue, like the radiance of the sky. The pools in the curves of the brook shone darkly bright. Dale's gaze swept up and down the valley, and then tried to pierce the black shadows across the brook where the wall of spruce stood up, its speared and spiked crest against the pale clouds. The wind began to moan in 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 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 voices. Quickly he turned to feel in the dark for a ladder 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 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.

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 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 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.

As it chanced, Dale lay face down upon the floor of the loft, and right near his eyes there were cracks between the boughs. When the fire blazed up he was fairly well able to see the men below. The only one he had ever seen was Jim Wilson, who had been well known at Pine before Snake Anson had ever been heard of. Jim was the best of a bad lot, and he had friends among the honest people. It was rumored that he and Snake did not pull well together.

"Fire feels good," said the burly Moze, who appeared as broad as he was black-visaged. "Fall's sure a-comin'... Now if only we had some grub!"

"Moze, there's a hunk of deer meat in my saddle-bag, an' if you git it you can have half," spoke up another voice.

Moze shuffled out with alacrity.

In the firelight Snake Anson's face looked lean and serpent-like, his eyes glittered, and his long neck and all of his long length carried out the analogy of his name.

"Snake, what's this here deal with Beasley?" inquired Jim.

"Reckon you'll l'arn when I do," replied the leader. He appeared tired and thoughtful.

"Ain't we done away with enough of them poor greaser herders—for nothin'?" queried the youngest of the gang, a boy in years, whose hard, bitter lips and hungry eyes somehow set him apart from his comrades.

"You're dead right, Burt—an' that's my stand," replied the man who had sent Moze out. "Snake, snow 'll be flyin' round these woods before long," said Jim Wilson. "Are we goin' to winter down in the Tonto Basin or over on the Gila?"

"Reckon we'll do some tall ridin' before we strike south," replied Snake, gruffly.

At the juncture Moze returned.

"Boss, I heerd a hoss comin' up the trail," he said.

Snake rose and stood at the door, listening. Outside the wind moaned fitfully and scattering raindrops pattered upon the cabin.

"A-huh!" exclaimed Snake, in relief.

Silence ensued then for a moment, at the end of which interval Dale heard a rapid clip-clop on the rocky trail outside. The men below shuffled uneasily, but none of them spoke. The fire cracked cheerily. Snake Anson stepped back from before the door with an action that expressed both doubt and caution.

The trotting horse had halted out there somewhere.

"Ho there, inside!" called a voice from the darkness.

"Ho yourself!" replied Anson.

"That you, Snake?" quickly followed the query.

"Reckon so," returned Anson, showing himself.

The newcomer entered. He was a large man, wearing a slicker that shone wet in the firelight. His sombrero, pulled well down, shadowed his face, so that the upper half of his features might as well have been masked. He had a black, drooping mustache, and a chin like a rock. A potential force, matured and powerful, seemed to be wrapped in his movements.

"Hullo, Snake! Hullo, Wilson!" he said. "I've backed out on the other deal. Sent for you on—on another little matter...

particular private."

Here he indicated with a significant gesture that Snake's men were to leave the cabin.

"A-huh! ejaculated Anson, dubiously. Then he turned abruptly. Moze, you an' Shady an' Burt go wait outside. Reckon this ain't the deal I expected.... An' you can saddle the hosses."

The three members of the gang filed out, all glancing keenly at the stranger, who had moved back into the shadow.

"All right now, Beasley," said Anson, low-voiced. "What's your game? Jim, here, is in on my deals."

Then Beasley came forward to the fire, stretching his hands to the blaze.

"Nothin' to do with sheep," replied he.

"Wal, I reckoned not," assented the other. "An' say—whatever your game is, I ain't likin' the way you kept me waitin' an' ridin' around. We waited near all day at Big Spring. Then that greaser rode up an' sent us here. We're a long way from camp with no grub an' no blankets."

"I won't keep you long," said Beasley. "But even if I did you'd not mind—when I tell you this deal concerns Al Auchincloss—the man who made an outlaw of you!"

Anson's sudden action then seemed a leap of his whole frame. Wilson, likewise, bent forward eagerly. Beasley glanced at the door—then began to whisper.

"Old Auchincloss is on his last legs. He's goin' to croak. He's sent back to Missouri for a niece—a young girl—an' he means to leave his ranches an' sheep—all his stock to her. Seems he has no one else.... Them ranches—an' all them sheep an' hosses! You know me an' Al were pardners in sheep-raisin' for years. He swore I cheated him an' he threw me out. An' all these years I've been swearin' he did me dirt—owed me sheep an' money. I've got as many friends in Pine—an' all the way down the trail—as Auchincloss has.... An' Snake, see here—"

He paused to draw a deep breath and his big hands trembled over the blaze. Anson leaned forward, like a serpent ready to strike, and Jim Wilson was as tense with his divination of the plot at hand.

