

THE BROKEN COIN

A Story of Mystery and Adventure
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From the Scenario by GRACE CUNARD



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.

SEVENTH INSTALLMENT

CHAPTER XXV.

Divided.

As Kitty approached the little room of the count's palace—which before now had proved to be something of a storm center in the affairs of the Gretzhoffen coin—there came to her the conviction that there might be others beside herself who would have some inkling as to the whereabouts of the missing portion of the coin, and who might therefore arrive upon the scene at much the same time as that of her own visit. She was not altogether surprised at the sudden interruption of her labors, just at the moment of her success.

As she saw herself the object of a poised weapon, she swerved aside instinctively—called out instinctively for help.

"Roleau!" she exclaimed, for, womanlike, she had learned the value of a strong man's arm, and her first thought was of the faithful servant who so strangely had attached himself to her own varying fortunes. And Roleau came hastening from his watching place outside the door.

He saw the little room occupied by a man—who now suddenly had entered—and who menaced Kitty, so that, to save her life as she supposed, she was on the point of surrendering to him both pieces of the coin. The sight of his mistress in danger was enough for Roleau. With his customary battle cry he plunged immediately into the conflict, careless of the threatening weapon. In the melee the two half coins both were dropped upon the floor.

Even now the ruling impulse of Kitty did not quite forsake her. She stooped and regained one of the half coins, but the struggling men, shifting here and there in the room, kept her from securing the other. In the blind instinct for escape she fled now to the open hall, taking that direction which led back from the front of the building.

Roleau heard her pass, and could not join her in flight—but he heard her give a cry of alarm whose cause he could only guess. His energies were fully occupied by the combat with this



She Felt a Hard Hand Close Upon Her Mouth.

stranger—whom now he saw to be one of Count Sachio's men. He had noted him at the hunting lodge. He himself had not time to reason as to the presence of this new factor in the general imbroglio, but at last, able to bring his own weapons into play, he stayed the issue for a time. They both had time to recognize one another as they stood, the one as much baffled as the other, and neither quite comprehending what the other was doing here.

Very naturally the sounds of all this confusion could not be concealed. The scream of a woman had rung widely through the halls, and used as they were to extraordinary circumstances hereabouts, the servants could not fail to investigate the cause of this. They hastened in the direction of the uproar, but their advance was stayed by the command of the master of the palace himself.

The men in the room, as they

paused for breathing space, heard a steady footfall advancing to the door, heard the calm voice of Count Frederick himself.

"Gentlemen!"

The intruders, whatever the errand of each, took their eyes from one another and turned now, recognizing yet another man who scarce had come in friendship.

"You honor me greatly, gentlemen," said Count Frederick with his usual coolness in any extraordinary situation. "But might I ask why you care thus to disarrange my apartment? Had I known your own curiosity regarding it, I might have asked some of my servants to assist you in a search more orderly."

"I was sent back by my master," began the stranger—who was none other than Bartel, the late successor to Rudolph in Count Sachio's good graces. "He had left certain of his belongings—some silver cases of the toilet, Monsieur le Comte—he did not trouble to ask you about them, and now he sent me—"

"Indeed! That is most plausible! But why seek for them in my rooms, when his quarters were in quite another part of the palace, my dear sir?"

"As to that," replied the other with calm effrontery, "I cannot say. I only came here because the servants told me that this was the room. Of course, if there has been any mistake—"

"Cease, I say," exclaimed Count Frederick, frowning now, his face flushing.

He turned from Roleau to the other intruder in his apartments. Roleau stood dumb. The other shook his head.

"Monsieur le Comte," said he, "the young woman was here when I entered—when this man also entered. She passed yonder—when she had the opportunity—and took with her one half the coin. There lies the other on your floor. She disappeared—we heard a cry—"

Count Frederick stooped and picked up the object pointed out to him. It was his own half of the coin—or that which he had called his own—since he had taken it from her.

So then, he reflected, she had found the place to his most secret hiding place—she was on the very point of success when this last contretemps had interfered with her plans. A new feeling of admiration for her keenness and persistence once more came to Count Frederick's heart. For a moment he stood regarding half-reverently the bit of metal in his hand.

"I shall not offer this trinket to you, my friend," said he grimly to the man Bartel, as he pocketed the coin. "For of course you were not looking for coins—only toilet articles—silver ones, did you say, sir? You shall take back an excellent set of my own to Count Sachio, with my compliments. Tell him that it would seem ill to me that any guest of mine should suffer risk of loss either to his person or his property while he was beneath my roof!"

