THE BROKEN COIN

By EMERSON HOUGH

AUTHOR OF "THE LADY AND THE PIRATE" "JOHN RAWN" ETC.

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(Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.)

Kitty Gray, a newspaper woman, finds half of a broken coin, which arouses her curiosity, and leads her to the principality of Gretzhoffen to piece out the story suggested by the inscription.

She calls on Count Frederick, who attempts to detain her. She is rescued by Roleau, who had shadowed her as the count's agent, and then had become her friend.

Brought before King Michael of Gretzhoffen, Kitty Gray, confessing the object of her visit, is given the other half of the broken coin. It bears the words: "Torture chamber, treasures of the King."

Later, fearing that the half coin will be stolen from her, she sends it back to the King by messenger. Kitty overhears a plot against the monarch and warns him not to drink any wine at the ball that evening.

The King remained sober, frustrating the plans of Frederick to start a revolution. But when the messenger delivered the package from Kitty to the King the coin had disappeared. Kitty overhears Sachio plotting with another person to overthrow Gretzhoffen, indicating that he has intercepted her messenger and obtained the half of the coin she had sent to the King.

Roleau follows Kitty, saves her from attack by a stranger. Sachio startled by the noise drops the coin. The stranger seizes it and makes off with Kitty in pursuit. Later Roleau and Frederick follow her. She traces her man to the band of desert brigands.

INSTALLMENT SIX.

CHAPTER XXII.

In the Underworld.

WHICHEVER way she turned, escape seemed quite cut off for the young woman, whose adventures now had carried her into such desperate case. Behind her still rose the sounds of combat, where Roleau and Landozi fought with the occupants who remained in the thieves' den. On ahead, in the passageway, others of the gang swarmed in, cutting off exit by the main gallery. And here, holding her as his prisoner, was the man she feared most of them all, as the most apt to win in this contest for the possession of the coin—Frederick, the nobleman of Gretzhoffen, whose resolution matched her own.

She beat at him with her hands as he swung her lightly from the ground, but he only smiled at her protests—only smiled when he saw himself outnumbered by these newcomers who confronted them in the main exit. At bay, he stood beside his captive and waited those who sought to make them both captives.

From mansion to cottage, from the royal palace to the dens of outlaws and thieves—such had been the travels of this fateful coin! Hope, despair, adventure, risk—these were close about it all the time. It seemed the very touchstone of hazard, invoking even the risk of life on the part of those who ventured its pursuit. These men were desperate, would kill for less excuse than offered now. They saw their own little underworld kingdom invaded, and the first motto for them at all times was that dead men tell no tales.

Roleau and Landozi, seeing that Kitty had escaped, glared at one another for a moment before they understood that they both were her friends. From what they heard they knew that she still was besieged in the main entry way. A moment later Roleau forced his way out of the rear entry of the den, closely followed by Landozi, as agile as himself. They armed themselves at the car which had brought them hither, and sprang forward to the entrance of the main gallery, eager to assist the woman whom they both sought to serve.

This flanking attack upon the enemy was more than offset by the march in the rear of the main enemy himself—Blake, the renegade, who finding himing himself freed of his assailants, sprang into the passageway after Kitty. She, as he knew very well, was in possesion of the coin. He found her there in the company of a stranger—a tall man whom he never before had seen, and who now showed small fear of himself or of the others confronting him. There was no time for Blake to figure upon what relation these two might have—the coin was all he cared for.

"Give it to me!" he demanded as he sprang at Kitty with a raised weapon.

Count Frederick stepped toward him. "Fellow, what is it that you want? Leave this young lady alone."

"He has it! Search him!" exclaimed Kitty quickly, pointing to Frederick himself. That individual experienced a swift surprise at this sudden turning of the tables upon him. But the ruse worked—unceremoniously the apaches laid hands upon Count Frederick and haled him back to the rear of the subterranean passageway. Believing that he had taken the coin from Kitty, they set her advice into vigorous effect at once.

A pair of thieves still guarded the exit, but these now were to meet the escaped Roleau and his confederate, as keen for conflict as they, and better prepared for it. Kitty heard rapid shots, the acrid smell of powder filled the place. Then, before she had further time for thought, she felt herself hurried forward, the strong hand of Roleau upon her arm.