"See here," panted Beasley. "The girl's due to arrive at Magdalena on the sixteenth. That's a week from to-morrow. She'll take the stage to Snowdrop, where some of Auchincloss's men will meet her with a team."

"A-huh!" grunted Anson as Beasley halted again. "An' what of all thet?"

"She mustn't never get as far as Snowdrop!"

"You want me to hold up the stage—an' get the girl?"

"Exactly."

"Wal—an' what then?"

"Make off with her.... She disappears. That's your affair. ... I'll press my claims on Auchincloss—hound him—an' be ready when he croaks to take over his property. Then the girl can come back, for all I care.... You an' Wilson fix up the deal between you. If you have to let the gang in on it don't give them any hunch as to who an' what. This 'll make you a rich stake. An' providin', when it's paid, you strike for new territory."

"Thet might be wise," muttered Snake Anson. "Beasley, the weak point in your game is the uncertainty of life. Old Al is tough. He may fool you."

"Auchincloss is a dyin' man," declared Beasley, with such positiveness that it could not be doubted.

"Wal, he sure wasn't plumb hearty when I last seen him.... Beasley, in case I play your game—how'm I to know that girl?"

"Her name's Helen Rayner," replied Beasley, eagerly. "She's twenty years old. All of them Auchinclosses was handsome an' they say she's the handsomest."

"A-huh!... Beasley, this 's sure a bigger deal—an' one I ain't fancyin'.... But I never doubted your word.... Come on—an' talk out. What's in it for me?"

"Don't let any one in on this. You two can hold up the stage. Why, it was never held up.... But you want to mask.... How about ten thousand sheep—or what they bring at Phenix in gold?"

Jim Wilson whistled low.

"An' leave for new territory?" repeated Snake Anson, under his breath.

"You've said it."

"Wal, I ain't fancyin' the girl end of this deal, but you can count on me.... September sixteenth at Magdalena—an' her name's Helen—an' she's handsome?"

"Yes. My herders will begin drivin' south in about two weeks. Later, if the weather holds good, send me word by one of them an' I'll meet you."

Beasley spread his hands once more over the blaze, pulled on his gloves and pulled down his sombrero, and with an abrupt word of parting strode out into the night.

"Jim, what do you make of him?" queried Snake Anson.

"Pard, he's got us beat two ways for Sunday," replied Wilson.

"A-huh!... Wal, let's get back to camp." And he led the way out.

Low voices drifted into the cabin, then came snorts of horses and striking hoofs, and after that a steady trot, gradually ceasing. Once more the moan of wind and soft patter of rain filled the forest stillness.

CHAPTER II

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Milt Dale quietly sat up to gaze, with thoughtful eyes, into the gloom.

He was thirty years old. As a boy of fourteen he had run off from his school and home in Iowa and, joining a wagon-train of pioneers, he was one of the first to see log cabins built on the slopes of the White Mountains. But he had not taken kindly to farming or sheep-raising or monotonous home toil, and for twelve years he had lived in the forest, with only infrequent visits to Pine and Show Down and Snowdrop. This wandering forest life of his did not indicate that he did not care for the villagers, for he did care, and he was welcome everywhere, but that he loved wild life and solitude and beauty with the primitive instinctive force of a savage.

And on this night he had stumbled upon a dark plot against the only one of all the honest white people in that region whom he could not call a friend.

"That man Beasley!" he soliloquized. "Beasley—in cahoots with Snake Anson!... Well, he was right. Al Auchincloss is on his last legs. Poor old man! When I tell him he'll never believe ME, that's sure!"

Discovery of the plot meant to Dale that he must hurry down to Pine.

"A girl—Helen Rayner—twenty years old," he mused. "Beasley wants her made off with.... That means—worse than killed!"

Dale accepted facts of life with that equanimity and fatality acquired by one long versed in the cruel annals of forest lore. Bad men worked their evil just as savage wolves relayed a deer. He had shot wolves for that trick. With men,

good or bad, he had not clashed. Old women and children appealed to him, but he had never had any interest in girls. The image, then, of this Helen Rayner came strangely to Dale; and he suddenly realized that he had meant somehow to circumvent Beasley, not to befriend old Al Auchincloss, but for the sake of the girl. Probably she was already on her way West, alone, eager, hopeful of a future home. How little people guessed what awaited them at a journey's end! Many trails ended abruptly in the forest—and only trained woodsmen could read the tragedy.

