

PINE CREEK RANCH

HAROLD BINDLOSS

CHAPTER XXIX Spalding's Return

Spalding's tired horses went slowly, and now the strain was over Lawrence felt that all was flat. The night was cold, his clothes were wet, and he was dull with fatigue. He hated to think he must soon resume his labor in the harvest field, but the thrashers would not wait and the noisy mill must be supplied.

Although his party had perhaps saved the homestead, Lawrence reflected dry humor that their return was not at all triumphant. In fact, he did not think the others knew they went. The Ogilvies were not a hospitable lot, and Lawrence doubted if the old fellow had bothered to thank Spalding. He certainly had not thanked him, and when the fire was conquered the party, so to speak, stole away. Well, Lawrence had not reckoned on much gratitude, and Margaret had carried the magazine. In the smoke and raining sparks she had nobly seen him out. Her pride to some extent perhaps accounted for her rashness, but Lawrence imagined it did not account for all.

Where they cut the Fairholm trail Spalding stopped his team, and the hired men got down, but he did not let Lawrence go.

"After my rather unusual efforts, I cannot relax, and although I'm cold and tired, I don't want to go to bed," he said. "If you feel you cannot sleep, come on over to my place and Helen will give you some coffee. I'd like to show you a letter I got from a grain broker at Winnipeg."

Lawrence agreed, and by and by a window glimmered in the dark. Helen, with some surprise, remarked the dull illumination.

"It's queer," she said. "Somebody is carrying about the small hand lamp."

After a few moments the light vanished, and when Spalding took the homestead trail Mrs. Heath crossed the field.

"A stranger got down an hour back, and tied his horse," she said. "He wouldn't tell me who he was, but he lighted his pipe and said he'd wait. As you wasn't expecting anybody, I thought I wouldn't go to bed."

Spalding sent off Heath with the horses, and the others went to the house. When they were at the door somebody asked:

"Who's with you, Geoff?"

"My wife and Lawrence Elliott."

"Then you can come right in," the other replied.

"Thanks! I believe the house is mine," said Spalding, and getting a light, exclaimed, "Spalding!"

Spalding shut a window at the back and gave Helen an apologetic smile.

"You see, I darsen't take chances, ma'am, and my horse is saddled. He has carried me 30 miles since sundown. I reckoned you'd sooner I came along in the dark."

"The plan has some advantages, Tom," Spalding agreed.

"However, to begin with, we'll put your horse in the stable."

They went off and Helen frowned.

"It's too bad, Larry! We risked something for the man before, and now we're winning out. I wish he'd left Geoff alone!"

She rather impatiently put the kettle on the stove and got some plates and cups. After a few minutes the others came back and Lawrence studied Spalding. The fellow's clothes were good, he was fatter, and his pinched, hunted look was gone. In fact, although he had used caution, Lawrence sensed returning confidence. Helen gave them coffee and slabs of

cold pie, and Spalding began to narrate his adventures.

"When I got across to Dakota I hit a job at a livery stable. The boss was pretty good sort, and although the settlement wasn't a long ways from the frontier, I reckoned I'd stay. You see, if the police made good a claim for extradition, they'd get me anyhow. Besides, if I was near the boundary, I might get some news. When I quit, the red coat boys had not found Hart."

"Nobody has yet done so," Spalding remarked.

"Sure they have not," said Spalding with a smile. "Now I'll tell you something! Hart isn't dead. He was at the livery stable three or four days ago!"

"By George!" said Spalding, and although Helen said nothing, her relief was obvious.

Spalding turned and gave her a deprecating glance. "Now you see why I bothered you this time, ma'am. I had to get going, and my friends are roughnecks like me. They'd loan me a horse and cover my tracks, but that's not all I want. Well, your husband is sure a sport and Mr. Elliott's his partner. When you got to think up a touch proposition you can bet on Larry."

Lawrence thought Helen's face went red and he frowned. Spalding laughed.

"Comparisons are embarrassing. Suppose you go ahead?"

Spalding resumed his narrative. When he cleaned some harness one evening two strangers arrived at the livery stable and ordered a team to go back three or four miles for their car. The trail was sandy and at a steep pitch she took the bank and something broke.

Lawrence nodded. Cars were not yet much used on the plains, and he knew prairie trails that bothered a good team. Spalding said the strangers were annoyed about it and one told the livery man they had planned a trip to Canada. His voice puzzled Spalding, who imagined he had heard it before, but he was some distance off and when the boss called him the fellow had gone to the hotel. Spalding harnessed a team and he and the other went for the car.

