

THE BROKEN COIN

A Story of Mystery and Adventure

By EMERSON HOUGH
From the Scenario by GRACE CUNARD

SYNOPSIS.

Kitty Gray, newspaper woman, finds in a curio shop half of a broken coin, the inscription on which arouses her curiosity and leads her to the printer of Gretzhoffen, to go to the printing office to see out the quality of the inscription. She is followed by the printer, and on arrival in Gretzhoffen she is arrested by the police and taken to the prison where she is kept in a cell.

TWENTY-SECOND INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER LXXVI.

The Treasure.

Deep within that chamber of horrors which before now had smitten the souls of both with terror, two persons were bending over in the light of the candles, which gave a faint illumination.

"It is here," said Count Frederick, glancing at the little compass which he had brought with him. "The north-east lies there—it is yonder, where east lies there—the iron chair! That was the last guard of the king."

"What shall we do?" gasped Kitty Gray. "I dare not."

"Nonsense! my dear, fear—why should we feel fear? Yonder friend of ours has kept the place well and safely seated there in his iron chair waiting so long—for us!"

Kitty Gray, pale and disturbed, still feeling a woman's terror at these grim scenes about her, spoke with solemnity in her tones. "He was waiting for liberty and justice, Sir Frederick, said she. 'He shall have them. We will give all these Christian burial—shall we not?'"

"Whatever you wish shall be done," said Count Frederick. "Yes, we will take all these poor victims away to their last rest and let them lie in peace. I shall seal up this cavern here."

"But come," he said, and so laid a hand on the grinning guest in the iron chair. The bony frame was confined upright by metal bands which supported it. He found the ancient chair heavy to move, but applying his great strength, at length, gently as he could, he shifted it to one side. On the floor of the chamber, formerly beneath the iron chair, there showed dimly in the dust the outline of a steel plate, an iron ring welded to its center. Count Frederick pointed. "This is the place," said he, with conviction. "It was guarded well. See here—I doubt not this is the lid which covers what is below."

Yet even his strength failed to remove the covering. He found at last a part of an old bar, pushed it through the ring and put his strength to it. A faint dust arose, the lid yielded slowly, and at last fell back with a clang upon the rocky floor. At the edge of this newly made aperture there showed the edge of another plate, close fitting.

"It runs farther," exclaimed Count Frederick. "See—look what is below!"

Kitty, overcoming her terror, bent forward with him to gaze down. "Yes, it is here," said she. "But look how much there is!"

"Softly," said her companion. "Let us open this cavern more widely. Here is the grave of a giant treasure—I had not dreamed what really it was."

Cautiously he pushed in and under the edge of the bar, removing plate after plate of that which had been the covering of the treasure place. Below this, they saw a cavity filled with steel receptacles. Each was locked, clamped and banded, tight against all intrusion.

"What is here?" said Count Frederick. "Are we baffled even at the last?"

Kitty Gray cast the rays of her light here and there about her in the cavernous interior. By chance her eyes rested—indeed were drawn, fascinated, to the skeleton which sat bent forward in the iron chair. A dull gleam of something like metal caught her eye.

"Look," said she, and pointed. There, fastened by a metal band to the wrist was a key—it was half hidden between the bones of the forearm.

"Look," said Count Frederick, and held it up before her. "Cunning enough was the man who hid this treasure, and yet he left it plain for those he meant to find it."

He stooped and tried the key in the lock of the central chest of those which lay below. The next moment he had flung back the lid.

Their eyes rested upon what would have made glad the heart of any buccancer. Gold, countless pieces of gold!

It was the lost treasure of the king! They stood, awed, spellbound and looked down at what they saw.

"But look yonder," said Kitty, plucking at his sleeve—her hand had grasped it comfortably for many moments now, for she took comfort in the touch even of his clothing, the presence of the bulk of his body near her.

parcements thrust down at the side of the chest. Gently he drew it out and held it in his hands for a moment, regarding it curiously.

"I shall not open it!" said he. "With you, I feel a certain fear. I believe here is something come down to us out of the past—some message from the king. If this be so, it belongs not to me, but to the people. It must go before their duly constituted rulers."

CHAPTER LXXVII.

The Reckoning.

"Now," said Count Frederick to Kitty when at length they had reached the upper portion of the palace, "we must advance to what remains yet to be done. The ministers must be summoned. The writs must issue for the attendance of the parliament. 'Tis long since one has been convened. Michael the king—he alone has been our government—and what a government!"

They were now passing toward the central portion of the palace, having ascended from the vaults below. Absorbed—intent—Count Frederick, at least, was inattentive to aught else save the presence of the woman at his side. But now she plucked his sleeve.

"Listen!" said she and laid a finger on her lips.