"Strange how I cut across country to-day from Spruce Swamp," reflected Dale. Circumstances, movements, usually were not strange to him. His methods and habits were seldom changed by chance. The matter, then, of his turning off a course out of his way for no apparent reason, and of his having overheard a plot singularly involving a young girl, was indeed an adventure to provoke thought. It provoked more, for Dale grew conscious of an unfamiliar smoldering heat along his veins. He who had little to do with the strife of men, and nothing to do with anger, felt his blood grow hot at the cowardly trap laid for an innocent girl.

"Old Al won't listen to me," pondered Dale. "An' even if he did, he wouldn't believe me. Maybe nobody will.... All the same, Snake Anson won't get that girl."

With these last words Dale satisfied himself of his own position, and his pondering ceased. Taking his rifle, he descended from the loft and peered out of the door. The night had grown darker, windier, cooler; broken clouds were scudding across the sky; only a few stars showed; fine rain was blowing from the northwest; and the forest seemed full of a low, dull roar.

"Reckon I'd better hang up here," he said, and turned to the fire. The coals were red now. From the depths of his hunting-coat he procured a little bag of salt and some strips of dried meat. These strips he laid for a moment on the hot embers, until they began to sizzle and curl; then with a

sharpened stick he removed them and ate like a hungry hunter grateful for little.

He sat on a block of wood with his palms spread to the dying warmth of the fire and his eyes fixed upon the changing, glowing, golden embers. Outside, the wind continued to rise and the moan of the forest increased to a roar. Dale felt the comfortable warmth stealing over him, drowsily lulling; and he heard the storm-wind in the trees, now like a waterfall, and anon like a retreating army, and again low and sad; and he saw pictures in the glowing embers, strange as dreams.

Presently he rose and, climbing to the loft, he stretched himself out, and soon fell asleep.

When the gray dawn broke he was on his way, 'cross-country, to the village of Pine.

During the night the wind had shifted and the rain had ceased. A suspicion of frost shone on the grass in open places. All was gray—the parks, the glades—and deeper, darker gray marked the aisles of the forest. Shadows lurked under the trees and the silence seemed consistent with spectral forms. Then the east kindled, the gray lightened, the dreaming woodland awoke to the far-reaching rays of a bursting red sun.

This was always the happiest moment of Dale's lonely days, as sunset was his saddest. He responded, and there was something in his blood that answered the whistle of a stag from a near-by ridge. His strides were long, noiseless, and they left dark trace where his feet brushed the dew-laden grass.

Dale pursued a zigzag course over the ridges to escape the hardest climbing, but the "senacas"—those parklike meadows so named by Mexican sheep-herders—were as round and level as if they had been made by man in beautiful contrast to the dark-green, rough, and rugged ridges. Both open senaca and dense wooded ridge showed to his quick eye an abundance of game. The cracking of

twigs and disappearing flash of gray among the spruces, a round black lumbering object, a twittering in the brush, and stealthy steps, were all easy signs for Dale to read. Once, as he noiselessly emerged into a little glade, he espied a red fox stalking some quarry, which, as he advanced, proved to be a flock of partridges. They whirred up, brushing the branches, and the fox trotted away. In every seneca Dale encountered wild turkeys feeding on the seeds of the high grass.

It had always been his custom, on his visits to Pine, to kill and pack fresh meat down to several old friends, who were glad to give him lodging. And, hurried though he was now, he did not intend to make an exception of this trip.

At length he got down into the pine belt, where the great, gnarled, yellow trees soared aloft, stately, and aloof from one another, and the ground was a brown, odorous, springy mat of pine-needles, level as a floor. Squirrels watched him from all around, scurrying away at his near approach—tiny, brown, light-striped squirrels, and larger ones, russet-colored, and the splendid dark-grays with their white bushy tails and plumed ears.

This belt of pine ended abruptly upon wide, gray, rolling, open land, almost like a prairie, with foot-hills lifting near and far, and the red-gold blaze of aspen thickets catching the morning sun. Here Dale flushed a flock of wild turkeys, upward of forty in number, and their subdued color of gray flecked with white, and graceful, sleek build, showed them to be hens. There was not a gobbler in the flock. They began to run pell-mell out into the grass, until only their heads appeared bobbing along, and finally disappeared. Dale caught a glimpse of skulking coyotes that evidently had been stalking the turkeys, and as they saw him and darted into the timber he took a quick shot at the hindmost. His bullet struck low, as he had meant it to, but too low, and the coyote got only a dusting of earth and pine-needles thrown up into his face. This frightened him so that he leaped aside

blindly to butt into a tree, rolled over, gained his feet, and then the cover of the forest. Dale was amused at this. His hand was against all the predatory beasts of the forest, though he had learned that lion and bear and wolf and fox were all as necessary to the great scheme of nature as were the gentle, beautiful wild creatures upon which they preyed. But some he loved better than others, and so he deplored the inexplicable cruelty.

