The Broken Coin

By EMERSON HOUGH

From the Scenario by Grace Cunard

A Story of Mystery and Adventure

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Novelized From the Motion Picture Drama of the Same Name. Produced by the Universal Film Manufacturing Company.

SYNOPSIS.

Kitty Gray, newspaper woman, finds in a curio shop half of a broken coin, the mutilated inscription on which arouses her curiosity and leads her, at the order of her managing editor, to go to the principality of Gretzhoffen to piece out the story suggested by the inscription. She is followed, and on arrival in Gretzhoffen her adventures while chasing the secret of the broken coin begin.

EIGHTEENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER LXIV.

Sachio and Michael.

The two rival capitals of these mooted lands still faced one another in a conflict as yet undecided. Which were deeper in duplicity it had been difficult to say, but as to which surpassed in active measures no doubt at all remained. Count Sachio, restless and energetic, already was taking further steps to enforce his own will and that of his sovereign upon the weaker mind which purported to govern at Gretzhoffen.

It was as Sachio had prophesied—the sloth of Michael left him open to any proposition which came couched in fair words and which offered no disturbing changes in his own personal plans. He acceded readily enough to the proposals of the Grahoffen courtier to lengthen the armistice between the two warring countries with a view to a formal and final peace. Readily enough also he admitted into his own household the archplotter of the forces of his hereditary enemy.

Unopposed, indeed invited, Sachio made his way much as he liked throughout the Gretzhoffen palace, with whose interior he already was more or less familiar. It was his plan in case of any challenge to refer to the royal ruler who was his host.

He paid special attention to that apartment where he had found the partially destroyed original script whose missing half he sought. Here, minutely, patiently, like a hound running a difficult trail, he went over the place inch by inch, seeking to find some trace which would lead him to his quarry.

But success did not attend his efforts, though these he prosecuted even in those portions of the palace where so recently he and his troops had faced death when the levels were flooded by waters turned in from the castle moats. He was willing to despair, and in fact had turned away with the intention of giving up the search, when he met a subofficer of the guard who proved difficult to handle in his usual easy fashion.

"Halt! Who goes there?" challenged this guard as he saw Sachio emerge from one of the lower chambers.

"A friend!" rejoined Sachio promptly, in military formula.

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign!" came the gruff command.

"The countersign?" said Sachio. "Ah, well, my friend, now that I think of it, I have not had it given to me. 'Twas my own neglect. But I am a friend of the king—'twas he who gave me permission to explore these portions of the palace. I was curious to see the operations of this system of defense by water—it was something new to me."

"That is all very well," rejoined the soldier, "but explanations of that sort are scarcely good enough."

"Take me, then, to the king himself," said Sachio.

"Why should I?" rejoined the other. "What business is it of yours to know about the lower levels of our palace? These are ticklish times, and there have been such things as spies."

"Spies!" exclaimed Sachio, virtuously. "I, a spy—is that what you mean, fellow? If so, I command you to carry me forthwith to the presence of the king himself. He knows me well, and you should have a care not to offend one who is under the king's protection."

The sheer audacity of this intruder had its effect, even upon the blunt soldier who had accosted him. Sachio was indeed taken to the presence of Michael, and there his bold prediction proved true—Michael reprimanded publicly the officer who had done his duty, and showed his public favor to the man who was indeed a spy, although not suspected of being one.

"What, fellow?" exclaimed the king to the soldier, when Sachio had made his explanations—"what do you mean by offering indignity to our friend and future ally in this fashion? Away with you, and do you report at the guardhouse under arrest. Your trial shall come later."

"My dear Sachio," resumed Michael, "you see how prompt we are with our protection of our friends? Do not take it ill of us that one of our underlings has done what his superior officers or his sovereign would never think of countenancing. We trust you will accept this disclaimer."

