

The Emerald Ring

By M. F. Coughlin

"MY dear man, she's down there on that vast ranch with a Chinese cook in the kitchen and four laboring men—what do you call 'em?—vaque-roes—playing cards in the Hall House."

Gordon took off his cap and ran his fingers through his thick gray hair. He was a Scotchman, factor for the American properties of Sir James Dunstan, as he had been for the English estate when the young man before him, the fourth son of the old baronet, was a small boy. He was accustomed to leer at Dunstan's interest in the daughter of Sweet Meadows Ranch, for many reasons of good policy, but he forgot these for the moment.

"It won't do, a lass like that—she's too well-born—she wouldn't understand."

"No, she doesn't," said the other, "that's why I couldn't do anything. She was standing with that astonishing hair in two long, golden plaits, playing on her violin like a symphony orchestra, the score pinned up on a pillar of the veranda. I gave her the mail and her father's note. She's game. Her face went white, but she just stood and looked off gravely—it would have wrung your heart—as if she'd been a woman of sixty, and then she said, 'The foreman is ill with pneumonia, Mr. Dunstan, and my father says he must superintend the driving himself. It is a very difficult sort of thing, isn't it—driving five hundred head of cattle two hundred miles over the mountains? I'm afraid he is too old to endure the camping-out and exposure.'"

"I told her that I was sure it would be very beneficial, and that I would be glad to see her safely over to King's herself."

"I shall have to stay here," she said quietly. "I can't go and leave Wing alone. For one thing, I'm quite sure she wouldn't stay."

"Oh! it seemed the father went away like that once before unexpectedly and brought her over to King's to visit, and the men who had been left there—the foreman had to go off for a few days to Lakeview—played some internal practical joke on the poor heathen, bound and gagged him, you know, and made him believe they were going to carve him up. When he found himself finally unbound to get supper, he cooked and served it for them, and then shut up the house, stole out and saddled a horse and rode ten miles to King's that night. Nobody knows how he ever found the way, but he tumbled in there as they were going to bed, and called, vivid and chattering, for Miss Bellinger and fell in a faint at her feet. Nothing on earth would induce him to go back. She won't leave him this time. He loves her as if he were her dog and she's—Dunstan laughed with a sag that was almost a sob—"she's staying down there alone to be his protection against the possible drunken brutality of her father's servants." Gordon muttered that the old man must be weak-minded.

"He sees nothing on earth but that he's losing money on a piece of property. Americans beat me—to leave an exquisite girl like that. Couldn't you suggest the propriety of—or the improbability, don't you know?"

Dunstan's blue eyes snapped. "If you met St. Cecilia strolling along on a sunset cloud with that organette thing in her hand, would you hold her up to know what she'd done with her chaperon? I wish you'd look into those eyes of hers, and talk propriety. I tried it and she said, 'There's nothing to steal and I can shoot straight enough.' She walked in to her father's desk and showed me her pistols. She had two, and we ended up by cleaning 'em and shooting bottles off the fence-post."

Gordon got up and put a hand on the other's shoulder. "Come to bed," he said, "she's safe, but the old man needs a keeper."

Dunstan went on obediently to his room, but only to change his clothes to warmer ones, and then slipping out to the stables, he took a fresh horse and measured the miles once more to the Sweet Meadows Ranch.

There was no light in the Hall and in the great house only one, in the region of the kitchen. His spurs clanked softly on the porch, and Wing's terrified face looked up from the bread-board by the open window.

"Wing," he called gently, "don't be afraid."

But Wing's teeth chattered.

"No can speak me now—go in' bed."

"No, you're not going to bed," said Dunstan firmly.

"You're going to listen to me. I'm not one of the men on the place. You know me, don't you?"

The voice and the inflection, in spite of terror, made a gulf between Dunstan and the demons whom Wing considered his hellish enemies.

"I don't want those men to harm you or Miss Bellinger, do you understand? And I want you to arrange a signal so that you can get me in case of need."

He caught this in spite of the idioms.

"I let you in," he murmured.

"No, don't unbolt the door. I don't want to come in. I can talk with you perfectly here."

This was more reassuring still.

"How I get you?"

"I'm going to ride down every night after sunset and picket in the tules yonder by the river, do you see?"

No one will know—if you breathe a word of this, I'll murder you? Wing's narrow eyes blinked once. "But at any suspicion of trouble comes to this house, I want you to step out and light that beacon, do you see?"

