

The BROKEN COIN

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From the Scenario by GRACE CUNARD

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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.

FIFTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XVIII.

A New Intruder.

The keen senses of Roleau, schooled in peril, told him of some hidden danger—the very tenseness of the situation warning him. Turning, he saw the upraised weapon, and in a flash a blow from his own powerful arm had sent it flying through the window. It fell clinking on the floor at the feet of Count Sachio and his friends. Kitty, rescued from the danger which she had not realized, sprang back. An instant later Roleau had grappled with the intruder.

Hearing the sound of this encounter, Count Sachio and his companions sprang at the intervening door, broke it in. They found two strange men engaged in an encounter whose cause they could not guess, but both of whom undoubtedly were intruders in this place, and who, therefore, might be regarded as enemies.

"The American!" exclaimed Sachio, as now he saw also the young girl, who was endeavoring as best she might to give assistance to Roleau in his struggle with the stranger.

"Quick, excellency, run!" exclaimed Roleau.

The strange man was not easily to be disposed of, but gave even the powerful Roleau all he liked to do to handle him. Meantime Sachio flung himself upon Roleau, his comrades did as much for the stranger.

In the melee, which slipped from place to place upon the floor, Sachio let fall the little bag with the king's half coin—in his excitement he had forgotten that he still had it in his hand. The stranger, whose shifty eyes caught everything, saw the bag as it lay upon the floor.

Working gradually towards the place where the little bag lay, now underfoot, now scuffed aside by the struggling men, the stranger managed to trip and throw that one of Sachio's friends who pressed him most closely. They fell directly before the packet. Swiftly, the long hand of the stranger reached out and caught it up.

There remained for him no more wish for the fight. An instant later, his crossed arm against the throat of his assailant, he broke away, flung through the open window and left the others to shift as they might.

Roleau, still held in the powerful grasp of Count Sachio himself, struggled furiously, all the time calling to Kitty to make her own escape.

"Roleau!" called Kitty. "Quick, he has it—he has stolen it. We must follow him!" And Roleau did his best to shake himself free.

"Not so fast, not so easily," panted Sachio, whose stern grip still held Roleau's collar. "You will not get off just yet. Who are you, to come prowling about my place—thieves against thieves? You shall tell me what all this means."

"Go, excellency, run!" panted Roleau, still in his mistress. "Leave them to me. I'll come when I can."

Kitty turned, knowing that she must act quickly or be taken prisoner herself.

"Follow me, Roleau!" she cried,

"Follow me when you can. I'll leave a trail." And as she caught up a book from the table Roleau guessed what she had meant by this—a paper trail. She looked this way and that, but could see no trace of the stranger who had thus treacherously intruded upon their own plans. A strange feeling came to her mind that perhaps she had seen him elsewhere before now. Where could that have been? Ransacking her memory she concluded that he must have been some one of the band of banditti who had surprised her and her companions in the desert.

Trusting to fortune to bring her aid, she ran forward in the general direction which she supposed the man had taken. She passed from the floor of the gallery, which held no trace of footprints to the softer ground where she might see the trail, and caught it now. He was running in great leaps towards the edge of the forest, where the road came in. Yonder lay the trail to Gretzhoffen. He seemed bound for that. Yes—she presently heard a sound of horse's hoofs.

"Horses!" thought Kitty to herself, recalling the stables where some of Sachio's mounts were kept—indeed, she doubted not that some might be saddled and waiting in the yard. It was true—an instant later her own flying hoofbeats pursued those now lessening in the distance. And as she fled Kitty left a trail.

As for Roleau, his faithful heart was wellnigh broken when, having seen his mistress follow his advice and make her escape, he found himself in spite of all unable to join her in the pursuit of the escaping thief who had their coin. The grasp of Sachio upon him did not relax, and now others re-enforced their leader.

"Ah, well, messieurs," he said grinning, at length, "you have the argument."

"Search him!" exclaimed Sachio. "I have lost the coin. It was here. It is gone—he has it about him somewhere."

The companions of the count complied, but could make nothing of the search, Roleau stoutly asserting that he knew nothing of it and had it not in his possession.

"I dropped it on the floor in the scuffle," exclaimed Sachio. "Surely this man must have it, or it has wings! I had it in my hand but now, this very moment. That American—surely she is a witch. Did she take it, fellow? Tell me?" He turned furiously upon Roleau.

"Monsieur, how can I tell?" replied the latter.

At last, however, there came the sound of one driving furiously.

"On guard, gentlemen!" exclaimed Sachio. "We do not know who comes—I hope it may be Rudolph."

It was indeed this missing stranger—the man who had been left bound in Frederick's apartments.