"It was nothing, your majesty," replied the wily statesman, "and I assure your majesty the incident shall not linger in my memory. May we perhaps venture to drown in a bumper to your majesty's good health all thought of this misunderstanding? I will drink to the health of Michael and the prosperity of his kingdom."

"Quite agreeable!" exclaimed Michael; "and let us follow that with another to the final and peaceful conclusion of that unhappy misunderstanding which has heretofore divided these two kingdoms."

They drank. The befuddled friends of Michael joined them in hilarity if not intelligent, at least vociferous.

"But, my good Sachio," resumed Michael after a time, "let me ask you a question. Yours was ever a keen eye for beauty, and a good scent on the trail of beauty itself. Tell me, then, what became of that beautiful young American who so lately was with us—and who, if you will allow me to say it, had so much to do with the late repulse of your forces? I have not seen her since that time—nor, now that I recall it, have I seen her friend, Count Frederick. They have been gone some days or hours. I cannot tell which measures their absence, whether clock or calendar, but I know she is not here, for every room of the palace has been searched for her, and she is not found."

"Your majesty," rejoined Sachio, "it is astonishing how a keen brain like your own can guess another's secrets! I also make a claim to humble intelligence enough to have guessed your wishes in this matter, but, alas, I can be of no service to your majesty. I grieve to add, neither can anyone else be of service."

"What? She is dead!"

"Oh, not so bad as that. But she is gone."

"Gone—where?"

"To her own country—back to that America of which your majesty has heard her boast so freely."

"How do you know this, my friend?" demanded Michael.

Sachio smiled. "Who should know better?" said he. "Let me confess. We took yonder young lady a prisoner and carried her away with us; but we could not hold her as such. Indeed, we no longer hold any quarrel with Gretzhoffen and there was no longer a question of prisoners as between the two kingdoms. This young lady was seen to take ship."

"At what port?"

"At ours, your majesty. Her astonishing ingenuity enabled her to escape from our guards. Like Catiline of old, she has escaped, she has evaded, she has broken forth! And a good riddance of her, so say we all!"

"All, my good Sachio? I am not so sure. How shall I rid my memory of her eyes so beautiful, her hair so lovable, her figure—her so charming and delicate figure? Fortune does not often repeat such favors. We may not expect to see her like again at any early date."

"That is as it is," said Sachio, pretending to heave a vast sigh of sympathy. "But what can we do? She took it all into her own hands, and by this time is well on her way to America. There is not the slightest doubt regarding either her departure or her destination—she was rather bold about it, in fact, and made no secret of her plans."

"Was she a spy, think you, Sachio?"

"Without doubt, your majesty, and I well rue it that she did not receive the punishment fit for a spy. True, she was beautiful—"

"Yes, yes!" assented Michael. "Such eyes, such a figure—think you that she will return?"

"I truly hope not, your majesty," returned Sachio fervently, and for once he spoke the truth, even on the chance of offending this amorous king.

CHAPTER LXV.

The Unknown Countries.

What new of those to whom Count Sachio had so lightly given carte blanche to oblivion? Certainly there was left behind them no trace or clue which could give a hint of the extraordinary circumstances now enmeshing them. They might all of them, Kitty, Count Frederick, Roleau, as well have been dead indeed and sunk at sea, so far as any hint of their fate was concerned. They had vanished from the earth. The ship that bore them had vanished from the water as well.

It was a strange and unreal country which faced Count Frederick when he found solid land under foot once more. He turned to life and its happiness only with a dull apathy, a lagging interest.

Frederick did not note that the faithful Roleau had become separated from him in the confusion following the landing of the boat. In truth, Roleau, exhausted as he was, himself had noted but little of what had gone on. Finding himself finally left practically alone, he made off down the beach in search of food and water, while meantime Frederick was accompanied by a party of natives up the beach and into the village which served as headquarters for that portion of the island. Here he was brought before the chief. From the look of him and his subjects, Count Frederick fancied himself to be on an island somewhere off the African coast.