While his companion experimented with the engine he saw some small illustrated folders on the seat and he picked up one. The Pamphlet stated that a live man willing to invest \$1,000 could soon get rich by speculating in a Canadian farm.

"We know the stuff," Spalding observed. "The Canadian Northwest is not yet a farmer's paradise, and when you cannot pay the interest the land company takes back the mortgaged block; but I imagine the Dakota men do not expect too much. The American farmer carries a heavy load."

Lawrence agreed and lighted a cigarette. He was not bored by the particulars Spalding rather generously rather generously supplied. As a rule, emigration is from Canada to the United States, but sometimes a sort of reflux from Dakota and Montana flows across the fertile prairie belt, and American settlers had begun to buy Canadian farms. Lawrence knew one or two; hard, sternly frugal men, whose wives were worn by household cares. Spalding's companion was obviously a real estate speculator and perhaps thought to work up a boom.

"Go on, Tom," he said. "I expect you made some inquiries about the fellows?"

Spalding had done so. The real estate house was a pretty good house and the hotelkeeper reckoned they were putting through a big deal in Manitoba. One fellow was very mad because they might be forced to use a

team; it looked as if he did not want to remain across the boundary long. Anyhow, he had ordered the blacksmith to bust the blasted machine if he could not make her go.

Spalding's curiosity was excited, but the real estate men entertained some farmers in their room and he was forced to wait. All the same, he found out where they were going first, and at length the mended car rattled noisily up the street. Spalding was then at the pool room, and he ran for the hotel. The night was rather dark and when he was 50 yards off, the strangers got in the car. A beam from the lamps touched one's face, and Spalding pushed savagely through the group at the steps. The fellow was Hart.

He did not know if Hart saw him, but the car went ahead. Somebody pulled Spalding back and he was left to storm in the tossing dust. Now he asked Spalding to picture his emotions. Hart certainly was not dead. The brute had cheated him and sold his farm, and afterwards used their fight to help him make his getaway. Spalding began to think somebody in Canada, a creditor perhaps, was on the blazed hog's track, which might explain his unwillingness to be long on British soil. For all that, he was going to exploit some suckers who wanted to sell land, and very possibly to rob the American real estate house.

The livery stable keeper was a good sort, and when Spalding gave him his confidence he loaned him a horse. In Canada Spalding sent back the animal and borrowed another, on which he started for Pine Creek. He did not know what he ought to do, but he reckoned Lawrence might put him wise. For one thing, Hart did not use his proper name and was a clever crook. Suppose he did rob his American partners and vanished another time? The police might not believe Spalding's romantic tale; all they would have to go upon was his statement that the land agent was Hart. In fact, Hart must not be allowed to recross the frontier.

Well, the others knew all Spalding knew, and he was very tired. In the morning Lawrence might think up a plan. Spalding fixed a bed for him with the harvesters, and when he returned to the house lighted his pipe.

"We are very tired, but the gang starts at daybreak and to keep the mill supplied will occupy all my thinking powers. We ought perhaps to arrange our program before we go to bed. What are you going to do about it, Larry?"

"So far, I don't see much farther than Spalding sees," Lawrence replied. "To begin with, I believe Hart is a crook, and it's very possible he had an object for vanishing, although nothing indicates whom he feared. There's another thing that supports Spalding's surmise; when Hart thought he could not use the car he was savagely annoyed. Since he was keen to travel fast, the implication is, for him to stay long in Canada might be dangerous. Well, when he recrosses the frontier, to get on his track might baffle us, and in the meantime the police want Spalding. My notion is, we must try to find the man Hart is afraid to meet."

Helen looked up and her eyes sparkled.

"I believe I know—Not long after the hailstorm, Ogilvie came across and talked about Geoff's lending somebody a horse. He tried to bully me, but I said nothing about Spalding and at length he asked if Hart had got the horse. I told him I hated the brute. I think he believed me, for he went. I thought it queer, but now I begin to see a light. Ogilvie did not mind if Spalding escaped; he wanted Hart and doubted if he was dead."

"By George!" said Spalding. "You have solved another puzzle. All the same, our line is not yet very obvious."

"Perhaps yours is not," Helen rejoined with a smile. "In the morning I'll go over to Ogilvie's. If Hart is in Canada, I think the

old fellow will find him."

Lawrence got up. "Since you are going to help us, I mustn't meddle, and now I think about it, I ought to get home."

They let him go and he languidly crossed the harvest field. The long rows of stooks were melting, and when he reached the high wheat bin he stopped. He was worse tired than he had thought, and when he sat down the straw was soft. For a few minutes he would weigh Spalding's narrative and Helen's conclusions.