It should be understood now that when Count Frederick had returned to his own apartments and found his private room occupied by a man who evidently had been there for no good purpose—a man left trussed up and bound by yet other intruders—he had had some parley with the helpless intruder in the way of learning what had been the cause of his strange plight.

"I know you, fellow," said he. "You are of Count Sachio's suite. You have been quartered here with him as a guest of this house—and now you would rob me!"

"Your excellency," exclaimed Rudolph, "spare me! I was found here

in your room. It is true, or near to it, at least, and was set upon by a ruffian and a young woman. Between them they bound me and left me helpless—flung me into your room here as you see. I ask no belief of you. Take me to Count Sachio—I am his man. Let him plead for me. I shall make no plea at all."

Count Frederick found upon the floor a little kerchief, which told him much.

"Very well," said he to Rudolph, "that is precisely what I shall do! We shall go to find your master, Count Sachio. There has been too much mystery of late; perhaps he can explain a part of it."

It was thus, therefore, that Count Frederick and his new passenger had come in a swift car from Gretzhoffen direct to the lodge of Count Sachio, beyond the neutral lands. And having arrived at the chalet Rudolph had lost no time in flinging himself from the car and hastening to explain to his master that absence which he knew would be so resented. Seeing Roleau there in advance of him—and bound—his own rage overcame him and he lost not an instant in casting himself upon Count Sachio's prisoner.

This was not altogether a fortunate matter for any; Roleau, surprised at the attack, and by this time somewhat in possession of recuperated powers, made so stern a heave at his bonds that he broke them; and thereupon addressing himself to the combat once more, soon gave Rudolph all he liked to do.

Meantime Count Frederick, thinking it well to guard all exits of the chalet, himself had gone to the rear, and had found the open window through which Kitty and the stranger had escaped. What he now saw, therefore, in the main room, was his own late prisoner engaged in conflict with Count Sachio's prisoner.

"They find him a Tartar!" exclaimed he to himself; for at that moment Roleau, casting Rudolph aside, made for the outer door of the chalet.

"Stop!" cried Count Sachio loudly, as others would have followed him. "It is useless! Wait—he has not the coin. Why waste time on him!"

They fell back as the count once more took charge of this complicated situation.

"As for you, Rudolph," he exclaimed, "you have come late, and you have failed—you have not the coin that you were sent to bring me."

"Excellency, no—I have failed. That man—he pointed to the door where Roleau had fled—he and a young woman caught me even as I was searching for it where you directed me. They fell on me and trussed me up and left me helpless. I stayed there until the master of the place came. It was he who brought me hither—I told him you would make any explanation that could be made."

"And a fine explanation anyone can make!" exclaimed Count Sachio bitterly.

CHAPTER XIX.

The Apaches.

The man who had proved himself the last possessor of the king's half of the Gretzhoffen coin was the most unworthy of any thus far concerned in its destinies. True, Kitty's recollection had been correct—she had indeed seen him among Landozi's condottieri. Yet lawless as the members of that band were, he scarce was fit to claim comradeship with them.

His name in truth was Blake—a renegade Englishman, who had for some time belonged to the underworld of the capital of Gretzhoffen. If, animated by some greater ambition of his own, he now and then joined the bands of the desert rovers, his real preference was for the underworld of the city, where, with his comrades of the cheaper thieving gentry, he might for the most part smoke or loaf in idleness or daring. It had been by mere chance of his prowling nature that he had learned something about the ownership of the broken coin—had guessed that it might have some value, and had resolved to possess himself of it.

As he fled now, therefore, he made not for the desert so much as for the dens of his own sort in the purlieus of Gretzhoffen town itself. When at length, after his long ride across the neutral country, he found himself once more near to what he called home, he cast loose his horse and completed his journey on foot.

At the door of the underground dive, where he counted upon meeting most of his friends, he made the usual sign of admission. It was a choice band of kindred souls who rose to greet him as he entered. They asked him what cheer.

"What have I done—what have I taken?" Swagging, he pushed them aside and threw on the table in the center of the room a bit of coin which he took from his pocket.

"Something, comrades, I am thinking."

A roar of laughter broke from them, as, a motley group, they surrounded him.

"He is a jolly jester, is it not so, my brothers!" exclaimed one. "A coin! If it were whole it might be worth perhaps a lira or so, but broken—it is worthless. What can we get for this in a bank, my brothers? So, Blake, is this your day's work!"

"You may laugh, comrades," said he, "all you like; at the same time, I venture you that coin will be worth something to us before we are done with it."

"What is it?" exclaimed one, curiously, examining the inscription. "An old Roman coin, do you think?"

mystery that will pay well when solved. Besides, it might act as some sort of safeguard for us. There has been plenty of talk of late that our band may need friends to keep us from the noose. Very well, then—I think the ownership of this coin at least will give us friends when we may need them. Guard it well, that same broken coin, my brothers."