Whether these people were friends or foes he could not tell at first, for he understood neither their language nor their gesticulations, but it occurred to him that whichever they might be it would not be amiss for him to impress them with a feeling of his own power. He could not tell whether or not they were familiar with the effect of firearms, but recalled all he had read of the terror inspired in savage minds by the use of such weapons. He draw from his pocket the pistol which he had carried, and looked about him for some object at which to aim.

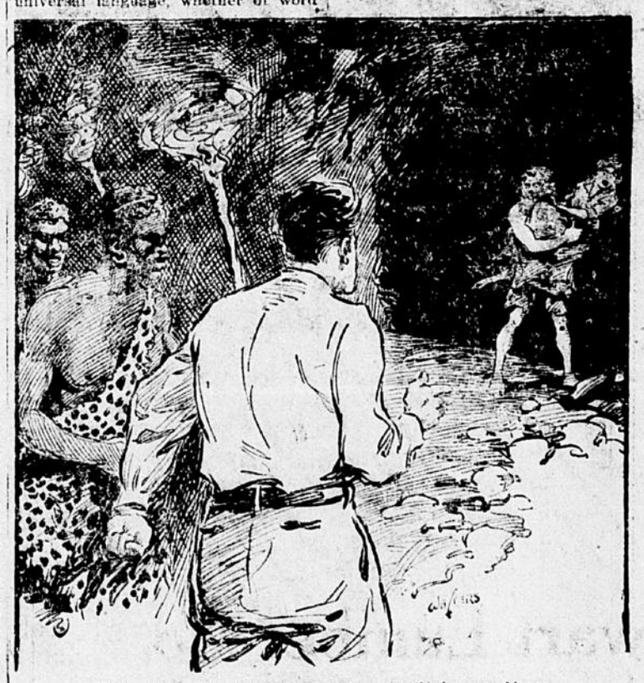
A wild duck was floating in the lagoon not far away, and at this Count Frederick took careful aim, and fired—with the extraordinary good luck to kill it outright. This feat brought out a most ludicrous activity amongst the natives. In consternation they flung themselves before him, clasped his knees, and laid their foreheads upon the earth even as Man Friday had in the presence of Crusoe of old. Obviously they were not disposed to curry favor with him now, and not to attack him. As for himself, possessed only of such ammunition as remained in his single cartridge clip, he assumed such an attitude as he fancied would best display him as a conqueror—although in truth he felt himself far from such.

They led him through the village to a place where he was offered food and water—both now imperatively craved by his starved body.

Unable to understand what was desired of him, and indifferent as to the meaning of the colloquy going on about him, for some time his interest in life and its affairs was so lax that he paid no attention to anything that was happening. At length, however, he noticed something which caused him to take a sudden and eager interest in his surroundings.

Two men came running, evidently from a distant part of the island and evidently bearers of news of some importance, as could be proved by the reception given their hurried story. But what was that story?

There is a certain virtue in necessity itself. There is a certain common denominator in human emotions. There is perhaps a certain unrecognized common denominator in human expression of human emotion—some universal language, whether of word or gesture, or of the unspoken telepathic quality of the mind itself. Count Frederick understood not one word of this language which he heard, yet he knew—because he must know—something of the subject which these persons were discussing.



Kitty Was Held Suspended Above the Unknown Abyss.

The men had come far—one could tell that, their looks proved it. They had seen something strange, something extraordinary had happened, some event of interest or importance had occurred, else they would not have come so fast and so far. This was easy enough to reason out.

What was that event? What could happen out of the ordinary on this desert island, unless it were something coming from beyond the narrow horizon of that island—say, a shipwreck, or the landing on these shores of some survivor such as he himself had been?

That would explain these hurried messengers. But if that were true, who or what was the survivor or adventurer discovered in a distant part of this same land? Was it a man or men, was it a woman or women? What was the meaning of these excited ejaculations, these gestures, these contortions?

Guessing, rather than knowing, Count Frederick fancied that these men were telling about a woman who like himself had been cast up by the waves.