He crossed the wide, grassy plain and struck another gradual descent where aspens and pines crowded a shallow ravine and warm, sun-lighted glades bordered along a sparkling brook. Here he heard a turkey gobble, and that was a signal for him to change his course and make a crouching, silent detour around a clump of aspens. In a sunny patch of grass a dozen or more big gobblers stood, all suspiciously facing in his direction, heads erect, with that wild aspect peculiar to their species. Old wild turkey gobblers were the most difficult game to stalk. Dale shot two of them. The others began to run like ostriches, thudding over the ground, spreading their wings, and with that running start launched their heavy bodies into whirring flight. They flew low, at about the height of a man from the grass, and vanished in the woods.

Dale threw the two turkeys over his shoulder and went on his way. Soon he came to a break in the forest level, from which he gazed down a league-long slope of pine and cedar, out upon the bare, glistening desert, stretching away, endlessly rolling out to the dim, dark horizon line.

The little hamlet of Pine lay on the last level of sparsely timbered forest. A road, running parallel with a dark-watered, swift-flowing stream, divided the cluster of log cabins from which columns of blue smoke drifted lazily aloft. Fields of corn and fields of oats, yellow in the sunlight, surrounded the village; and green pastures, dotted with horses and cattle, reached away to the denser woodland. This site appeared to be a natural clearing, for there was no

evidence of cut timber. The scene was rather too wild to be pastoral, but it was serene, tranquil, giving the impression of a remote community, prosperous and happy, drifting along the peaceful tenor of sequestered lives.

Dale halted before a neat little log cabin and a little patch of garden bordered with sunflowers. His call was answered by an old woman, gray and bent, but remarkably spry, who appeared at the door.

"Why, land's sakes, if it ain't Milt Dale!" she exclaimed, in welcome.

"Reckon it's me, Mrs. Cass," he replied. "An' I've brought you a turkey."

"Milt, you're that good boy who never forgits old Widow Cass.... What a gobbler! First one I've seen this fall. My man Tom used to fetch home gobblers like that.... An' mebbe he'll come home again sometime."

Her husband, Tom Cass, had gone into the forest years before and had never returned. But the old woman always looked for him and never gave up hope.

"Men have been lost in the forest an' yet come back," replied Dale, as he had said to her many a time.

"Come right in. You air hungry, I know. Now, son, when last did you eat a fresh egg or a flapjack?"

"You should remember," he answered, laughing, as he followed her into a small, clean kitchen.

"Laws-a'-me! An' thet's months ago," she replied, shaking her gray head. "Milt, you should give up that wild life—an' marry—an' have a home."

"You always tell me that."

"Yes, an' I'll see you do it yet.... Now you set there, an' pretty soon I'll give you thet to eat which 'll make your mouth water."

"What's the news, Auntie?" he asked.

"Nary news in this dead place. Why, nobody's been to Snowdrop in two weeks!... Sary Jones died, poor old soul—she's better off—an' one of my cows run away. Milt, she's

wild when she gits loose in the woods. An' you'll have to track her, 'cause nobody else can. An' John Dakker's heifer was killed by a lion, an' Lem Harden's fast hoss—you know his favorite—was stole by hoss-thieves. Lem is jest crazy. An' that reminds me, Milt, where's your big ranger, thet you'd never sell or lend?"

"My horses are up in the woods, Auntie; safe, I reckon, from horse-thieves."

"Well, that's a blessin'. We've had some stock stole this summer, Milt, an' no mistake."

Thus, while preparing a meal for Dale, the old woman went on recounting all that had happened in the little village since his last visit. Dale enjoyed her gossip and quaint philosophy, and it was exceedingly good to sit at her table. In his opinion, nowhere else could there have been such butter and cream, such ham and eggs. Besides, she always had apple pie, it seemed, at any time he happened in; and apple pie was one of Dale's few regrets while up in the lonely forest.

"How's old Al Auchincloss?" presently inquired Dale.

"Poorly—poorly," sighed Mrs. Cass. "But he tramps an' rides around same as ever. Al's not long for this world.... An', Milt, that reminds me—there's the biggest news you ever heard."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Dale, to encourage the excited old woman.

"Al has sent back to Saint Joe for his niece, Helen Rayner. She's to inherit all his property. We've heard much of her—a purty lass, they say.... Now, Milt Dale, here's your chance. Stay out of the woods an' go to work.... You can marry that girl!"