"What do you mean?" asked the spokesman curiously. "Who has sought it, then?"

"Such men as Count Sachio of Gretzhoffen. It was of him I took it. There was pursuing it, also, that same young American—and that ruffian of hers, who serves her so like a dog—Roleau, I heard her call him. My word, he had a grip of steel in his hands—he well-nigh did for me before I could make my escape. I saw Count Sachio drop the coin upon the floor. I threw my man so I could pick it up, and then I fled. My word to you, brothers, I fled at speed! So here I am."

Now, while these thieves of the city were holding their little conference, their bolder brethren of the desert, not so far away in their own rendezvous, were gathered for an evening's converse—a dozen or more of Landozi's band of desert riders, half fellows well met, friends of the king's troops and enemies, as they boasted, of none but the rich. Their headquar-

"Ho, brothers!" cried the ruffian who held Kitty in his arms—"By the Lord, 'tis the same!—'tis the young American highness whom we lost!"

"Loose me! Let me free!" cried Kitty vehemently—"I came to you for help. I trusted in you. I am in need and I ask you gentlemen to be my friends."

"What, your friends!" They laughed loudly at this.

"Yes, your leader knows me—do you not remember how he took us captive the other day? He told me then if I needed aid to count on him. Does one of your brotherhood speak falsely?"

They fell back from her now respectfully, impressed in part by what she said, and in part by the fear that they might offend their leader. This latter fear was well placed, for even now they heard the sounds of rapid hoofbeats.

"Hist!" exclaimed one, "Landozi—it is very likely he."

And it was he, the man whom they all respected through their fears. He flung himself from his horse now and strode into the lighted circle.

"What now, fellows!" exclaimed he as he caught sight of the young woman standing there, disheveled, pale. "Do you not know this excellency? What, would you insult her?"

"I came hither for help," exclaimed Kitty, addressing him with such ap-

their den for stolen goods—yes, yes, I know. But dare you go with me?"

"I must dare it," said Kitty firmly. "Perhaps my friends will follow me—I do not know—but even if not, you and I must get back what he has stolen from me."

"And what was it, excellency?"

"No more than a broken bit of coin, captain, of value to none as it is now, of great value to me provided I can attain it and the other half."

"You need say no more. The errand is enough to interest me—because now I shall have that fellow Blake where I have longed to find him. He shall not ride with us again. But come," he added.

They found their way through the darkening streets in the purlieus of Gretzhoffen town. Under the leadership of the chieftain they threaded street after street, alley after alley, until at length their party descended into a steep gully in a less important portion of the city. A faint light showed through the chinks of a wall which seemed to be the facing of a bank, but which really concealed some of den within.

"er, excellency," whispered Landozi, "is the place where they hole up—like rats in a sewer—and they have no more principles—they are worthy of no more. Come, my men, close in."

He pushed against the door round which shone the gleams of light, and hastened into a sort of passageway. Their entry attracted no attention for the time.

Only two of the gang remained, the others having departed on one errand or other of their own. When Kitty and her companion looked through the little window, which gave in upon the recess under the bluff, they saw sitting close to the table two men—Blake, the renegade, and another of his band. The keen eye of Kitty detected Blake's hand lying upon the table—and near it the object which she sought—the missing coin!

"Quick," whispered Landozi, and as he spoke he broke into the room. Without hesitation he flung himself upon Blake, and Kitty, wishing to be of service, and finding no better means, caught up an empty bottle which stood near and dealt so interesting a blow upon the head of the remaining ruffian as to put him out of the combat for the time. An instant later she had caught from the table the coveted coin.

"Let him go, Landozi—quick! Come! I have got it!" she exclaimed. And an instant later she was in the passageway once more.

She had almost made her way out into the open, when in the semidarkness she felt a strong hand clutch at her wrist—heard a low laugh at her ear.

"Roleau!" she cried aloud.

"No, not Roleau," said a voice she knew well enough—the voice of the Count Frederick.

"So, you have it! Very well, cling to it, then—but don't drop it. To prevent that I will even hold your hand in mine."

"You brute!" exclaimed Kitty, sobbing now in the intensity of her emotions—"after all I have done to get it—and it is mine!"

"Why argue it, my dear young lady?" exclaimed Count Frederick. "I have told you I must have it. I regret as much as you that I must disturb you."

"Release me—let me go!"

Panting, she looked up at him in the half light. What she saw was a face grim and full of purpose—a face which it seemed to her she would always hate—but in which at least there was no trace of any fear.