This was too much. Wing didn't see, chiefly because he didn't know what a beacon was, and Dunstan led him, unwillingly enough, with his glimmering white apron removed, to a knoll of rim-rock beyond the woodpile. They arranged the wood innocently in a tall, narrow heap, slender sticks and barrel-staves around a core of stone, and in the center a can of kerosene and a box of matches. Dunstan had sighted the spot carefully through the field-glasses, and in the moonlight it stood clear of all intervening obstacles across the miles of meadow.

He put a weight of silver in the coolie's hand, who looked at him; he was a friend then. No fees except the unminted gold of Miss Bellinger's consideration had yet consoled him in this Siberian exile.

"I not tell, neber—not Miss Bellinger, nobolly."

"In the daytime I shall be at Mt. Dunstan—I can get across the valley in half an hour by a cut I know. But you are not to wait for trouble. You light it—do you hear?—any time you get the least uneasy. At night I shall watch; in the day you watch and signal."

So it was a compact; and Dunstan hid his horse in the tules, and counted the watches after the last light had been put out. And all night her window-curtain blew softly, and the ripening meadow lay like a golden floor under the moon, the rim-rock to the east, jagged iron in the shadow. The solitary house, with its wistful flower garden inside of the clean white fence, stood apologetically alone in a vast land that knew no human history, whose face turned expressively to the blank heavens. Beyond the rim-rock and beyond, lay leagues of tumbling hills and plains that had never trembled under a locomotive or heard the whisper of a telegraph—the one spot in the United States where, for a radius of three hundred miles, progress is but a rumor.

In the lonely nights he told his beads of memory. He recalled when he had first begun to dream at all. It was on a day a year ago, when he had been riding along the river at a point where their two places adjoined, and

suddenly beyond the tule tops he heard, like *Siegfried*, a bird which sang with words—"Venite Adoremus." It was a hymn that took him back to Paris—midnight mass at the Madeleine, and afterwards the Babylonian splendor of the cafes. She was so recent a comer that at first he did not connect her with the bird, and plunged, dared, in the direction of the voice.

"I thought I had had a vision!" he gasped.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see some one. My saddle is turned, and I don't know how to tighten it. The man puts his foot against the poor horse, but I am not tall enough."

"I'll tighten the girth when you've sung to me again," he had said, bewitched.

"Oh, I'll sing. What will you have?"

She sat on the ground, her visor cap shadowing her dancing eyes, her blue flannel habit showing glimpses of smart little boots; and with the most feminine of gestures she pulled off her gauntlets and began fastening the loose pins of her hair. It was so long since he had seen anything but the unfinished rawness of the frontier, that he could have kissed her feet. And then, not asking him his choice, she had sung with audacious mischief, "Comin' thro' the rye." When it was over she said very soberly:

"Do you prefer classical music?"

"I like the words," he answered.

"That isn't very cultured."

"No, I'm not."

And he brought her his happiest books and had carried away some of hers; and then when winter came, sometimes instead of a book he used to ride over with an armful of mountain-laurel.

The next head was rough between his fingers.

It was a day in February when the snow lay in their lands a glittering level sheet, the solitary white house scarcely distinguishable but for the jets of blue smoke that curled straight upward in the still icy air. The thermometer was registering unbelievable degrees below freezing, and he found her before the roaring stove in the living-room, playing checkers with her father;

the keenest torture to youth and inexperience, was in her eyes and not absent from her voice. It was the weakness that sent him after three months of the wilderness shivering to Gordon with shamefaced anguish. And Gordon had said:

"Fight it with work, young 'un. It nearly drove me mad the first year out here. I think I should have given in but for forty years of memories to feed on."

And he—had had no memories, only work, to fight it with; but she had neither memories nor work with which to conquer her loneliness.

"Will you let me bring you something gayer?" he had ventured.

"I don't want gay things, they make me miserable by contrast. I like strong drink, thank you," and the light came back laughing to her eyes and the lit to her voice.

But he brought her his happiest books and had carried away some of hers; and then when winter came, sometimes instead of a book he used to ride over with an armful of mountain-laurel.

The next head was rough between his fingers.

It was a day in February when the snow lay in their lands a glittering level sheet, the solitary white house scarcely distinguishable but for the jets of blue smoke that curled straight upward in the still icy air. The thermometer was registering unbelievable degrees below freezing, and he found her before the roaring stove in the living-room, playing checkers with her father;

repetitious, and the girl—who could tell about a woman? He suddenly remembered John Alden and Priscilla. No doubt he was like that chap, and his eyes told her every time he went near her what he kept his tongue from speaking. The thought wasn't sweet. If she cared, why didn't she give a sign like that girl? Say the word herself since she saw he decently couldn't?