To begin with, he had rather vaguely felt that the small farmer's independence was threatened. When he arrived Fairholm was mortgaged, Spalding's farm was sold, and Hart had meant to seize Pine Creek. Moreover, Lawrence knew others. . . . Methods were changing and pluck and muscle could not compete with gasoline and steel. To use modern machines, however, implied the support of a good bank roll. In fact, it might imply the consolidation of capital and central management. But Lawrence's brain was dull and he had pondered something like this before. He did not want to indulge in abstract speculations about agricultural economy.

The important thing was, the new forces gave the rich man fresh power, and it looked as if somebody had planned to use the power for his neighbors' impoverishment. Well, Hart was greedy and unscrupulous, but Lawrence doubted if he had the talent and imagination as big consolidation scheme required. Yet he might be an agent, employed by another who plotted to crush the small men and seize their land. Lawrence's back was sinking in the straw and his head bent, but he suddenly braced up. Mrs. Spalding had solved the puzzle that had baffled him for long. Margaret's father was the man!

Well, nature had beaten the plotter; the noble harvest had broken his power and given his victims freedom. Although they had pinched and sweated, now they triumphed.

But Margaret was Ogilvie's daughter and she was loyal. Lawrence began to see her pride sprang from humiliation. She doubted her father and was ashamed from him. Her lover's business was to give her liberty and break the old fellow's domination. Well, when Lawrence knew he had made good, he would try to do so.

CHAPTER XXX The Loser Says

In the morning Helen went to Ogilvie's and waited for some time on the shady porch. Ogilvie was in the field, but Margaret sent for him, and at length he arrived. Although Helen imagined him unwilling to be disturbed, his look was inscrutable and hers was not at all apologetic.

"I have got about 10 minutes, ma'am," he said.

"Thank you," said Helen tranquilly. "Then minutes is enough; but I doubt if you will go back to your harvesters afterward. Well, some time since you asked if my husband lent Hart a horse. It looked as if you knew he was not dead. Let's be frank. Did you really know?"

Ogilvie knitted his brows, but he did not hesitate.

"Spalding stopped Hart by the bridge, and it's pretty obvious he thought he knocked him out. I allow I was not quite sure."

"Perhaps you had some grounds to doubt?"

"Suppose you go ahead; I'll wait," said Ogilvie dryly.

"Then, you imagined Hart might be willing for you to think him dead? In fact, the fight gave him the chance he wanted to steal away?"

"You are clever, ma'am. One begins to see why Spalding makes good," Ogilvie remarked.

Helen's color rose. "Geoffrey is a better farmer than you imagine, but I want to talk about something else. Hart was afraid of you?"

(TO BE CONTINUED)

the issue is, the time is fast approaching when a clear cut and definite adjustment is essential. Prisoners were not built to encourage loafing.

More Like It.

From Passing Show, London. "Oh, mother, may I go to the masquerade tomorrow as a milkmaid?" "No, you are too small."

"Then may I go as a condensed milkmaid?"

Indefinite.

From the Boston Transcript. He—May I kiss you? She—I should say not! He—I know. But what do you say?



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Billy Burch

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Prison Labor.
From the Indianapolis News.
So diversified has private industry become that prison labor has few outlets for its products in commercial markets, if it is to avoid coming into competition with commodities made outside penal institutions. The broad principle that free workmen are entitled to consideration in determining the use of convict man power is accepted generally and is valid; but this does not obscure the fact that to permit imprisoned persons to spend their time in comparative idleness is a detriment both to them and society. To inculcate habits of industry is to encourage

reform and to benefit the people by reducing a drain on the public treasury for penal purposes.

The Indiana law, subject to several restrictions, permits the state reformatory, state prison and state farm to manufacture articles and dispose of surplusage not required for use by the institutions themselves. One of the enterprises of the state farm is the manufacture of reed floral baskets. When it was started the understanding was that no private manufacturer of the product existed in Indiana, but a company is now in the field, and has brought suit at Greencastle to enjoin state activity of that sort. The contention is that the

state farm does not require reed floral baskets in its conduct, and that, therefore, they are being made for commercial trade alone, in violation of the law.

What the merits of the complaint are, we do not know. The larger aspects of the situation are clear, however. An outlet for prison labor is not only desirable but imperative, if the general welfare is to be advanced. We do not purpose to say in what direction it can be found without encroaching on other legitimate interests, both in the way of free labor and capital investment. Penologists themselves hold differing views. Troublesome and difficult as