A Knave of Conscience

By FRANCIS LYNDE.

CHAPTER XXII—Continued

"I tell you, Griswold, there is no doubt about it; we have Jasper Grierson to thank for every move in this block game of ours. Every dollar's worth of work that we have lost has been taken away from us by his orders; and when we shall come to the heart of this strike business we shall find out that he is at the bottom of that."

The partners were closeted in the private office of the iron works, discussing the discouraging outlook in general and the ultimatum of the workmen in particular, and thus far Griswold had been unable to offer any helpful suggestion.

"I don't like to believe that, Ned," he protested. "It is a terrible charge to bring against any man. Besides, what motive could he have?"

"The one motive he has for everything he does—greed. He meant to swallow me whole when he lent me the money for the enlargement of the plant. You stepped in and stopped that, and now he means to swallow both of us."

Griswold shook his head. "I can't conceive the hardness of it, Ned."

"If you should accuse him of hardness it would make him laugh in your face. He would say it was business. But that is nothing to him. He is something more than a driver on the Juggernaut-car of business. He is a robber, out and out, and one who sticks at nothing. Have you heard of that deal he is engineering with the old banker from New Orleans?"

"What banker?"

"Old Andrew Galbraith, of the Bayou State bank."

If Griswold did not turn pale at the mention of Andrew Galbraith's name it was because his face was always colorless. Yet he forced himself to ask the question:

"I haven't heard of it; what is it?"

"Grierson is about to stick the old Scotchman for a cool million in the Red lake pine lands. You know what they're worth—or, rather, how utterly worthless they are."

"Oh, I think you must be mistaken, Ned. It would be sheer robbery."

"I am not mistaken; it came as straight as a string. It is a family matter and I ought not to mention it even to you. Young Blanton drew up the papers and, as you may have guessed before this, he and Gertie have no secrets from each other. The deal is all but closed."

Griswold went silent at that, sitting quiet for so long that Raymer wondered a little, and would have wondered a great deal if he could have known what a lion's net of responsibility his bit of information had flung over the silent one.

Truly, of all men living, Kenneth Griswold should have been the last to feel any conscientious promptings toward the saving of the man whom he himself had robbed; and yet the promptings were there, full-grown and insistent. He was still wrestling with them when the noon whistle of the iron works jarred sonorously upon the air, and Raymer got up and walked to the window commanding a view of the gates. And it was Raymer's voice that broke his reverie.

"It has come," said the ironmaster; and Griswold quickly joined him at the window.

The men were filing soberly out at the great gates with their dinner-pails and other belongings. The strike was on.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was late in the afternoon of one of the matchless summer days when Griffin became an involuntary Crusoe. It was in the second week of the strike and the fourth of his sojourn in Wahaska, and being no nearer the solution of his problem than he was on the day of theory-framing when he had made sure that Charlotte Farnham's robber-lover would in due time make his appearance, he had fallen into the way of killing time in a rowboat on the lake. It was weary work, this waiting for a man who might never turn up, and there was a limit to the satisfaction to be gotten out of prying into the affairs of a small city whose history one might read as he ran. So Griffin took to the rowboat and the lake, pulling slow-races against time, wrestling with his problem meanwhile, and calling himself hard names; saying that it was only the inertia of the place, and not the hope of success, which was keeping him.

In the afternoon of the Crusoe hazard he had pulled out to the islet in the middle of the lake, had drawn the light boat up on the sand and had climbed the low bluff to smoke the pipe of reflection in the shade of the trees. It was here, with his back to the bole of a great oak, that sleep found him, smiting the pipe from his teeth and blotting out the hour in which the sun was sinking behind the western hills and the wind was rising. From this sleep unawares he was awakened by the whipping of the branches overhead and the crash of tiny breakers on the beach; and when he came alive to the realities he sprang up quickly and ran down to the little cove where he had left the boat; ran and looked and congratulated himself ironically; for the boat was gone.

"By Jove! I ought to have a leather medal for this, and I'll get it if they ever find out at headquarters," he jeered. "Hello, there! Boat ahoy!"

A small cat-boat with two women and a man in it was scudding down the lake, and the involuntary Crusoe yelled himself hoarse. But the wind was against him, and the cat-boat held its course toward Wahaska, heeling smartly to the flaws.

Griffin climbed the bluff and measured his chance of escape in a glance

THE BOAT WAS GONE.

that boxed the compass. Off to the southward a steam-launch was making for the hotel pier, but there was no other craft in sight save the cat-boat. Whereupon he refilled his pipe and prepared to take the consequences of his carelessness philosophically, as he did most things.

"I guess I'm safe to make a night of it, but it won't be the first night I've slept out of doors. All the same, I hope this wind won't blow up a rain. I wonder if I couldn't rig up a shelter of some kind under the lea of this kingdom of mine."