With these stinging words, which brought color to the other's face, Count Frederick turned coolly away, and once more faced Roleau. That was in his face now which did not bespeak remorselessness, revengefulness. No, something softer lay in the man's cool gray eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Solitary Confinement.

When Kitty in her blind impulse of self-preservation sprang out of Count Frederick's room, she did not at first contemplate continued flight. Once out of reach of immediate danger, she paused, loath to leave what she had come there to obtain, and loath also to abandon her stout-hearted ally in his time of stress. She turned back, paused just outside the door once more. As she did so, yet another door opening into the hall was pushed silently ajar—opened fully. Yet another man, whom never in her life had she seen before, now stepped out. She felt a hard hand close upon her mouth, more than half-stifling her scream for help. "Silence!" she heard his voice insist. "Go on ahead of me."

Once more Kitty undertook to scream, and again the firm hand stopped her voice. It seemed to her that some pungent aromatic drug filled the air with its fumes. She struggled less violently. Events seemed to pass by her in a dream, and she regarded them carelessly, apathetically. In short, either in part or in whole, she had lost consciousness.

When at length she fully regained her senses she was alone—alone with a terror which seemed to her more overpowering than any she yet had known. Instead of her own apartments in her hotel, instead of the room of Count Frederick or the hunting lodge of his quondam friend, Count Sachio, she found herself surrounded by four barren walls—in what edifice or in what place, she could not guess. There seemed some sort of door—yes, there was a small, high, barred window; but the latter was at such height as to be almost beyond her

reach. For the time Kitty was of the belief that her senses must leave her forever. The sense of solitude was a poignant torture.

How long she had thus remained she could not tell, when at length the close-fitting door in one side of the four walls opened. An old woman came in, bringing some food for her. Kitty tried her in every language which she had ever known, but got no answer. The old woman shook her head, and after a time retreated silently as she had come.

Getting no answer to her appeal for help, Kitty sat down once more, fighting herself to retain her faculties, her calm, her poise. Escape? How could there be hope for that? For once she was at her wit's end as she looked about her. She sat moody and silent, too dazed, suffering too much, too uncertain in her own mind to plan intelligently any course of action. She was brought to herself somewhat by hearing the tinkle of some object on the floor at her feet.

It was a bit of stone wrapped tightly in a little wad of paper. Surely it had been meant as some communication to her—from someone outside the room. It must have come through the window.

She opened the paper and smoothed it out. As she read it she wondered how many other persons there were in this strange country who could claim acquaintance with her own plans.

"Better write an imaginary story for your paper and return to America. Give up the coins and you will gain your freedom. Refuse and you will fare badly."



An Old Woman Came In Bringing Some Food for Her.

These strange words suddenly brought Kitty back to a train of thought which for the time had been broken. She felt quickly at her bosom and at her waist for the bit of coin which she had brought away from Count Frederick's room. It was gone! At some time during her journey from Count Frederick's palace to this place—long or short whether it had been, she could not tell—the coin had been taken from her.

Kitty sprang to the sill of the little window and peered out for an instant; but her hold was too feeble. She sank back, not seeing what would have given her great joy to see.

Apparently some eye had caught sight of her face, brief as had been its appearance. In truth, Roleau, hound-like, had run his game to earth. It was he who had caught sight of her just for an instant. Later she heard once more the tinkling of some falling object upon the floor. She picked it up—it was a substantial file, which evidently had been flung through the window by someone having the intent to aid her. This thought gave her hope. Almost as soon as she grasped it she fell to work at the bars which had restrained her.

Meantime, at the scene from which she had been so unceremoniously abstracted but now, Count Frederick remained still pondering on the strange events which had been brought home so close to him. He was too much preoccupied in his concern over the young woman's disappearance to note carefully anything else that went on about him. When one of his household placed a message in his hand, for the time he gazed at it, scarce comprehending that it came from the royal palace.

Since he had left unattended the servant of Count Sachio, whom he had found in his own room, the latter seized the present opportunity to escape from the place and to find his own master, Count Sachio himself—

who waited for him impatiently enough at the rendezvous which had been established.

"Well, well, then, Bartel," exclaimed the count, "why the delay? What's wrong? You are not going to tell me the same story that Rudolph brought—you have not failed?"

The shamefaced look of the other gave him his own answer. Count Sachio himself gave way to hearty curses of all incompetence.