"Quick, excellency," he called, "there is yet time."

As she felt the cool air of the outer world upon cheek Kitty shook off a trace of her despair. The coin still was in her hand—she might yet escape.

Cut off by some of the apaches from the car toward which they sprang, Roleau turned and hurried Kitty to the two horses which had brought Landozi and herself thither. An instant later they were mounted and fleeing, leaving Landozi to fend for himself, as they well knew he could. What interested them more was the cries of the two ruffians who themselves had sprung to the car and now were cranking it furiously with the intent of pursuing them in their own motor.

Within the den where these things had occurred Frederick, count of Gretzhoffen, now was prisoner to the rat-faced leader of the apaches, the renegade Blake. The latter stood menacing him.

"Why be agitated, my friend?" demanded the nobleman, cooly enough. "You see I have not the coin. The girl has outwitted you—myself as well. I swear, her wit is nimble enough! She has left me—and you—in the lurch, and has escaped once more. She has flung me to you, as Russian travelers sometimes fling something to stop the wolves which pursue them. While you are rending me she gains time! But why rend me? If I had the coin I would give it to you now, for I fancy a whole throat more than I do a divided coin. But you see I haven't it."

"Nor have I," assented Blake, ruefully enough.

"Ah? Perhaps you have something else, my friend—a cigarette, let us say?"

Blake tossed him a box of cigarettes, and Count Frederick lit one calmly.

"Very well, monsieur," said the renegade leader. "I am forced to believe what you say—the coin is gone, no one knows where by now. But you yourself shall remain here until my men bring back those two—the girl and the ruffian who used us so hard in her defense. Landozi—he is safe enough. We do not fear him, for in a way he is our brother. But tell me, monsieur, what is it—this coin? Why do so many pursue it?"

He turned a keen eye upon the nobleman who remained so composed in these surroundings.

"Why, I may tell you but little," answere Count Frederick. "If I had it in my hand now perhaps I could tell you more. But always, no sooner do I place a hand upon it than yonder young woman appears out of nowhere and makes away with it again! I have resolved to have it—I admit that. As you know, monsieur, one does not readily give up resolutions of that nature when formed. Is it not so?"

"Frankly, I own a like desire," retolned Blake. "I will win—my men will bring her back."

"I am not so sure. I find her most active in her ways."

"Who is she then?—and what is she to you, monsieur?" demanded Blake.

Count Frederick paused for half an instant, as though himself engaged in thought.

"Monsieur," said he, "you ask me a question there indeed! I have not yet myself decided upon that answer. Who is she? She is an American—that is almost all I know of her. She may or may not be of quality in her own land, but she has some desperate errand here in ours."

"With such beauty as hers," said the apache leader, "rank matters but little."

"Stop!" exclaimed Count Frederick. "It is not for you to comment in that way." The blood surged into the nobleman's face as he spoke.

"Why? What is it to you?" The covert sneer on the face of the other showed his own suspicions as to which way the wind might set regarding these two.

"It is no matter what it is to me—nay, I do not know in truth what it is to me," said Count Frederick, irritated almost beyond speech. "She is, as I have said, an American—she has some business here—I know little more."

"And you did not answer my main question—What is she to you?"

The nobleman turned on him angrily, in loathing of such familiarity on his part. "If I could answer that question, fellow," said he, "I would not. Since I am not able to do so, I shall not."

"She is not your sweetheart?" persisted Blake—"nor your wife—nor your daughter—nor of your family—?"

Count Frederick made no reply.

"Ah, I see," mocked the other; "it is not what she is, but what she might be."

With difficulty restraining himself, the nobleman turned away. In his own heart arose that same question. He had seen the pleading look on the face of the young girl as she turned toward him, his prisoner. He reflected now on the brutality of some of his own conduct toward her. He felt anew an admiration for the struggle which she was making for what she desired so keenly—admiration for the indomitable quality of her will; for, as he reminded himself once more, she was here alone in a foreign land, and as she claimed, not intending to violate any of the laws of that land.

"Monsieur admires that jeune fille!" The sneer of the renegade once more was evident.

