

Dagg cabin. It was already mid-afternoon. The sun, still high over a jagged horizon, was rapidly sucking up the moisture occasioned by an early morning rain. The humid breath of the soil was tempered by the sweet smell of blossoming wood flowers. Numerous small streams glinted and splashed over rocks, running riot as soon as they reached the precipitous incline which fell away abruptly to the level of white sand bordering the shore of the creek.

McMann's pulses were tingling with the exuberance of health. He stood for a moment before making the final descent, his grey, untroubled eyes looking out across the valley. On the opposite side he beheld the green of forest growth. Three hundred feet below Wolf Creek, a narrow and turbulent ribbon of water, was flecked with foam and broken by many rapids.

Curiously enough, he found Dagg unemployed.

"Glad you came," said the big man, motioning his guest to a seat on the improvised bench in front of the cabin. "Just happens I'm taking a holiday myself. Well, how's dirt?"

"I'm not prospecting," McMann explained. "At least, I haven't been lately."

A queer smile puckered the corners of Dagg's expansive mouth.

"You're all shaved up," he observed, "an' you got a clean shirt on, an' your eyes have a sort of I'm-not-at-home look. I kind of suspect that you're going over to Patterson's."

"Right," admitted McMann.

"She's a nice girl," declared the big prospector, "an' her father's an

interesting ol' chap, too. I was over there yesterday."

A mild irritation pricked McMann. He fumbled in his pockets for tobacco and papers.

"She's the most sensible woman I ever met," continued Dagg. "She's got refinement an' education an' good looks, an' her voice is smooth an' low—just like music."

"I'm going to ask her to marry me today," stated McMann.

Conversation waned. Dagg turned, suddenly interested in the flight of a lone mallard, which was darting from point to point in search of its kind, now and again its squaking, anxious call faintly heard.

"I wouldn't if I was you," said the big prospector, at length, squarely facing McMann, his voice vibrant with suppressed feeling. "Maybe you'd be sorry," he hinted, darkly. "I got a notion that you're not the man she wants."

Mentally, McMann was stunned. He gripped the side of the bench. He rose, confronting Dagg, his face flushed, anger and resentment shaking him.

"I don't need your advice," he exclaimed, caustically. "I'll do as I like in this matter. If I happen to feel like asking a woman to marry me, that's my business."

The big prospector did not answer immediately. His mouth had widened into a grin. His left hand was stroking the black muzzle of a dangerous-looking automatic.

"Let's not quarrel about it," he said, happily. "McMann, won't you sit down?"

McMann did.

(To be continued)