"Come," he said, and flung an arm about her waist as he stepped toward the open. "Let Roleau fend for himself—I am satisfied with what I have now."

An instant later he halted. From what sounds he heard at the rear, he knew escape was cut off there. And now crowding in at the entrance of the main gallery in which they stood, there came yet others of the thieves' band, barring exit there as well.

Count Frederick, shielding Kitty, stood at bay.



She Caught From the Table the Coveted Coin.

ters, as was generally known, lay a little way back on the cross-trail of the main road, between the two kingdoms of Grahoffen and Gretzhoffen, which crossed midway of the neutral lands.

When Kitty fled after the thief Blake, it was at first with no definite purpose of her own; but she had not gone far before she realized that alone she could accomplish little against such men as he; and she doubted not that he was on his way to join his comrades. What then was there to do? Who could aid her?

Even as she rode the thought came to Kitty's mind of the debonair bandit leader, Landozi, the same who had so gallantly freed her and escorted her to the city's gates but a short time before. She was woman enough to know the impression she had made on the bandit chief—and shrewd enough also to hit upon him as an ally in her own plans. Therefore, as Kitty rode now—not so fast as not to leave abundant bits of paper on the trail so that Roleau might be able to track her—it was not towards any citadel of the law—not to Gretzhoffen town itself—but towards the capital of law; the rendezvous of the ragged banditti of the desert.

They sat, these rude and careless folk, ill clad, ragged, yet not ill content, under the sheltering rocks which made their lair or den on the cross-road in the neutral lands. Cooking, eating, drinking, they spent the time as persons of no more mentality than theirs would spend it—joking, conversing, talking of what they had done, vamping of what they were about to do. Most prominently in their minds seemed to linger the memory of their little expedition in which they had taken prisoner the Count Frederick and the beautiful young American.

"And the chief let that prize go!" grumbled one. "Out of the whole enterprise we got nothing, absolutely nothing. What the count gave us would not have made two lire apiece, divided fairly among our band. The main prize—the young woman—we got nothing for her whatever. And yet, what a chance for ransom!"

"Such a chance does not come often. But I wonder where the chief himself is tonight. And are the pickets out down the road? In these times we cannot be too careful, for they say that between the two kingdoms war may come, and if so it would be but our luck for one of the armies to ask us to recruit with them."

"Go, you fellows, two of you," instructed one who seemed to be some sort of lieutenant. "Step out and scout down the road a bit."

It was not long after this that the men left at the rendezvous heard in the darkness a woman's scream. With this came the laughing shout of their comrades.

peal in her eyes as any man would have found it difficult to resist. "I am in need—I am in pursuit of a thief and I—"

"And you ask a thief to catch a thief?" The bandit chieftain smiled grimly.

"No, not in the least—I do not call you so, your brothers of the desert. You yourself, Captain Landozi, told me to come to you if I needed help. Well, I need it now, tonight, this very moment! I am all alone. I need conduct to Gretzhoffen town. I am convinced that the man who robbed me fled thither. What, would you allow one to escape who would rob a woman?"

"No," exclaimed Landozi. "That is not our trade. It is our profession that we take only from the rich; and we do not side with those who rob the weak. Excellency, my word is my word. You come to us for aid, and we should be barren of all honor did we not give you aid. What can we do?"

"Ride with me!" exclaimed Kitty. "Yourself—two or three men—show me the way from here to Gretzhoffen. Shield me against any other possible riders who may not be of your brotherhood. Is it agreed?"

"It is agreed!" exclaimed Landozi, and with small discussion they soon were in the saddle again—Landozi, two or three of his stoutest men and Kitty; and once more she felt the rush of the wind against her cheek, as a good horse carried her forward.

CHAPTER XX.

The Sewer Rats.

"Who was the thief that robbed you, excellency?" demanded Landozi, as they drew up near the edge of the city—did you see him well?"

"Perfectly," said Kitty. "Moreover, I am sure I have seen him before."

"Where?"

"With your own band, monsieur—he was one of those who rode with you the other day!"

"Ah, a slim man—sharp face—white?"

"Precisely—the same."

"I know him—Blake! He was with us that day, yes, but I promise you he is not really of our brotherhood. He is not worthy of association with gallant gentlemen like ourselves. We ride the trails—he creeps through the alleys of the city. We are borderers—he is a common thief. Blake—truly, it must have been he. No one of our own gentry would have robbed a woman. Now, you help me in your own quest. I know Blake's lurking place. He and his kind have a sort of a den in the low quarter of the town. The prefect of police leaves them pretty much alone, because in these times the officers of the law have much else to think about. Their opium lair—"



He Broke Away and Flung Through the Open Window.



Count Frederick, Shielding Kitty, Stood at Bay.

(TO BE CONTINUED)