"No chance for me, Auntie," replied Dale, smiling.

The old woman snorted. "Much you know! Any girl would have you, Milt Dale, if you'd only throw a kerchief."

"Me!... An' why, Auntie?" he queried, half amused, half thoughtful. When he got back to civilization he always had

to adjust his thoughts to the ideas of people.

"Why? I declare, Milt, you live so in the woods you're like a boy of ten—an' then sometimes as old as the hills.... There's no young man to compare with you, hereabouts. An' this girl—she'll have all the spunk of the Auchinclosses."

"Then maybe she'd not be such a catch, after all," replied Dale.

"Wal, you've no cause to love them, that's sure. But, Milt, the Auchincloss women are always good wives."

"Dear Auntie, you're dreamin'," said Dale, soberly. "I want no wife. I'm happy in the woods."

"Air you goin' to live like an Injun all your days, Milt Dale?" she queried, sharply.

"I hope so."

"You ought to be ashamed. But some lass will change you, boy, an' mebbe it'll be this Helen Rayner. I hope an' pray so to thet."

"Auntie, supposin' she did change me. She'd never change old Al. He hates me, you know."

"Wal, I ain't so sure, Milt. I met Al the other day. He inquired for you, an' said you was wild, but he reckoned men like you was good for pioneer settlements. Lord knows the good turns you've done this village! Milt, old Al doesn't approve of your wild life, but he never had no hard feelin's till thet tame lion of yours killed so many of his sheep."

"Auntie, I don't believe Tom ever killed Al's sheep," declared Dale, positively.

"Wal, Al thinks so, an' many other people," replied Mrs. Cass, shaking her gray head doubtfully. "You never swore he didn't. An' there was them two sheep-herders who did swear they seen him."

"They only saw a cougar. An' they were so scared they ran."

"Who wouldn't? Thet big beast is enough to scare any one. For land's sakes, don't ever fetch him down here again!

I'll never forgit the time you did. All the folks an' children an' hosses in Pine broke an' run thet day."

"Yes; but Tom wasn't to blame. Auntie, he's the tameest of my pets. Didn't he try to put his head on your lap an' lick your hand?"

"Wal, Milt, I ain't gainsayin' your cougar pet didn't act better 'n a lot of people I know. Fer he did. But the looks of him an' what's been said was enough for me."

"An' what's all that, Auntie?"

"They say he's wild when out of your sight. An' thet he'd trail an' kill anythin' you put him after."

"I trained him to be just that way."

"Wal, leave Tom to home up in the woods—when you visit us."

Dale finished his hearty meal, and listened awhile longer to the old woman's talk; then, taking his rifle and the other turkey, he bade her good-by. She followed him out.

"Now, Milt, you'll come soon again, won't you—jest to see Al's niece—who'll be here in a week?"

"I reckon I'll drop in some day.... Auntie, have you seen my friends, the Mormon boys?"

"No, I 'ain't seen them an' don't want to," she retorted. "Milt Dale, if any one ever corrals you it'll be Mormons."

"Don't worry, Auntie. I like those boys. They often see me up in the woods an' ask me to help them track a hoss or help kill some fresh meat."

"They're workin' for Beasley now."

"Is that so?" rejoined Dale, with a sudden start. "An' what doin'?"

"Beasley is gettin' so rich he's buildin' a fence, an' didn't have enough help, so I hear."

"Beasley gettin' rich!" repeated Dale, thoughtfully. "More sheep an' horses an' cattle than ever, I reckon?"

"Laws-a'-me! Why, Milt, Beasley 'ain't any idea what he owns. Yes, he's the biggest man in these parts, since poor old Al's took to failin'. I reckon Al's health ain't none

improved by Beasley's success. They've had some bitter quarrels lately—so I hear. Al ain't what he was."

Dale bade good-by again to his old friend and strode away, thoughtful and serious. Beasley would not only be difficult to circumvent, but he would be dangerous to oppose. There did not appear much doubt of his driving his way rough-shod to the dominance of affairs there in Pine. Dale, passing down the road, began to meet acquaintances who had hearty welcome for his presence and interest in his doings, so that his pondering was interrupted for the time being. He carried the turkey to another old friend, and when he left her house he went on to the village store. This was a large log cabin, roughly covered with clapboards, with a wide plank platform in front and a hitching-rail in the road. Several horses were standing there, and a group of lazy, shirt-sleeved loungers.

"I'll be doggoned if it ain't Milt Dale!" exclaimed one.

"Howdy, Milt, old buckskin! Right down glad to see you," greeted another.