"The count retained one-half the coin," went on the unfortunate messenger. "I don't know which it was. The girl—the young American—got the other piece. I saw her pick it up. But she did not get both! I don't know which one she did get, but I know that each has one-half—the count and the girl. She must have been carried away by some other man. I heard her scream, then all was silent."

"So all escaped you? It is another matter what I myself may have done as to the girl and the coin—they escaped you?"

"Yes, excellency, naturally I could not prevent the man from escaping, and the count himself allowed the other man to do so."

"What other man?"

"Roleau, they called him—the girl's servant—he follows her like a dog—and fights like one."

"So, there were two others present beside yourself?"

"Yes, it seemed as though everyone interested in the coin came all at once."

"Naturally, the competition asks quick work of all of us. And we will

had left him. Now he learned that the message from the king asked his attendance at the palace as soon as might be. The king had, it seemed, a communication which he desired to make to Count Frederick at once.

"Confound his royal highness!" exclaimed Frederick to himself. "I never leave him but he asks me back at once. He is always in some trouble, and I am ill-disposed now to be nurse to any king, for I have affairs of my own to trouble me sufficiently."

Nevertheless, grumbling, he went his way to the palace, for the royal will was something not yet at least to be set aside.

"Good! Count Frederick," Michael greeted him. "I asked your return because of a sudden thought that had come to my mind."

"As to what, your majesty? Did it come to you alone, unassisted?"

"The king was too much preoccupied to concern himself with sarcasm."

"Yes, assuredly. It is regarding the coin."

"The coin! I thought your majesty cared little for it—so little that you gave it away unasked to one who is not even of our country—a stranger—the young American."

"Precisely. That is true. And I had cause for my act. But, see you, one does not make gifts unrequited. Now the young American has disappeared, and so has the coin. Perhaps, rather, I should reverse that, and say that the coin has disappeared and with it the young American. At least, that is to say—they both are gone. So I sent for you, my dear Frederick, to tell me what to do."

The nobleman stood for a moment but half concealing his real feelings, gauging the man before him, this imitation of a king.

"She was a most charming young person," began the king, trying to conceal his own thoughts. "Do you not think such hair as hers is rare?"

"Rare, indeed, your majesty—she is in all things rare," suddenly exclaimed the count.

"And where is she gone?"

"I do not know—I have no idea."

"But you can find her—you certainly can bring her back."

"I hope it, your majesty—I hope it very much. But then, as to the coin?"

He added, somewhat maliciously—for he knew well enough where sat the wind in royal quarters.

"Oh, yes, about the coin. Well, I was only going to ask you to find it for me."

"That seems simple, your majesty! Even though I do not know where the young girl is."

"That is why I ask you, my dear count."

"Agreed then, your majesty. Of what use is a servant of the king if he cannot do the king's will? I accept your errand. I will soon return to you the coin—at least, I hope so. After all, perhaps it has no such value as you seem to think—I am sure it has less value for you than other things that we might mention."

Count Frederick did not add aloud what was in his own mind—the truth—that the coin had more value for him than he at any time before now had believed.

Presently he excused himself from the royal presence and departed to put into effect a little plan of his own which he fancied might blunt both horns of this dilemma into which the naivete of King Michael so suddenly had placed him.

As luck would have it, there had been thrown into his hands the king's half of the coin.

Count Frederick thought for a moment before he made a plan. Then he made a hurried journey to a certain silversmith in whose skill he had much confidence.

"Make me," he said as he laid upon the counter his piece of the coin—"a replica of this—absolutely, line for line, so that I myself cannot tell the two apart. Do you hear me? Can it be done?"

"Yes, excellency," said the workman, "it can be done—so nicely that I myself scarcely could tell them apart."

"Then quick with it," said Count Frederick. "How soon?"

"By tomorrow, excellency, I promise you a duplicate."

It was therefore on the morrow that Count Frederick was able once more to visit the royal palace with a mind more at peace with circumstances. With him he carried what was apparently the king's half of the coin which he had given to the young American so carelessly, and which now at once he coveted again—since the young American herself was gone.

"So soon!" exclaimed Michael. "You are the acme of punctiliousness and efficiency, my dear count. You are indeed a man of results. Go now to my cabinet again and help yourself to such jewels as you fancy."

"No more, your majesty, I thank you. If I have been of service I am pleased. Jewels are not for me. They are for women—and no woman has jewels from me now. I have reformed, your majesty. I shall be taking myself to a monastery next."