The keen intentness of the white man's brain, for countless generations trained in logic and analysis, infinitely superior to the mentality of these half brutes about him, served to force itself into some comprehension of what might almost as well have been an unspoken thought on the part of these others. The eye of the white man kindled, the figure of the white man straightened. He knew! They were trying to tell that they had found a woman shipwrecked and cast upon this island.

If so, who was it, who could it be? Was it she whom he sought? Was fate merely jesting with him once more, or mercifully intending to teach him the one truth he craved?

The chief himself somewhat confirmed Count Frederick's surmises. He came now and pointed to one of the women of his own tribe, then approaching Frederick, he pulled up his sleeve and ran his hand over the white man's skin, pointing again to the woman. Plainly, a white woman had been discovered! That itself was an extraordinary occurrence here. Admiration, wonder, in part consternation, existed among these simple-minded natives.

But, obviously, they intended themselves to go to see this strange creature. The chief called about him some of his men. Count Frederick saw his opportunity in this. He placed himself at the head of the little band, and patting his pistol, held it up, as showing that he himself, owner of this powerful weapon, was the one leader fit for this errand of discovery of this strange white woman.

CHAPTER LXVI.

The Caverns.

When Kitty Gray awakened to consciousness upon the beach of a strange land whither she had been carried by no purpose of her own, she looked once more into the face of peril. The savages who surrounded her showed no sign of pity or kindness. Upon the contrary, whooping and yelling, they fell upon her and dragged her in spite of herself toward their own village.

This village had a ruler of its own, no doubt chief for that part of the country.

He was a savage of peculiarly fierce and forbidding visage, and Kitty felt her blood run cold as she faced his evil gaze. The natives, yelling in glee, practically cast her at his feet. Evidently they were giving to Caesar the things which they thought were Caesar's—in this case, woman, the spolia opima of all wars and all conquests. The evil face of the savage monarch relaxed into a grin which made Kitty shudder.

What woman was this now brought by chance to the presence of this ogre? Surely he had never seen her like before. Moreover, she was alone, a prisoner, helpless. The progress of reason hereabouts was swift and simple, and the chief himself did not lack directness in his methods. He gave a sign to his men, and the girl was dragged away, struggling as best she might, and flung into a hut which she knew was to serve as a prison.

Here in a corner of the dark interior she cowered in terror before the apparitions conjured up by her own imagination. She had not long to wait. The chief himself came, little suspecting the resistance he was to meet—that of an enraged and despairing woman. So valiant did Kitty prove herself in repulsing his odious advances, that he was glad enough to give her up and make his way back to his hammock, leaving her to her own devices.

Outside the hut Kitty could now hear loud cries, orders, shouts, exclamations, all the sounds of a crowd gathering—for what purpose she could not guess. The meaning of this also was not long left in doubt for her. Again the door of her hut was darkened, and again the natives intruded upon her privacy. Forceful hands dragged her once more before the chief.

The latter, smiling his hideous purpose of vengeance, pointed to a pile of firewood burning at the brink of a deep pit in the ground. He made signs to Kitty which she could not fail to understand.

Yes, she saw it now—she was to suffer the most horrible of deaths, that by fire! These people either were cannibals or fiends. Perhaps they purposed for her some rite of a horrible religion.

What could it matter to their victim, since the end would be the same, no matter what the reason for it?

But now they added the last touch of cruelty in their torture of her, that of delay. They did not carry her, resigned to the worst, at once to meet her fate; but on the contrary led her away and left her alone for a time, a prey to her own reflections, the victim of her own imaginations.

Only at times her strong will, her strong body, rebelled at the thought of death. Then she would cry out, "Roleau! Roleau!" she would exclaim, raising her hands; "Help, help! Come to me!" But more often than his name, she invoked that of another. She heard her own voice, almost without her own will, calling aloud for Count Frederick, the man so late her enemy, yet so ready and so powerful in any time of stress or danger!