"Hello, Dale! You air shore good for sore eyes," drawled still another.

After a long period of absence Dale always experienced a singular warmth of feeling when he met these acquaintances. It faded quickly when he got back to the intimacy of his woodland, and that was because the people of Pine, with few exceptions—though they liked him and greatly admired his outdoor wisdom—regarded him as a sort of nonentity. Because he loved the wild and preferred it to village and range life, they had classed him as not one of them. Some believed him lazy; others believed him shiftless; others thought him an Indian in mind and habits; and there were many who called him slow-witted. Then there was another side to their regard for him, which always afforded him good-natured amusement. Two of this group asked him to bring in some turkey or venison; another wanted to hunt with him. Lem Harden came out of the store

and appealed to Dale to recover his stolen horse. Lem's brother wanted a wild-running mare tracked and brought home. Jesse Lyons wanted a colt broken, and broken with patience, not violence, as was the method of the hard-riding boys at Pine. So one and all they besieged Dale with their selfish needs, all unconscious of the flattering nature of these overtures. And on the moment there happened by two women whose remarks, as they entered the store, bore strong testimony to Dale's personality.

"If there ain't Milt Dale!" exclaimed the older of the two. "How lucky! My cow's sick, an' the men are no good doctorin'. I'll jest ask Milt over."

"No one like Milt!" responded the other woman, heartily.

"Good day there—you Milt Dale!" called the first speaker. "When you git away from these lazy men come over."

Dale never refused a service, and that was why his infrequent visits to Pine were wont to be prolonged beyond his own pleasure.

Presently Beasley strode down the street, and when about to enter the store he espied Dale.

"Hullo there, Milt!" he called, cordially, as he came forward with extended hand. His greeting was sincere, but the lightning glance he shot over Dale was not born of his pleasure. Seen in daylight, Beasley was a big, bold, bluff man, with strong, dark features. His aggressive presence suggested that he was a good friend and a bad enemy.

Dale shook hands with him.

"How are you, Beasley?"

"Ain't complainin', Milt, though I got more work than I can rustle. Reckon you wouldn't take a job bossin' my sheep-herders?"

"Reckon I wouldn't," replied Dale. "Thanks all the same."

"What's goin' on up in the woods?"

"Plenty of turkey an' deer. Lots of bear, too. The Indians have worked back on the south side early this fall. But I reckon winter will come late an' be mild."

"Good! An' where 're you headin' from?"

"Cross-country from my camp," replied Dale, rather evasively.

"Your camp! Nobody ever found that yet," declared Beasley, gruffly.

"It's up there," said Dale.

"Reckon you've got that cougar chained in your cabin door?" queried Beasley, and there was a barely distinguishable shudder of his muscular frame. Also the pupils dilated in his hard brown eyes.

"Tom ain't chained. An' I haven't no cabin, Beasley."

"You mean to tell me that big brute stays in your camp without bein' hog-tied or corralled!" demanded Beasley.

"Sure he does."

"Beats me! But, then, I'm queer on cougars. Have had many a cougar trail me at night. Ain't sayin' I was scared. But I don't care for that brand of varmint.... Milt, you goin' to stay down awhile?"

"Yes, I'll hang around some."

"Come over to the ranch. Glad to see you any time. Some old huntin' pards of yours are workin' for me."

"Thanks, Beasley. I reckon I'll come over."

Beasley turned away and took a step, and then, as if with an after-thought, he wheeled again.

"Suppose you've heard about old Al Auchincloss bein' near petered out?" queried Beasley. A strong, ponderous cast of thought seemed to emanate from his features. Dale divined that Beasley's next step would be to further his advancement by some word or hint.

"Widow Cass was tellin' me all the news. Too bad about old Al," replied Dale.

"Sure is. He's done for. An' I'm sorry—though Al's never been square—"

"Beasley," interrupted Dale, quickly, "you can't say that to me. Al Auchincloss always was the whitest an' squarest man in this sheep country."

Beasley gave Dale a fleeting, dark glance.

"Dale, what you think ain't goin' to influence feelin' on this range," returned Beasley, deliberately. "You live in the woods an'—"

"Reckon livin' in the woods I might think—an' know a whole lot," interposed Dale, just as deliberately. The group of men exchanged surprised glances. This was Milt Dale in different aspect. And Beasley did not conceal a puzzled surprise.

"About what—now?" he asked, bluntly.

"Why, about what's goin' on in Pine," replied Dale.

Some of the men laughed.

"Shore lots goin' on—an' no mistake," put in Lem Harden.