At her signal, Count Frederick softened his footsteps and walked with her stealthily. The sound of the voices engaged in whispered conversation came now to his ears. Suddenly he stepped forward, convinced, flung open a door of the main hall, and passed within unannounced. It was no time for formalities in Gretzhoffen palace now.

"So," said he, "you are here again. What, Sachio, you honor us yet by another visit? That is most kind of you! You, Grahame, you, my former bodyguard—here with this arch traitor, this liar, this treacherous snake!"

They stood, surprised as yet without plan for their defence.

"Ho, there!—the guard—the guard!" cried Count Frederick, stepping back to the door.

But to his call there came no footsteps of the guard. Instead, one man came—Roleau, who for the past few moments had been in search of the two men. He hastened past Kitty as she stood, thrust himself into the room, and with Count Frederick, faced the trapped men who stood before them.

Count Sachio, with a snarl of rage, sprang forward at his foe, and Roleau, with a quick motion flung himself between. He felt the iron band of his master on his shoulder.

"Leave him to me, Roleau! Take care of the other man."

The two noblemen faced one another calmly now. Not so with Roleau. On the instant, he flung himself upon the man accosted as Grahame. The struggle was unequal and under Roleau's powerful grasp the intruder soon was helpless.

"Well," said Count Frederick; "Sachio, how shall it be? Shall I choke you with my hands?"

The man whom he accosted was one not easily dismayed. He greeted these words with a smile which showed his white teeth. His own fighting blood was up, and fear was a thing he did not know.

Suddenly his eye, rapidly glancing about the room, caught sight of a trophy of arms hung across the room. From it he caught down two swords. Bowing, he handed both, hilt forward, to Count Frederick. "At your service, monsieur," he said.

"On guard!" said Count Frederick.

Lightly, gracefully, gently, the tips of the two blades met, shivered a trifle, each feeling of the other, scarce rarer than a hair's breadth from its course.

The icy eye of Count Frederick, cold, merciless, looked into the dark and smiling face of Sachio.

"I am going to kill you now," said Count Frederick. "Shall it be soon?"

The answer of Sachio was more than a smile. Fiercely he whipped free his blade. His knuckles up, his blade shot forward in a long and deadly lunge.

Suddenly the jaw of Count Frederick shut the tighter. None could have said that he had seen what ensued. In some fashion, the blade of the nobleman of Gretzhoffen went out, vibrating, catching in its grip the blade opposed to it. There was a wrench, a twist. The weapon of Count Sachio was torn from his hands, he stood unarmed. He stood one half moment before he felt, hissing hot through all his body, the point of his antagonist.

Count Frederick turned, not waiting to see his foe sink down, for he knew the work was done. He advanced half a pace to the man Grahame, covering in the corner before Roleau. Him he snote across the cheek with the bloody blade and said: "You coward and traitor, you shall go to the law."

"As for you, Roleau, captain of the guard," said he, "you have proved your faithfulness once more."

"What? I am captain, master?"

"Roleau, captain of the guard," said he "I thank you."

And so he turned and strode from the room where one was waiting.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

Long Live the King!

In the great throne room of Gretzhoffen palace, there were gathered, late that day, those men highest in power of all the realm.

Count Frederick entered the room at last—but not alone. At his side there walked one whose presence was greeted with a frown by those grave and revered seigniors—it was a woman.

"Gentlemen," said Count Frederick, smiling as he saw this reception, "you will pardon me that I bring with me one whom I honor, whose wisdom I value. Thanks to the fate which brought this young woman to our shores, we have found the lost treasure of the king!"

A sighing silence fell upon them all. Alone of all these—till now almost unnoticed, in the corner where he sat sunken down—the weaking king made some show of resentment at what he heard. A snarl, a growl of rage almost inarticulate, came from him.

"You Michael, our king!" said Count Frederick, suddenly turning to him, growing wrath in his tones now, "I call you 'your majesty' as yet, but I dare say to you, your majesty—your drunken majesty—your weak and helpless coward majesty—that there shall never be wasted upon you or your purpose one penny of this treasure which we have found!"

"That, gentlemen," said he, turning to the councilors and ministers who stood about, "is the treasure of the people. It was saved for them. It has been guarded for them by Michael the good king, whose name this man is not fit to wear."

"Do not doubt what I say to you, gentlemen. I myself have seen that

he could to his own bloated face. "What do you mean—treason, in the presence of the king?"

"No treason, for you are not our king."

"These," said he, "are the imperial scripts of Michael the First of Gretzhoffen. They were buried with his treasures. In some part, they govern the disposition of those treasures. You hear in this the voice of our king, and that must be our governing power hereafter."

"What is it, then?" at length exclaimed the prime minister. "Has there been a mistake—you say Michael here is not our king—who then is our king?"