"Frederick!" she moaned, again and again. "Where are you? Why do you not come?"

But to all this, only the howling derision of her captors made answer. She must, then, die!

In the last moment of their caprice, or in the full time of their decision, they haled her once more forth from the hut, up to the brink of the sacrificial pit itself, where now she saw the awakening flames.

Facing this culmination of their heathen rites, whatever were their purposes, their innocent victim again made such battle as she could against her captors. Shrieking she called again and again upon those names with which once she could conjure—called also upon the last name spoken by human hearts in despair. Who shall tell whether or not there be higher powers controlling circumstances such as these? At least, at this crucial moment there came a rescue, if rescue it might be called.

There burst from the corner of the nearby forest a strange, ill-shapen, half-clad figure, whether or not human Kitty scarce could tell. It was a man, a white man, clad in tattered fragments of what once had been a white man's garment. Brawny, hairy, repulsive indeed, of guttural and incoherent speech, he seemed like no white man Kitty Gray ever had seen. A swift conviction came to her that he was demented, that he was a lunatic—perhaps preserved from death by the very reason of his lunacy.

Whoever or whatever he was, his design now seemed not unfriendly to the victim of these savage ceremonies already in progress. Sweeping aside with blows of his great arms the savages who clustered about her, he caught Kitty up in a gorillalike embrace, and with hoarse cries of defiance made his way with her to the cover of the woods.

The natives did not pursue them—Kitty could not tell why. Indeed, she scarce had time to reason, in this new terror at the formidable apparition which now had her in charge.

Then slowly, finding him not unfriendly, she found time to ponder and to plan. Certainly this being was, or had been, a white man. Certainly he could or once could have employed intelligible speech—might again be able to do so.

But speech of intelligible sort she did not hear. Only he bore her away to some distance, until at length safe in the cover of the forest, he set her down.

Kitty looked about her. She found herself in a situation which she could liken to nothing else in all her experience.

A steep trail led down the declivity of a craterlike opening, evidently the mouth of a great cavern reaching back under the hill. The opening would not easily have been guessed by a stranger in those parts, even though passing close by in the forest. It was, in short, the mouth of one of the vaultlike series of caverns formed in the lava rock of what had once been a volcanic hill.

Below, within, all seemed dark, cold, silent. It was a refuge—though what a refuge. She was rescued—but by what a rescuer!

He beckoned to her now, and she followed him down the steep slope. Came then long stretches of underground passages, how many, how long, Kitty could not tell.

At least she lived. In spite of all her terrors, in spite of all these additional doubts, she still lived. She might have been more disposed to make some effort in her own behalf, had she not felt full upon her that strange oppression always experienced by any human being finding himself deep beneath the surface of that earth upon which, and not under which, he was born to walk.

So far as she could see, her captor had no plan save that of safety from pursuit. And she still lived—she could say so much as that, if no more!

CHAPTER LXVII.

In the Bowels of the Earth.

Count Frederick and his little band of warriors did not at once arrive upon the solution of the mystery of the strange white woman. The childlike caprice of the natives led him hither and thither, to this village and to that; so that a considerable time had elapsed before at length he found himself upon the scene of the late fateful happenings, although himself at that time still ignorant alike of the occurrences and their cause. To him this was but one more savage village, one more set of difficulties, one more series of disappointments.

They brought him, guarded by his own warriors, and hence for the time safe, into the presence of the same chief who had devoted Kitty Gray so ruthlessly to the sacrifice. To Count Frederick he was only one more savage with whom he could hold no converse.

But even as he stood before the hut of this old ruffian Count Frederick's eye caught sight of something which caused his heart to leap.

It was a little object, an unimportant item which might have escaped any other eye than his. Yet his gaze was drawn to it irresistibly.

It was a bit of cloth, a torn trifle of soiled and sea-encrusted checkered cloth, a portion of a woman's garb. Count Frederick recognized it at once as a part of the dress skirt in which he had last seen Kitty Gray garbed. There was no mistaking it. He knew it as well as the pattern of his own apparel.