Probably the keen Beasley had never before considered Milt Dale as a responsible person; certainly never one in any way to cross his trail. But on the instant, perhaps, some instinct was born, or he divined an antagonism in Dale that was both surprising and perplexing.

"Dale, I've differences with Al Auchincloss—have had them for years," said Beasley. "Much of what he owns is mine. An' it's goin' to come to me. Now I reckon people will be takin' sides—some for me an' some for Al. Most are for me.... Where do you stand? Al Auchincloss never had no use for you, an' besides he's a dyin' man. Are you goin' on his side?"

"Yes, I reckon I am."

"Wal, I'm glad you've declared yourself," rejoined Beasley, shortly, and he strode away with the ponderous gait of a man who would brush any obstacle from his path.

"Milt, thet's bad—makin' Beasley sore at you," said Lem Harden. "He's on the way to boss this outfit."

"He's sure goin' to step into Al's boots," said another.

"Thet was white of Milt to stick up fer poor old Al," declared Lem's brother.

Dale broke away from them and wended a thoughtful way down the road. The burden of what he knew about

Beasley weighed less heavily upon him, and the close-lipped course he had decided upon appeared wisest. He needed to think before undertaking to call upon old Al Auchincloss; and to that end he sought an hour's seclusion under the pines.

CHAPTER III

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In the afternoon, Dale, having accomplished some tasks imposed upon him by his old friends at Pine, directed slow steps toward the Auchincloss ranch.

The flat, square stone and log cabin of unusually large size stood upon a little hill half a mile out of the village. A home as well as a fort, it had been the first structure erected in that region, and the process of building had more than once been interrupted by Indian attacks. The Apaches had for some time, however, confined their fierce raids to points south of the White Mountain range. Auchincloss's house looked down upon barns and sheds and corrals of all sizes and shapes, and hundreds of acres of well-cultivated soil. Fields of oats waved gray and yellow in the afternoon sun; an immense green pasture was divided by a willow-bordered brook, and here were droves of horses, and out on the rolling bare flats were straggling herds of cattle.

The whole ranch showed many years of toil and the perseverance of man. The brook irrigated the verdant valley between the ranch and the village. Water for the house, however, came down from the high, wooded slope of the mountain, and had been brought there by a simple expedient. Pine logs of uniform size had been laid end to end, with a deep trough cut in them, and they made a shining line down the slope, across the valley, and up the little hill to the Auchincloss home. Near the house the hollowed halves of logs had been bound together, making a crude pipe. Water ran uphill in this case, one of the facts that made the ranch famous, as it had always been a wonder and delight to the small boys of Pine. The two good women who managed Auchincloss's large household were

often shocked by the strange things that floated into their kitchen with the ever-flowing stream of clear, cold mountain water.

As it happened this day Dale encountered Al Auchincloss sitting in the shade of a porch, talking to some of his sheep-herders and stockmen. Auchincloss was a short man of extremely powerful build and great width of shoulder. He had no gray hairs, and he did not look old, yet there was in his face a certain weariness, something that resembled sloping lines of distress, dim and pale, that told of age and the ebb-tide of vitality. His features, cast in large mold, were clean-cut and comely, and he had frank blue eyes, somewhat sad, yet still full of spirit.

Dale had no idea how his visit would be taken, and he certainly would not have been surprised to be ordered off the place. He had not set foot there for years. Therefore it was with surprise that he saw Auchincloss wave away the herders and take his entrance without any particular expression.

"Howdy, Al! How are you?" greeted Dale, easily, as he leaned his rifle against the log wall.

Auchincloss did not rise, but he offered his hand.

"Wal, Milt Dale, I reckon this is the first time I ever seen you that I couldn't lay you flat on your back," replied the rancher. His tone was both testy and full of pathos.

"I take it you mean you ain't very well," replied Dale. "I'm sorry, Al."

"No, it ain't thet. Never was sick in my life. I'm just played out, like a hoss thet had been strong an' willin', an' did too much.... Wal, you don't look a day older, Milt. Livin' in the woods rolls over a man's head."

"Yes, I'm feelin' fine, an' time never bothers me."

"Wal, mebbe you ain't such a fool, after all. I've wondered lately—since I had time to think.... But, Milt, you don't git no richer."

"Al, I have all I want an' need."

"Wal, then, you don't support anybody; you don't do any good in the world."

"We don't agree, Al," replied Dale, with his slow smile.

"Reckon we never did.... An' you jest come over to pay your respects to me, eh?"

"Not altogether," answered Dale, ponderingly. "First off, I'd like to say I'll pay back them sheep you always claimed my tame cougar killed."

"You will! An' how'd you go about that?"

"Wasn't very many sheep, was there?"

"A matter of fifty head."