"Your excellency," said Count Frederick slowly, as he turned toward him, "yourself, these noblemen of Gretzhoffen, the council of ministers, the parliament of the realm—all these shall at length perhaps bear out my statement which I make now. I myself—I, Frederick—am the king."

At these words they made no answer. There was nothing on those calm features of insincerity, of intrigue or dishonor. His words carried with them his own conviction as to their truth.

"Listen, gentlemen," said he, gently, at last. "Great things have happened to us in our realm. We shall this day save our kingdom. As I believe, I am your king. I accept that station solemnly, and here I have the proof—it may not be doubted that ultimately its substantiation will be complete—by the parliament, by the people themselves—by all our courts—by your voice unanimous, as I doubt not, your noblemen of this kingdom."

"Shah, I then read?"

"In the name of God, Amen! I, Michael of Gretzhoffen, by the grace of God, king, leave this script with the treasures of the kingdom which have concealed herewith beneath the floor of the torture chamber. With them I place the secret governing the ownership of the treasures of this kingdom. That secret is known only to myself and my bodyguard, who has been a faithful man—Boris Roleau. For now these many months I have

brother—not of royal blood, but the bastard of a serving woman—Frederick, he is called. It may be within the purpose of my foster brother that that boy shall be brought up as the king, in case I, myself, should fall. He is not fit to rule. He is not your king. But signed hereunto is the name and the seal, unmistakable, done in my blood and his, of your king Michael the First, and of your future king, Michael the Second, my son. He is as yet too young fully to know the gravity of these presents. But by this sign you shall know your ruler, shall these presents come to you, well beloved."

"In the name of God, amen! Michael, Rex."

"Below this signature of Michael the Good," said the measured voice of Count Frederick, "there is another signature—Michael the Second, Rex. Gentlemen, there are two signatures to these scripts, and there are two seals."

A sigh of wonder, almost of consternation, came from those assembled. The only protest was from the huddled object in the farther corner of the room, where still remained Michael, the drunken.

"What then, the guard!" he shrieked. "Treason to me—after him, men! This pretender—what is it that he says? What proof has he?—what proof?"

"This proof, sir," said Count Frederick, boldly, and approached to him the broad page of the parchment sheet.

Michael gazed stupidly at what he saw, uncomprehending. Others gazed also, and at first could make nothing of what was there. Count Frederick went on:

"I recall now, as I see this page," said he, "this writing of the king, my father—you hear me, gentlemen—my father!"

"I recall that I saw him place beneath the great seal, that other seal—done in his own blood. I saw him draw the blood from his own arm and put his thumb in it, and place it here, thus sealing this document with the unmistakable seal—the one alone which cannot show a mistaken identity."

"And here, gentlemen, beneath that other line of signature, which you have heard and seen, there is another, a smaller, a very small seal of a similar sort! It is the print of a human thumb—the thumb of a boy, of a baby—a baby then, a man now—who recalls that scene vaguely. And here is the proof. Gentlemen, I recall now, it was my father made this mark; but it was his great hands which took my little one and dipped my thumb in the blood which he drew from my arm, and set it here below that name which he has written, 'Michael the Second' 'Gentlemen, who then is your king?'"

Even yet they could not grasp the full significance of what they heard, and again the voice of Count Frederick resumed:

"Go, now, gentlemen, send out your agents quickly. Bring here those men of science skilled in the reading of such things as these. It was Bertillon who developed that science of infallible identification. It was he who showed that each man carries with him, in his person, from his cradle to his grave, that unmistakable seal which identifies him infallibly."

"Now bring here your men of science. Here is my hand as God made it, and as my father held it in his so many years ago. Small then—larger and stronger now! God grant it be strong enough today to do what my father did, and do it well. As my mind have justice and liberty before it always, as those things were before us."

"Gentlemen, you know the history of this kingdom as well as I. You know the long regency following the Gretzhoffen war. You know why that regency was established. Rumor was that King Michael died like a king, in his own bed. The truth was otherwise. He was murdered here in the vault below by the men of his own foster brother."

"If that be true—and as God is my witness, I believe it to be true—then we well may guess which boy was brought up under the regent to take the place of a king. That was not myself—others, relatives of mine, reared me, as you know, until I am what you know. And yonder man—this drunken waster—not even the son of a lawful wedlock, never the son of a queen—that man, he was the one accepted as your king! Treason, you say—why, there was treason to every human being who lived on Gretzhoffen soil, when that pretender took the throne!"

"As for you, sir!" and he stepped over to lay an iron hand on the shoulder of the cowering man who sank back upon his seat, "your day is done. I do not say you were a party to this—I only say, you must go. For the rest, the parliament of our realm shall formally decide."