He kept his vigil for three weeks, tasting the heart-wracking misery of the lover's debate. She loves me—she loves me not. And at dawn, like a good knight faithful and sore spent, he rode home and slept. And Gordon told the necessary fibs to keep his watch from others.

When he rode down it was generally sunset in a translucent sky, and he beat the path—well worn now through the yellowing grass—wondering for the five hundredth time if she cared. A man could never tell—Every one who got the chance paid court to her. Suddenly his blood froze! The beacon was burning! It was not the sunset light, it was burning, blazing. He dug in the spurs and flung himself prone on the horse's neck. The animal understood; she was no broncho, but a blooded Arabian mare, who broke into a long, level stride, the blood streaming from her flanks, her nostrils wide, eyes steady, ears back; she sped low along the ground, and swam the ford without seeming to break pace. As they came up the other side, Dunstan lifted a set face and wiped his damp forehead. A woman in white was sitting—it was she—on the veranda and there

London, and I'm tired of my very shadow. The men are so respectful they won't even sit on their own veranda and listen to my violin. They go indoors and play cards; and the other day the mail remained all afternoon at the barn because the man who brought it couldn't find Jan to come and hand it to me. *Mon Dieu!* Gentlemen, you give me too much majesty," she quoted whimsically. "I almost fell on the neck of this lady." She was contemplating her dirty comrade. The young had been fed and the tired mother ate hungrily. "She came with her husband and children an hour ago, and I was so glad to see some one it's proper for me to speak to!"

He looked down at her lazily. The very sight of her always filled him with content. She was so plucky with that bright irony that had no malice, but was like fine woven armor to resist the cruelty of life. And underneath it, what golden tenderness and depth of feeling. Ah! but was there? Was she really tender or really hard straight through?

"Have you missed me?" he asked, deliberately.

She flushed, but did not turn.

"You're very irrelevant and unexpected."

"Unexpected maybe, but irrelevant? That question is behind everything I say or do."

She laughed, blushing and bewitching, a born coquette.

He studied the squaw. What was the use? It was to Florence Bellinger's isolation that he was indebted for whatever kindness and friendliness she had shown him. He was merely a means of keeping bright her weapons of coquetry. He looked off wearily, and the girl, who fenced in spite of her lonely heart and against her will, glanced up at his silence, but he was staring intently over her head.

"Some more callers coming there, I should think."

A train of horsemen in Indian file were riding along outside the fence, picking a way of their own to the north gate.

The squaw turned and grinned.

"Come stay here one night," she suggested tentatively, looking at Miss Bellinger.

"I don't think so," said Dunstan; "I don't think so. I'm going to see Wing, if you don't mind."

The beacon had died down or been put out, but there was all the width of the Pacific between Wing's immobility and that of the squaw. He had a pile of plates in his arm putting them around for supper, and he did not lift his eyes.

"No like Indian—think you better come. Got one family—four more men come far up road. Been hunting—got guns—shoot some bolly may be."

He did not stop one moment dealing out his plates, even while he was talking.

The Indians, who had dismounted at the barn, were filing over towards the house, and Dunstan went across the open space to meet them.

"Got 'em supper?" the first one asked, placatingly.

"Yes, we'll give you supper; then you water your horses and come along. You can't stay here; but you can put up at my place across the valley." The leader looked sullen.

"Stay here," he said, doggedly.

Through the opposite door the cowboys could be seen coming over for supper, four of them also, and he wondered if they had pistols. He went back through the house as they reached the garden.

"We got company for supper," said Jan, with a grin.

"They can't stay here, Jan, five young bucks like that. I dare say they're peaceful enough."

"Five! Dere was only one—he stopped suddenly."

The Indians, in fringed buskins, sombreros on their black heads, were sitting in a motionless row against the dining-room wall.

"Hooray for the Eden Musée!" cried one of the men; a wanderer from the ends of the earth; and another, looking in over his shoulder, gave a low whistle.

Instantly the Indians stood up with glancing eyes, watching through the open door.

"Better have a gun." Two of the men had already gone back to the Hall for pistols, and they loaded in the garden, quiet but jubilant with excitement.

"There'll be no fight, of course," Dunstan cautioned, "but they must be made to understand that they can't stop more than fifteen minutes to eat. You men will please serve them; stuff 'em full and make haste."