Coming down to the bluff edge to see, his attention was once more drawn to the yawing cat-boat. The wind was coming in sharper flaws, and the seamanship of the man at the tiller of the small craft was a thing to be admired. He was evidently making for one of the private landings below the hotel, and as the boat came under a hill-broken lea of the shore the alternating gusts and lulls called for a quick eye and steady nerves. Griffin was a bit of a sailor himself, and he gave the unknown skipper of the cat-boat his due meed of praise.

"By Jove! he's no fresh-water sailor. Most of these countrymen up here would have had that sail double-reefed long ago. I wonder who he is?"

The answer to the query was suggested when the cat-boat came up into the wind at the small pier on the water front of the Farnham grounds, and the suggestion was as the spark of fire to a train of powder. There was a swift succession of minor explosions as the spark ran along the train of conclusions in the detective's mind, and then the crash of a great one. Griffin sat down on the edge of the bluff and held his head in his hands.

"Heavens and earth! What wooden-headed tobacco signs we all are when it comes to a show-down!" he ejaculated. "Here I've been agonizing over this thing for a month when the answer to all the answerless questions has been parading in plain sight every day. I said when I should have found Miss Farnham's lover I should have my man, but I had to be marooned out here in the middle of the lake before I could put two and two together. Mr. Kenneth Griswold—alias anything you please—it will be unlucky for you if you can't prove up on your record."

From apostrophising the man to observing his movements at long range was but a step, and Griffin whipped a field-glass from his pocket and focussed it upon the boat and the Farnham pier. He saw the big sail shiver down, and a moment later Griswold handed the two young women up to the pier. There was a little pause, apparently of expostulance, on the part of the women, and then the big sail went up again, flapping and shivering in the wind like a huge white flag. The cat-boat edged away from the pier, fell off, came about, and pointed its sharp cutwater straight for the island. Griffin shortened the glass and dropped it into his pocket.

"Well, now; that's more than good-natured," he muttered. "You may be a robber of banks, Mr. Griswold, but you've got a kind heart in you."

When the rescuer's purpose to bring up under the lea of the island became evident the castaway scrambled down the low bluff and made his way around the southern point, to be ready to climb aboard. The boat doubled the northern sand-spit and it was waiting for him in the sheltered cove behind the island when he came in sight of it. Griswold hailed him cheerfully.

"Thought you had come across another Skipper Ireson, didn't you, when we went on and left you? I saw you waving, but the young ladies were a little nervous and I thought I'd better land them and come back after you. Can you make it from that log?"

Griffin could make it and did; and a moment afterward the cat-boat shot out from the island shelter, put her lee gunwale under and showed her bottom strake to the setting sun. Griffin crawled aft and balanced himself on the uplifted weather rail beside the helmsman.

"You have the courage of your convictions," he remarked, nodding upward at the full sheet of the straining sail. "I looked to see you reef before you put out again."

"I know the boat," was Griswold's rejoinder. And: "I hope you are not nervous."

"Not at all; I've sailed a little myself."

"Good. We'll get it decently fresh when we are out in the open, but we'll make it all right."

The prophecy was fulfilled in both halves, but the detective held his breath more than once before the cat-boat had thrashed its way through the perilous middle passage of the open lake to the calmer water in Wahaska bay. At the pier he helped his rescuer make fast and stow the sail, and they walked uptown together. At the hotel entrance Griffin introduced himself by name and made shift to thank the man whom he meant to bring to justice.

"I owe you one, Mr. Griswold," he said, at the hand-grasp, "and I'm afraid I shall never be able to pay it in kind."

Griswold laughed. "It is not a very heavy obligation. At the worst you might have had an uncomfortable night of it."

"Perhaps it wouldn't have been any worse than that. Well, maybe I can save you an uncomfortable night sometime. Won't you come in and smoke a cigar?"

Griswold thought at first that he would not, and then changed his mind. He was invited to dinner at Dr. Farnham's, but it was yet early. Now there is nothing like good tobacco for speeding an acquaintance between two men, and Griffin's single extravagance ran to fine brands of cigars. So the chat in the hotel office went hither and yon, and finally came down to the topic which was at that moment engrossing the town—the strike at the iron works.

"They are a hard-headed lot of fools," said Griswold, not without warmth, when he came to speak of the strikers. "They are just like all the rest; they don't know when they are well off. We meant to go into the profit-sharing with them next year, but the way they are acting now you would think that Raymer and I are their sworn enemies."

"Violence?" queried the detective.

"Threats of it; plenty of them."

"What will you do?"

"We haven't decided yet, but my idea is to import what labor we need and go on."

"That will be pretty sure to make trouble, won't it?"

"Oh, I suppose so. But we've got to fight it out sooner or later."

"No chance for a compromise, eh?"

"Not in the least, now; in fact, there never was any. Their demands were most unreasonable."