"So many! Al, do you still think old Tom killed them sheep?"

"Humph! Milt, I know damn well he did."

"Al, now how could you know somethin' I don't? Be reasonable, now. Let's don't fall out about this again. I'll pay back the sheep. Work it out—"

"Milt Dale, you'll come down here an' work out that fifty head of sheep!" ejaculated the old rancher, incredulously.

"Sure."

"Wal, I'll be damned!" He sat back and gazed with shrewd eyes at Dale. "What's got into you, Milt? Hev you heard about my niece thet's comin', an' think you'll shine up to her?"

"Yes, Al, her comin' has a good deal to do with my deal," replied Dale, soberly. "But I never thought to shine up to her, as you hint."

"Haw! Haw! You're just like all the other colts hereabouts. Reckon it's a good sign, too. It'll take a woman to fetch you out of the woods. But, boy, this niece of mine, Helen Rayner, will stand you on your head. I never seen her. They say she's jest like her mother. An' Nell Auchincloss—what a girl she was!"

Dale felt his face grow red. Indeed, this was strange conversation for him.

"Honest, Al—" he began.

"Son, don't lie to an old man."

"Lie! I wouldn't lie to any one. Al, it's only men who live in towns an' are always makin' deals. I live in the forest, where there's nothin' to make me lie."

"Wal, no offense meant, I'm sure," responded Auchincloss. "An' mebbe there's somethin' in what you say... We was talkin' about them sheep your big cat killed. Wal, Milt, I can't prove it, that's sure. An' mebbe you'll think me dodderly when I tell you my reason. It wasn't what them greaser herders said about seein' a cougar in the herd."

"What was it, then?" queried Dale, much interested.

"Wal, thet day a year ago I seen your pet. He was lyin' in front of the store an' you was inside tradin', fer supplies, I reckon. It was like meetin' an enemy face to face. Because, damn me if I didn't know that cougar was guilty when he looked in my eyes! There!"

The old rancher expected to be laughed at. But Dale was grave.

"Al, I know how you felt," he replied, as if they were discussing an action of a human being. "Sure I'd hate to doubt old Tom. But he's a cougar. An' the ways of animals are strange... Anyway, Al, I'll make good the loss of your sheep."

"No, you won't," rejoined Auchincloss, quickly. "We'll call it off. I'm takin' it square of you to make the offer. Thet's enough. So forget your worry about work, if you had any."

"There's somethin' else, Al, I wanted to say," began Dale, with hesitation. "An' it's about Beasley."

Auchincloss started violently, and a flame of red shot into his face. Then he raised a big hand that shook. Dale saw in a flash how the old man's nerves had gone.

"Don't mention—thet—thet greaser—to me!" burst out the rancher. "It makes me see—red.... Dale, I ain't overlookin' that you spoke up fer me to-day—stood fer my side. Lem Harden told me. I was glad. An' thet's why—to-

day—I forgot our old quarrel.... But not a word about thet sheep-thief—or I'll drive you off the place!"

"But, Al—be reasonable," remonstrated Dale. "It's necessary thet I speak of—of Beasley."

"It ain't. Not to me. I won't listen."

"Reckon you'll have to, Al," returned Dale. "Beasley's after your property. He's made a deal—"

"By Heaven! I know that!" shouted Auchincloss, tottering up, with his face now black-red. "Do you think thet's new to me? Shut up, Dale! I can't stand it."

"But Al—there's worse," went on Dale, hurriedly. "Worse! Your life's threatened—an' your niece, Helen—she's to be—"

"Shut up—an' clear out!" roared Auchincloss, waving his huge fists.

He seemed on the verge of a collapse as, shaking all over, he backed into the door. A few seconds of rage had transformed him into a pitiful old man.

"But, Al—I'm your friend—" began Dale, appealingly.

"Friend, hey?" returned the rancher, with grim, bitter passion. "Then you're the only one.... Milt Dale, I'm rich an' I'm a dyin' man. I trust nobody... But, you wild hunter—if you're my friend—prove it!... Go kill thet greaser sheep-thief! DO somethin'—an' then come talk to me!"

With that he lurched, half falling, into the house, and slammed the door.

Dale stood there for a blank moment, and then, taking up his rifle, he strode away.

Toward sunset Dale located the camp of his four Mormon friends, and reached it in time for supper.

John, Roy, Joe, and Hal Beeman were sons of a pioneer Mormon who had settled the little community of Snowdrop. They were young men in years, but hard labor and hard life in the open had made them look matured. Only a year's difference in age stood between John and Roy, and between Roy and Joe, and likewise Joe and Hal. When it came to appearance they were difficult to distinguish from one