He faced about and went in the dining-room, where the Indians stood carved in wood, only their eyes moving—they had made up their minds to fight.

"Are you on your way to Klammath?" said Dunstan, haughtily.

"Yes," said the fellow involuntarily.

"Well, you are welcome to good food here, then you must come along."

And he walked through the house to the front veranda. Miss Bellinger looked up contentedly.

"Her name is Dolores," she said; "a trace of the California missions. Isn't it interesting?"

"Very. Dolores, your husband wants you to go and get in the wagon again."

The girl looked at him. "She's my guest," she said, quietly.

"It isn't expedient to discuss it in her presence," he said, shortly. "If you'll allow me, I'll fetch her wagon down." He was off while he spoke.

"Allow you?" It was only a murmur, but it followed him and cut.

Then a shot came from the dining-room. Behind the Indians, Dunstan opened the door quietly, and took in the situation at a glance.

"File out," he said, standing back and drawing. "The first man who moves a hand will be shot through the back."

They fell over each other obediently.

Dolores and the children were cowering in the wagon at the front gate, and Dunstan, with an order to Jan to get in and drive, went back to the house.

He took off his sombrero. "I'm so sorry," he said; "I was afraid of that."

She looked up at him, a mixture of fun and rebellion smoldering in her eyes.

"I wanted a playmate so," she said.

"It is very lonely for you," he answered perfunctorily, as is the Englishman's wont, while his heart beat with misery.

"The sound escaped against her will; the dumb appeal shook his heart out of control and sent him pleading to her."

"I can't bear it—I love you desperately, miserably, day and night. What is it you want?"

She had turned away at his first step forward, and now, still turned, she answered in a strained voice.

"You might speak to me—"

"Flourie!"

"And comfort me if you had any sense!" It was a murmur that had the familiar echo of her maddening country. His arms were around her.

"Hol' hol' voices outside called to the horses; 'steady there!'"

She pushed him away, laughing.

He took off a curious, deep-set emerald that he wore on his little finger and put it on her finger.

"Now you belong to me," he said.

An hour later he dismounted his cavalcade at the bungalow steps, and the astonished Gordon took out his pipe.

"Holy Willie! Is it Buffalo Bill?"

"Some of my friends, come to spend the night," answered Dunstan dreamily.



HER FACE WENT WHITE, BUT SHE JUST STOOD AND LOOKED OFF GRAVELY.

"It's a disadvantage."

What lashes she had!

"Do you think so? It allows a man to concentrate his mind on the main enjoyment." She looked up.

"The main enjoyment? Of what?"

"Well, of an enchanting song and"—her eyes warned him—"a kind singer."

The lashes went down again. He was satisfactory.

"I wish I could give you a real pleasure. But I can't do better on my violin." And then, solemnly sweet, she had lifted her throat and sung, "Du bist mir wie eine Blume." She inferred somehow that he would not understand, but he merely said: "Now sing something that applies to me."

She looked at him meditatively.

"If I knew you better I could choose." But she gave it up. "I don't know what would fit you," and demanded that her saddle be fixed forthwith.

When he had helped her to mount he held the bridle and took off his cap: "I am tremendously your debtor. Will you let me say that I have seen a vision?"

She laughed unsteadily.

"Well, the vision bores itself fearfully all alone in that white house over there; you might come and let it give you tea when you are over this way."

And like a monk at prayers, he fingered the next bead.

It was a week later when he had ridden over with an offering of a haunch of venison. She was lying in the hammock on the veranda, with her hair all loosened and lovely, so intent on her book that she had looked up only at the sound of his foot on the step. Her book was "Buckle's History of Civilization," and in the confusion of her surprise, he picked it up. He had made an extra low bow; "Mes compliments! You don't waste your time."

"When one has so much of it, one has to use up every bit profitably or go mad."

She had laughed deprecatingly, but the look of the pain of solitude, that asphyxiation of the heart that is

her great eyes filled like brimming wells with a weariness that the old man, with the merciless dullness of age to youth, translated only in terms of filial duty and feminine insignificance. Was it Dunstan's impatience with parental egotism, or with the complacency of age toward that waste of the precious splendor of life's morning that had struck up the spark of antagonism between the two men? Somehow the guest had been made to understand that his calls were too frequent, that as a friend he was dangerous; as a wooer ineligible.

"I'm afraid you don't find much to do over there, Dunstan, in this weather?"