King Michael laughed loudly at this jest on the part of his former boon companion. "Not so far as that for me," he said. "I am not yet ready for any monastery. I swear I can remember a queen's face and a queen's figure when I see them, well as ever. And I saw them both here not so long ago. I thought I had secured the chance to see them yet again—when I gave her as our gift this which you have restored to me now. It seems I failed in that. But should the same case come up again for action—should she by intent or accident meet us again—I am in possession once more of what formerly was mine. Perhaps the af-

fair could be undertaken as I do, my dear count. She gave it to you to return to me? Well, no matter, only I hope that in some way, on some day, she will come back again."

"I trust it, your majesty," said Count Frederick fervently; and the deluded monarch, pleased at the quick execution of his wishes, knew nothing of the deeper machinations of the keen brain which he fancied still was in his service.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Means to an End.

Kitty, left alone once more, found herself in better heart than she had been but now. At least, she had seen Roleau—had found once more proof of his faithfulness and his efficiency. Surely he would help her to escape yet again. And as for Sachio—better he, of whom she knew something, than a stranger of whom she knew nothing at all. Of late despair had been knocking at her heart in such fashion that the summons of opportunity found no hearing, but now she began to plan once more.

She sought to study the exits of the apartment in which she found herself. There were two doors, so it seemed, both fastened. She pushed strongly at one; it opened before her. She stood once more face to face with Count Sachio, the mocking conspirator who had of late had so much to do with her own misfortunes!

"Mademoiselle!" said he, "I am so pleased."

"For myself," rejoined Kitty indignantly, "I was never so much displeased as I am now. So the gentlemen of this country in this way show their quality—in their treatment of women? I compliment you."

"Your words are at least better than your absence, mademoiselle—I like neither."

"And what of me? What shall I say of a man who treats me as a criminal? Nay, a criminal would be treated better in my country—he would have a trial. There would be process of law, observance of the law. Is the habeas corpus writ a thing unknown in this country—have the people never yet wrung that right from the hands of tyrants? In my country there are some recourses which any citizen may have."

"Your own country? Why did you ever leave it, mademoiselle?"

"The reasons concern me alone, sir."

"Indeed, you mistake—they do not concern you alone. We are many of us in this country also concerned with them. We would that you never had come from America. There are many reasons moving to that. And, indeed, we even ask your return to your own country."

"So, then, it was your message to me that I got? Most melodramatic of you, Count Sachio—but by what right do you demand my return?"

"There are some large rights, mademoiselle, which need small explanation."

"But which allow you to hinder me in the performance of my own duties—to ask me to be unfaithful to my employers? Why, you even ask me to deceive the public—to present a counterfeit—to pretend that I have done what I have not done."

"So? And you cannot take such good advice?"

"No, I will not. To deceive, to pretend, to counterfeit—those are attributes of your kingdom, not of my own country, America. In my country we have better standards—men and women alike—for which I heartily am glad."

"You have a stinging tongue, mademoiselle," said Count Sachio, red under his swarthy skin. "Perhaps it will grow milder if left unused. I shall leave you here—until you are willing to say you are done with Gretzhoffen and ready to return to your own country. This land, mademoiselle, can keep its own secrets—it could even close over the secret of the disappearance of a young woman—and leave her fate a mystery. I trust that you will reconsider what you have said."

A moment and he had left her once more. Before he passed through the door she glanced beyond. The room was occupied, apparently, by his friends—escape on that side was impossible.

The other door still remained fastened. Kitty turned to it with burglarious intent—using an art learned when she was a schoolgirl. With no better instrument than a hairpin, she had seen wonders done at opening locks.

Her brisk interchange of compliments with Count Sachio had set her pulses stirring once more. She wanted to get out—she wanted to escape, and she proposed to escape. Once more free, she admitted to herself, she would be willing enough to take the advice which but now she had scorned—willing enough to take ship back home, to see the familiar sky line of her own city, to find her own place back in the smoky and grimy city, her own place in the hum and grind of the old newspaper. How good it would seem to her now to see the faces of the local room. They might chaff her all they liked. Yes, she would go back home.

And now, with schoolgirl finesse in the employment of the small instrument in her burglar's hand, she succeeded in her burglary. She felt the lock turn at last—felt it give—saw that she could open the door. She did open it—and closed it again.

Back of her she heard once more the creak of the other door as it opened. She turned—to encounter once more the figure of Count Sachio. He smiled at her as once more he entered unannounced.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Counterfeit Coin.

Count Frederick finally aroused himself from the apathy of inaction in which Kitty's sudden disappearance