"Yes!" Frederick turned full upon him now. "Monsieur admires her!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

The Plunge.

Roleau and Kitty learned soon enough that in a race of the best of horses against a good motor car the former has small chance. They heard the chug of the motor coming swiftly on. In turn those in the car could hear the hoof-falls of the fleeing horses. The fugitives had hurried to the rough country at the edge of the desert, but guided by a reckless driver the speeding car clung close to them.

"Ride, excellency, ride!" called Roleau at Kitty's ear; and scarce broke the silence again as they sped on. And Kitty settled herself to ride as never before had she ridden, forgetting the risk of a stumble in the darkness, having in mind only what was coming on behind.

A sudden exclamation from Roleau came back to her after a time. He pulled his horse up strongly, and she herself reined in just in time. Ahead of them lay the brink of a sheer drop of unknown depth.

"Pull off!" cried Roleau. "Go to one side and let them come—let them come on!" She swerved quickly aside just in time, and pulled up at the brink. There she was the witness of a sudden tragedy.

The men in the car, their eyes fixed only on the two whom they pursued, did not see the brink of the bank in time. Throttle wide open, they came on at speed. Too late they realized what was ahead. The car speed out into space—how far, neither of its occupants ever had time to know.

Roleau's horse dropped into running water as boldly he sprang on out ahead of the car. Saved by his horse, he swam it to the bank. Not so fortunate those in the car. The vehicle turned over even as it fell, and dropped—a drop of many feet, plinking them under it beneath the surface of the stream. They were lost hopelessly, for had the car not crushed them they must at once have drowned, thus imprisoned.

Kitty, trembling at what she saw, remained as though paralyzed by the scene, until at length she heard the voice of Roleau at her ear. That worthy had managed to scramble up the bank at some other point.

"Excellency—quick!" he cried once more. "We must get away. Ride! Ride!" And they hurried off to one side into the darkness as best they might, avoiding what they fancied would be the line of advance of their pursuers.

"Which way, excellency?" panted Roleau, riding alongside.

"Where is Landozi?" demanded Kitty. "This is his horse."

"Leave Landozi to his own care—he will look for his own safety, excellency. A horse here or there is nothing. Which way? Shall we ride to the outlaws—or where?"

"Into the city," cried Kitty, "fast as we can! I will be safer at the hotel."

And so, an hour later, she gave the management of the Ritz yet more cause for wonder, when, in the early hours of the morning, bedraggled, disheveled, pale, she and her unprepossessing attendant pulled up once more in the street in front of the door.

In her own room, after a certain time devoted to her toilet, which left her more at peace with herself, Kitty sat for a time pondering. Yes, she once more had half the coin—that half given to her by the king. So far, so good. But after all, she was as far from the ultimate success of her errand as ever she had been. Her own half of the coin—that which she had brought with her from America—where was it? In the possession of a certain, tall, strong man—a man who had smiled when dangers threatened him—a man she hated with all her soul, as she now persuaded herself. She ought to hate him with all her heart—yes, she was sure of that. Where was he now? At least she had evened matters with him. Once he had left her helpless in the desert—now in turn she had left him the prisoner of ruthless men. Perhaps he never again would see the light of day—his life even now might be forfeit, for all she knew. If so, she would have been the cause of all that.

Suddenly she stopped, her eyes wide. The thought gave her no comfort! Throughout he had sought for the coin ardently, as had she herself. Perhaps his reasons for doing so were quite as honorable as her own. After all, she had only professional pique to carry her on, whereas it was quite possible he had more than that. There were affairs of state which perhaps animated him. She could not claim so much. This was his country, it was not hers.

"They may kill him," said Kitty to herself. "I could not endure the thought of that—it would be my own fault. I will not admit that it was his fault I was used so cruelly by his man. He himself has laid no hand on me until this very night—and then not in rudeness. Indeed, for all I know, had he not come when he did, I myself might have paid the forfeit he may be paying now."

Kitty paused for a time to look at her own face in the glass. It was very pale, very unhappy.

"I must set him free," said she with sudden resolve to herself. "There has been life enough lost over this already—his must not be added. I will help to get him free."

CHAPTER XXIV.