His steelfike grip half lifted Michael from his place, thrust him toward, through the door—and instantly the door closed behind him. Beyond, there was an outcast king. Within, before them all, fronting them all, stood a man, stern and resolved to accept whatever responsibility now there was.

"Gentlemen," said he, "you have my proof. I submit my case to you and the parliament. I submit myself to the law. As for that law, if it is given me to reign, always shall I support it, and always shall it be my ambition to give to the people that liberty, that justice which I myself have learned to love."

Still the silence, the tense electric silence which thus far had held them all. They stood thus for one moment. Then as with one common impulse—

as though the same thought had caught them at the same instant, each of these men—idlers and wasters, or men of purpose and of principle, raised his hand. There rose in unison the old cry:

"LONG LIVE THE KING."

CHAPTER LXXIX.

Katharine.

Two were alone once more, two whom fate had so strangely cast together in such scenes. The tumult had ceased. Quiet and order now obtained within those ancient walls. Those two were alone in the great throneroom of the kingdom, for the nobleman had signified that such was his wish.

He turned toward her now gravely and held out his hands. She placed hers in his, trembling.

"Was it true?" she whispered. "Did they indeed and indeed—did they call you—the king? Or, how can I be happy at that. Now, I must go back—I must leave you!"

"You shall never go!" said the quiet voice of the man who confronted her. "You shall never leave me now."

"But how? You are the king? It has been confirmed. The scripts were true—what we thought was true."

"I am the king! Yes, but how shall I rule alone? You shall sit beside me, for 'tis you have taught me how a king should rule. Liberty and justice—those words were strangers to my ears until you spoke them. Think you I could go on in this business now, his solemn undertaking which I must assume, and miss your counsel in the future? You shall be as much queen as I am king in establishing those principles in this kingdom."

"But I cannot! I am an unknown woman. I am of no birth. I am not your—"

Again he laid his fingers upon her lips lightly.

"Cease!" said he; "do not say that word. Michael, himself, my father, perhaps was of no lofty lineage so far as traced kings could be named. He himself came from where he grew—he seized the reins of power—and he gave the people such liberty and justice as then was possible. Am I better than he? Was he better than you?—am I? Say no more, think no more that word which you were about to name."

Again he held out to her his hands, and now, in spite of all she could do, she could not withdraw them, so firmly clasped were they now. Trembling, weeping, she looked up into his eyes.

"It is all clear," said he to her at length. "It was Grahame, my unfaithful bodyguard, who had the knowledge of these things, and who betrayed us by that knowledge. He got the coins from Boris Roleau. I accord him but one item of thanks—it was through his treachery that I lost the coin at the time that I was in your country, on the errand of the Gretzhoffen loan. He stole that coin. He must have lost or pawned half of it, or sold it. At least, that is how you found it. So I thank him, for so much as that."

"As for Roleau—the son of that faithful servant of my father—he shall be honored by us both, because he has given loyalty. I myself have grieved that once I was cruel to him—that I struck him even—after the old fashion of our rulers here. Not again shall that occur. Roleau, your friend, my servant—he shall be captain of the Imperial Guard. I have told him so, much as that."

"What a curse attends these treasures! See now, out of all these who have been about me, two have been faithful—the son of that man who was faithful to our earlier king, and you! You fought me, yes, but you fought fair. You kept your word—you honored your own parole—you always will do so. I trust your word as I trust the beating of my own heart. You then shall be—you are—my queen!"

She could not answer, and still he went on slowly: "Ahead of us is duty, responsibility—for both of us. We serve for liberty and justice."

He led her gently to the great throne of Gretzhoffen, which stood before them now. They bowed before it.

"I give you my faith, Katharine," said he, simply. "Do you love me?"

"I do," said she, so low he could scarce catch the words.

And even in these words spoken there, the one to the other, in the silence of the great throne chamber of the kingdom, their plighted troth seemed as the words of the priest and the roar of the great organ and the later applause of the assembled multitudes, who hailed them as saviors of the land.

He gave her a hand now up the steps to the great throne itself, and bowed to her as she dropped back upon the great seat of power.

"God do so to me and more also," said he solemnly, "if ever I betray, them or you."

LENOVOI.

Under the sea there sped from the little kingdom of Gretzhoffen to the great republic of America a message carried in the electric spark which united the world. It was directed to the editor of the Daily Star in Kitty Gray's own city, and it was enough to give even Billy Cutler, city editor, pause for at least a moment.

"Well, good Lord!" said he, "wholl I put on the society page? Boys, the flowers were a total loss—and so am I! Here is an alias and an alibi! Listen!" He read from the little yellow bit of paper which he held:

"Great story, but cannot return to America inside six months as promised. I have lost my wager, but have gained a husband and a home. Katharine, Regina Graetisjovensis."

THE END.



"I Am the King! You Shall Sit Beside Me."