"Oh, yes, there are the foaling mares that need attention; we've got a hospital of invalids."

Gordon must do the lion's share.

Dunstan had looked at him. His meaning was so unmistakable that the girl flushed.

So Dunstan's visits became rare and more or less surreptitious, and the girl—who could tell about a woman?

He suddenly remembered John Alden and Priscilla. No doubt he was like that chap, and his eyes told her every time he went near her what he kept his tongue from speaking. The thought wasn't sweet. If she cared, why didn't she give a sign like that girl? Say the word herself since she saw he decently couldn't?

He kept his vigil for three weeks, tasting the heart-wracking misery of the lover's debate. She loves me—she loves me not. And at dawn, like a good knight faithful and sore spent, he rode home and slept. And Gordon told the necessary fibs to keep his watch from others.

When he rode down it was generally sunset in a translucent sky, and he beat the path—well worn now through the yellowing grass—wondering for the five hundredth time if she cared. A man could never tell—Every one who got the chance paid court to her. Suddenly his blood froze! The beacon was burning! It was not the sunset light, it was burning, blazing. He dug in the spurs and flung himself prone on the horse's neck. The animal understood; she was no broncho, but a blooded Arabian mare, who broke into a long, level stride, the blood streaming from her flanks, her nostrils wide, eyes steady, ears back; she sped low along the ground, and swam the ford without seeming to break pace. As they came up the other side, Dunstan lifted a set face and wiped his damp forehead. A woman in white was sitting—it was she—on the veranda and there

London, and I'm tired of my very shadow. The men are so respectful they won't even sit on their own veranda and listen to my violin. They go indoors and play cards; and the other day the mail remained all afternoon at the barn because the man who brought it couldn't find Jan to come and hand it to me. *Mon Dieu!* Gentlemen, you give me too much majesty," she quoted whimsically. "I almost fell on the neck of this lady." She was contemplating her dirty comrade. The young had been fed and the tired mother ate hungrily. "She came with her husband and children an hour ago, and I was so glad to see some one it's proper for me to speak to!"

He looked down at her lazily. The very sight of her always filled him with content. She was so plucky with that bright irony that had no malice, but was like fine woven armor to resist the cruelty of life. And underneath it, what golden tenderness and depth of feeling. Ah! but was there? Was she really tender or really hard straight through?

"Have you missed me?" he asked, deliberately.

She flushed, but did not turn.

"You're very irrelevant and unexpected."

"Unexpected maybe, but irrelevant? That question is behind everything I say or do."

She laughed, blushing and bewitching, a born coquette.

He studied the squaw. What was the use? It was to Florence Bellinger's isolation that he was indebted for whatever kindness and friendliness she had shown him. He was merely a means of keeping bright her weapons of coquetry. He looked off wearily, and the girl, who fenced in spite of her lonely heart and against her will, glanced up at his silence, but he was staring intently over her head.

"Some more callers coming there, I should think."

A train of horsemen in Indian file were riding along outside the fence, picking a way of their own to the north gate.

The squaw turned and grinned.

"Come stay here one night," she suggested tentatively, looking at Miss Bellinger.

"I don't think so," said Dunstan; "I don't think so. I'm going to see Wing, if you don't mind."

The beacon had died down or been put out, but there was all the width of the Pacific between Wing's immobility and that of the squaw. He had a pile of plates in his arm putting them around for supper, and he did not lift his eyes.

"No like Indian—think you better come. Got one family—four more men come far up road. Been hunting—got guns—shoot some bolly may be."

He did not stop one moment dealing out his plates, even while he was talking.

The Indians, who had dismounted at the barn, were filing over towards the house, and Dunstan went across the open space to meet them.

"Got 'em supper?" the first one asked, placatingly.

"Yes, we'll give you supper; then you water your horses and come along. You can't stay here; but you can put up at my place across the valley." The leader looked sullen.

"Stay here," he said, doggedly.

Through the opposite door the cowboys could be seen coming over for supper, four of them also, and he wondered if they had pistols. He went back through the house as they reached the garden.

"We got company for supper," said Jan, with a grin.

"They can't stay here, Jan, five young bucks like that. I dare say they're peaceful enough."

"Five! Dere was only one—he stopped suddenly."

The Indians, in fringed buskins, sombreros on their black heads, were sitting in a motionless row against the dining-room wall.

"Hooray for the Eden Musée!" cried one of the men; a wanderer from the ends of the earth; and another, looking in over his shoulder, gave a low whistle.