"So I think," said Griffin, coolly.

Griswold looked at his companion curiously. "I thought you were a newcomer," he said.

"I am; but I was here before the strike began, and I've looked into it a little—just for idle curiosity's sake, you know. There's a good-sized nigger in the woodpile, and I've been wondering if you and Raymer knew about it."

Griswold glanced around to make sure that no one else was within hearing. "The men were stirred up to it, you mean?"

Griffin nodded.

"Raymer said as much, but I couldn't believe it."

"It's a fact," said the detective, with the same air of assurance; "a fact susceptible of proof."

Griswold came awake to the possibilities in a flash.

"Could you prove it?" he asked.

"Perhaps; if I wanted to.

The defender of the rights of man puffed thoughtfully at the good cigar for a moment. Then he said: "Who are you, anyway, Mr. Griffin?"

The detective's smile was no more than grimace. "Perhaps I am the walking delegate of the Amalgamated Ironworkers," he suggested.

"Perhaps you are, but I don't believe it," Griswold rejoined. And then he apologized. "I had no right to ask the question, and I beg your pardon. But I'd give a good bit to be at the bottom of this strike business."

"You are at it already, if you will take your partner's word and mine. The whole thing is a put-up job to break you."

"But the proof," insisted Griswold.

"It can be had, as I said; but it is immaterial. Just go on the supposition that a certain capitalist is trying to smash you and act accordingly."

"But if your supposition is the true one we should be only postponing the evil day by giving in to the men. If this man whom you and Raymer suspect has stirred up trouble once he can do it again."

This time Griffin's smile was childlike.

"There is one sure way to tie his hands, and I wonder that it hasn't occurred to you," he said.

"Griswold laughed. "We are not big enough to buy him off."

"It doesn't ask for money; it asks for a little finesse. The man we are talking about is a law unto himself, but there is a power behind the throne."

"His daughter, you mean?"

"Yes."

Griswold puzzled over it for a moment, and then said: "I don't see the application."

"Don't you? Well, I'll tell you. If this young lady knew what is going on she'd stop it."

"Why should she?"

"I'm not going into particulars," laughed Griffin. "If you can be Ned Raymer's partner without knowing what the whole town is talking about a stranger couldn't give you a pointer."

"By Jove!" said Griswold, as one incredulous; but a little later, when he got up to take his leave he thanked the observant one.

"Don't mention it," said Griffin. 'I may have to do you an ill turn some day, and this will serve to show that I'm not malicious. Are we square on the score of the uncomfortable night I might have had?"

"Rather more than square," Griswold acknowledged, and he went his way with many new stirrings of the conscience-pool.

The detective stood at the hotel entrance and watched his late rescuer out of sight. After which he went in and had speech with the clerk.

"Griswold stopped awhile with you when he first came here, didn't he?" he asked.

"Yes; he was here sick for awhile."

"When was that?"

"It was some time last spring."

"Could you give me the date?"

The clerk could and did, or thought he did. But it was surely the very irony of chance that some one should distract his attention at the critical moment of date-fixing, making him miscall the month and so give Griswold 30 days more of residence in Wahaska than he had really had. Griffin's eyes narrowed and grew hard; and then a slow smile took the hardness out of them. He turned away to climb the stair to the dining-room, and the smile outlasted the ascent.

"I'm d—d if I'm not glad of it!" he confided to the hatrack when he was going in to his dinner. "But it knocks me silly just when I was sure I had my man. I wonder when I can get a train out of this dead-alive town?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

The threatening storm had blown over and the moon was shining fair and full upon a placid lake when the family dinner party at Dr. Farnham's adjourned to the veranda. Griswold and the Raymers were the only guests, and in the marshalling of chairs Griswold was skillful enough to cut Charlotte out of the group and so secure her for himself.

At the dinner table the talk had turned upon the pivotal point of the strike, but that subject was coming to be pretty well threshed out, and on the veranda Charlotte spoke of the wind-blown incident of the afternoon and of the castaway on Oak island.

"It was a terribly reckless thing for you to do—to go out after him in the Sprite," said Miss Farnham.

Now next to being exalted as a demigod by the woman of his choice a man loves best to have her believe him fearless. So Griswold dismissed the matter lightly.

"What is a man for?" he asked. "But as for that, the danger isn't worth mentioning."

"You may think so, but Gertrude and I did not. We stood up here on the veranda and watched you, going and coming. Gertrude says I pinched her black and blue grabbing her and saying: 'Oh, she's gone!' when the scud or a big wave would hide you."

Here was a small admission which no mere human sympathy could account for, and Griswold pinched himself black and blue in the ecstasy of it. It was coming, slowly, perhaps, but surely, and the name of it was love.