She had been here! The mysterious white woman was Kitty Gray!

Now indeed Count Frederick of Gretzhoffen became the man of action. Away now with doubt and despair—and welcome again the fierce resolve of a brave man determined to live and conquer, determined once more to achieve the dearest purpose of his life!

He caught from the post of the door which had torn off this fragment of cloth, and held it before the gaze of the chief—before the eyes of all his men. They knew what he meant when he demanded to see the wearer of this bit of cloth. They dreaded the sight of his anger, fell back before the menace of the little steel tube, unfamiliar as it was to them. They knew that this man would kill unless he found that which he sought—the captive but now rescued from the doom of fire.

Frederick's own men fell in behind him, and a right lusty contest directly arose between these two factions or tribes, whichever they may have been. As for Frederick himself, he had not time for matters of this sort. He hurried to hut after hut, tore aside roof after roof, wall after wall, hunting for the woman whom above all things he most desired to see. He did not find her. His questions brought no response.

Drawn by a horrible suspicion of the meaning of this fire built at the brink of the pit, he hurried thither to join the group of lingerers there, and now by mere chance found confirmation—and found hope as well.

He saw the print of a small boot heel in the sand, other footmarks just beyond—it was a trail. Yes, yes, she had been there. But the footprints ceased. The trail ended as though the maker of it had flown up into the air. Beyond, the imprint of large and misshapen feet still led.

Count Frederick now turned savagely upon these gibbering creatures about him, and the meaning of his demand was perfectly apparent to them. Threatening to throw them into the fire which they had prepared for another, he got from them shrieks of protest, much shaking of the head in denial, and much pointing on toward the forest which lay ahead. Some came to him and showed him the two lines of footprints, the one line continuing on, and pointed to the forest, although themselves not venturing to follow.

With a new terror in his heart, yet feeling a conviction that Kitty Gray still lived, he did not pause to wreak a present vengeance upon these creatures, but hurried on along the broken trail.

The doglike craft of one or two of his own band of savages aided him. Not slacking speed, they pointed out where the trail ran. Now and again Count Frederick could see on the earth the imprint of the woman's feet where for a time she had rested or been put down. At length, at the brink of the abyss before which Kitty Gray so recently had stood, he saw the double imprint again—where both captive and captor had stood and looked down.

The trail led on, and down, whither none could guess. Frederick of Gretzhoffen did not stop to guess, but plunged forward impulsively. Whoever or whatever might be this creature which had carried her off, here at least was his lair.

The dusty floors of the cavern, lit by the flare of such torches as they found ready for such work, still retained the record. Captor and captive had walked here. Deeper and deeper into the caverns under the hill they followed the trail, until at length the distracted eyes of Count Frederick saw on ahead something to give him pause.

He saw Kitty Gray standing, alive, apparently unhurt, in a vast apartment of these subterranean vaults! Beyond, the floor seemed to break off—to what depth he could not guess. No egress at either extremity of the subterranean chamber could be seen from where he stood. The trail led thither, to where she stood—to where at her side stood also a strange misshapen figure of a man, or what had been a man.

"Mademoiselle!" cried Count Frederick, high and clear. "Courage!" and sprang forward.

Now this strange creature that had brought Kitty Gray hither seemed to fancy himself about to be robbed of his captive. For one moment he stood awaiting the onslaught of Count Frederick and his allies, then with a hoarse cry he caught Kitty Gray up in his arms again. A pace or so, and she was held suspended above the unknown abyss which lay below. Menacingly, her captor turned upon his assailant a face which at least offered one conclusion.

He made no coherent speech, but his attitude spoke loud.

Count Frederick halted. One step more, and the girl would be plunged into eternity.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

It certainly is some proposition for a woman to select her fall clothes. If it is different from what other people are wearing, it isn't stylish, and if it isn't different, it lacks distinction and individuality.

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