Count Sachio and His Friends.

Far across the neutral lands, beyond the desert of Intergraffen, in his hunting lodge at the edge of the forest, Count Sachio for long hours of uncertainty has nursed his own wrath and disappointment at the denouement of the scenes which he had seen take place about him. Pacing up and down, refusing food or drink, his rage always turned toward the unhappy agent Rudolph, his unsuccessful messenger.

"You Rudolph of Grahaffen," he exclaimed at last, "you should have died rather than betray me! Ah, you betrayed our country as well."

The man addressed, now practically a prisoner, and if not an object of suspicion, at least one of histolity, sat moody and unhappy in the main room of the lodge.

"I can say no more, excellency," said he. "I failed, it is true. But you do not count the skill and power of those who are arrayed against us."

"How should I count them?" exclaimed Sachio, fiercely. "Why should I? Can I explain to my own king—can you explain to him? Bah! man, they come to nothing in life—explanations, excuses, reasons. Results, results, results—those alone count for aught."

"Excellency, I tried."

"You tried—what is that? Rather say you failed, for that is the main thing. The efficient man alone is worth his salt at my table or that of the king of Grahaffen. What good can come of excuses? I gave you a free hand—and you failed. You were the weak link in our chain, and the chain is done! Yet you had the chance to do a great deed for your country—and now you say you 'tried!' By the Lord! sir, if times were set back a century or so, your body would hang on the walls for crows to peck at."

"But, excellency," spoke up another man after a time, a friend of Sachio, "if it is useless to cry over spilt milk—and we cannot wholly mend this pitcher—even the trifle of milk remaining in the fragments may have some value."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, this. The young girl who was the actual instrument of Rudolph's failure—as none of us can doubt—is still alive and still at liberty."

"Well, what of that?"

"If we found her—and perhaps she can be found—we could even pick up our skein at the same knot where we left it. She is somewhere on top of earth—she is not a spirit, after all, elusive though she seems."

"Then what is your own plan, my friend?"

"Seek her at her best-known haunts. Every creature has some lair, a den, a house, a hiding place. Where is hers?"

"So far as I know," replied Sachio, "she is a stranger, and has no home here."

"But she must have some stopping place—there must be some place of protection for her."

"By Jove! true," mused Sachio. "She stopped at the Ritz Hotel in Gretzhoffen when last I heard. We might try that as a last resort."

"I offer the suggestion as nothing better than a last chance. It is somewhat apparent to your excellency how desirable it is to take back to our own sovereign something definite——"

Sachio grumbled some response, and the other went on.

"These strained times cannot hold together forever—the break will come before long. Our own monarch will not continue to endure this condition, half peace and half suspicion, that exists between the two kingdoms."

"Yes—war!" exclaimed Sachio. "But why war without success. War for plan or purpose or result—yes, we could agree to that. But curse it! man, do you not see that it all hangs on the ownership of this spirit coin? There is the issue. Without that we could gain nothing if we did go to war, nor even though we won the war."

"The economy of a king may mean much, my friend," went on Sachio, "Michael, the dead king, was a business man—he saved. The economy of a people is the hope of business—the economy of a king is the hope of a people itself. There are two sorts of folk in the world—those who make mortgages and those who pay them. King Michael the Second of Gretzhoffen is one who makes mortgages. King Michael the First was one who planned to pay them. He saved the money for that purpose—he intended to leave his kingdom sick.

"But where is his hidden treasury? We know something of it—it is under the fortifications of Gretzhoffen. Our own monarch knows so much as that—but no more. He asks me to learn more definitely the location of that treasury—and what have I done? What can I do—unless at length I shall gain not one both both halves of this Gretzhoffen coin? So is it not plain enough?

"Thirty years ago, your excellency," rejoined his friend, "these kingdoms did fight."

"Yes, and that was ended by the alliance Michael the first formed with our own princess. Love did that, messieurs—he loved our princess, so all was forgotten. He was a good king and a strong one. There is need for another strong man like him these days—but not like the second Michael of Gretzhoffen. Why, he gave away his very birthright—won by the fair face of a girl—this strange young American, whoever she may be. He gave her the Gretzhoffen coin out of hand, as though it were no more than a farthing, for all he cared—"

"But she cared, that is evidence enough!"