"But think of it," he said, willing to make that string vibrate some more; "think of how you and Miss Gertrude would have shone in the borrowed effulgence of me if I had been capsized. The Morning Argus would have had you out to identify the remains, and—"

"Oh, please hush!" she said, and her hand was on his arm; whereupon he went obediently from the grewsome to the matter-of-fact.

"Really, there wasn't any danger worth speaking of; and the fellow was glad enough to be picked up, I assure you."

"Who was he?" she asked.

"No one whom you know; a man named Griffin—a summerer, I fancy."

"I do know him," she asserted. And then: "I don't like him."

Griswold was both puzzled and curious.

"May I ask how and why?—how you came to meet him and why you don't like him?"

She was silent while one might count a score, and when she spoke her rejoinder was a half reluctant question.

"I wonder if I might dare to tell you about it?"

"I have been hoping that the time would come when you would dare to tell me anything."

She passed over the implication and went on, following out her own thought.

"It is rather dreadful, and I haven't told anyone about my part in it; that is, not anyone but this Mr. Griffin, and he had a right to ask," she said; and from this as a beginning she told him the story of the bank robbery in New Orleans, and of her part in the apprehension of the robber.

Griswold's lips were dry and there was an invisible hand clutching at his throat when she came to the end, but he made no sign.

"They arrested him in St. Louis, you say?"

"Yes; but he escaped again."

He moistened his lips to say: "I didn't hear of that—I mean I didn't read of it in the papers."

"Nor did I," she admitted. "This Mr. Griffin told me."

"Then he is a—a—"

"A detective; yes. It seems that he came to the conclusion that a woman had written the letter to Mr. Galbraith. He took the Belle Julie's passenger list and sought out every one of the women on it till he came here and found me. I was sorry, but I had to tell him what I knew."

"Of course. But why should you be sorry?"

"How can you ask! Is it so light a thing to help ever so little to set a snare for the poor fellow!"

Griswold's laugh was almost harsh. "I shouldn't waste any sympathy on him if I were you. He is a hardened criminal, by his own admission to you."

"No, he was not that," she said, quickly. "I understood him better than that—better than I have made you understand him. He was not a hardened criminal."

Griswold's blood, which had been slowly turning to ice in his veins, began to thaw out again at that.

"Then you don't condemn him utterly? You are willing to admit that his own conscience may have acquitted him?"

"I am very sure that it did; or, at least, I am sure that his own point of view was so obscured by what he had suffered that he could not rightly see the guilt of the thing he had done."

"But you saw the guilt of it?"

"How could I help seeing it?"

"True. There is no excuse for him."

"I shouldn't say that. There may be many excuses for him."

"But no justification?" He tried hard to make the saying of it an impersonal abstraction, succeeding so well that she did not remark the note of despairing eagerness.

"Certainly not. Nothing could justify such a deed of lawlessness."

It was as he had prefigured. Her womanly pity had in it the quality of mercy. It went out toward the lawbreaker as the divine compassion enfolds even the impenitent sinner. But her conscience arraigned and condemned him.

He bowed his head and went dumb before the woman who had judged him; but when he would have changed the subject he found it mightier than his will to break away from it.

"Your verdict is doubtless that of the world," he said. "And from what you tell me I fancy the end is in sight."

"Oh! Do you think so?" she quavered, and her voice, and the tears in it, were of womanly inconsistency.

"Surely. This man Griffin has made a long step on the way to the end. When he discovers the identity of the man who talked to you on the Belle Julie, the world won't be big enough for the fugitive to hide in."

She caught her breath in a little gasp. "And it was I who set the hunt upon him; not only once, but twice."

Then it was Griswold forgot his peril and turned comforter. "You mustn't grieve about it," he said, gently. "You have done no more than your plain duty. He made you do it in the first instance; he would have made you do it in the second if he could have known the circumstances."

She turned upon him quickly and he dared not look into her eyes. "How do you know he did that?" she queried; and though he would not trust himself to look, he felt all that he might have seen if he had lifted his eyes to her face. But he was equal to the emergency which his slip had brought upon him.

"You forget what you have just been telling me."

"Did I tell you that, too? I didn't mean to." She paused and looked away from him, adding: "And—and I don't believe I did."

He laughed. "Then I must have read your thoughts. How else could I have known it?"

"I don't know," she said, absently; and at the end of the silence which fell between them the talk went back to the strike.

"I am in pretty deep water," Griswold confessed, when the present hopeless state of affairs had been fully recounted for Charlotte's benefit. "My responsibility is heavier than Ned's. He wanted to compromise with the men, and I wouldn't agree to that. Now I am well assured of the cause—which he only suspects; and I know the remedy—which I am not brave enough to apply."

"Tell me about it," said Charlotte, with simple directness.

"I hardly know where to begin. It will be fairly incredible to you. Had you ever thought that the trouble might go deeper than mere dissatisfaction on the part of the men?"

"No. Does it?"