"Yes, she cared, that is true! and so did another care."

"Count Frederick?"

"Yes, now you have named them both," rejoined Count Sachio, his grim jaws set. "The young woman has half the coin. Count Frederick has the other half. They must both be found, and swiftly as may be. Who will ride with me? Not you, Rudolph—some one must do the errand you failed in doing. You, Johann; you, Marco—come. We must bring back not either half of the Gretzhoffen coin tonight—but both halves."

CHAPTER XXV.

The Quality of Mercy.

A two-fold mental attitude occupied Kitty as she sat in her own apartment trying to make just estimate of her own necessities and those of another.

"If I sent to the police to rescue him," she said to herself—and now she called "him" one who lately had been her enemy—"they would only laugh at me. They do as they like these days. No one knows whose friends they are—those of the thieves or of honest people. No, it would be useless to tell them.

"What then?" she asked herself. "The king!" But how could the king be reached now after all the fiasco of the night of the ball?

"I have it!" she exclaimed half aloud, "I see it now. The king is still afraid of his people—he is hid in his own palace now lest he see his shadow—and all the time he is looking for a strange man—the same whom he called to his side that night of the ball—Count Frederick. Very well, King Michael wants Count Frederick—and he shall have him. That is to say, he shall know where he is. If the king retains any power in this distracted country, surely he can prevail against thieves such as these. Yes, I will write to the king."

And forsooth Kitty did seat herself to write one more message to his majesty, King Michael. She made sure that his chamberlains should know who was the sender of this missive; and she counted on his majesty's memory of her own self.

"Your majesty!" she wrote, "It may interest you to know that Count Frederick is being held a prisoner by a band of apaches, in their dive near the sewers in the lower part of the city. Follow the desert road for Grahaffen, take steps leading to cellar of last house on left side of road. Kitty Gray."

The plan worked to perfection—was admirable. Within two hours the King's men had rescued the imprisoned nobleman and brought him once more to the palace, although of this Kitty knew nothing at all.

"Your majesty," he exclaimed when at length he met the King. "I greet your majesty with joy—and I must say with surprise. How could you know where I was—I sought in vain to get out some word."

"This was my advice," rejoined the King, and placed before him the note which he had but now received from the young American. Frederick gazed at it surprised, perplexed.

"Again the American!" he exclaimed. "She seems everywhere. Is it not so? I swear——"

"Vow not at all, my dear count! We do not yet know the end. She writes this from a hotel in the city, but no one knows where she may be now, or what she may be doing."

Meantime the young lady of whom they spoke actually remained at her own hotel, plotting yet other things. She did not doubt the justice of her impulse to secure the freedom of the Count Frederick, but no more did she underestimate some of the consequences of that act. Surely, she reasoned, he would go at once to the King's palace—and there would no doubt he detained for a considerable time. So much the more time for her own plans!

Count Frederick still had charge of her half of the coin—so she reasoned to herself. In all probability he had left it in the room where he slept in his own palace. What better time than the present, therefore, to make one more visit in that dangerous locality?

"Roleau," said she a few moments later, after she had arrived upon this resolution. "Get our car once more."

"Which way now, excellency? Must you still go on in these dangerous adventures? Why not give it up? You may lose your life."

"I cannot give it up, Roleau," replied Kitty. "This time it should not be difficult—we must make one more effort for Count Frederick's portion of the coin."

"That means we must go to the palace?"

Kitty nodded. Soon the car was speeding once more down the avenues.

"Why do they still admit you here?" asked Kitty of Roleau as once more they drew up in front of the count's palace. "I should think they would forbid us both."

"I am a person of no consequence, excellency. Once of the household staff of a nobleman of this land, one is supposed to remain. You think him harsh to me—so it may seem. But these others, they figure that I still belong here. He would not speak to others of the matter at all. So I am still admitted on the old footing."

"But as to myself?"

"Excellency, I may not tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because the truth may not wholly please you. You see, they admit you because they think you still to be a friend of Count Frederick—one of his friends—I cannot explain."

(Continued Tomorrow.)

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Kitty about to match both parts of the coin

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