

Ellen gets Her Man

(P. 5)



SECOND INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS: Ellen Mackay, on her way from school at Winniepes, to join her father at Fort Edson, misses the boat by which she was to travel. Hearing that another boat is to start north in the morning, Ellen goes to the owner, John Benham, and begs him to give her a passage. To her surprise he flatly refuses.

"This is Angus Mackay's lass, Pierre," announced Pat.
 Pierre Buschard murmured a sonorous greeting and bowed clumsily.

Ellen smiled and advanced close to the giant riverman. "You are going to help me, Pierre?"
 "Oul, oul, mam'selle," rumbled the big fellow. "M'sieu Benham, he's be mad lak' wulf at Pierre Buschard, but Pierre do w'at he can. You come wit' Pierre now

mam'selle, and we must be quiet lak' lynx w'en he stalk dat rabbit."

Ellen, victim to a sudden tumultuous thrill, scurried away and donned her mackinaw and cap. Back in the big room she stood on her tiptoes and pecked Pat McClatchney on one whiskery cheek with her red pursed lips. "I'll remember this, Pat," she promised.
 "Tis little enough, lass. Now stick to your guns and I gamble this will come out well enough. I feel sure of safety, for whatever else he may be, John Benham is a gentleman and the finest riverman in the north. Now run along with Pierre and do just as he says. He has already taken care of your luggage."

Pat gave Ellen's arm a squeeze and shook hands with Pierre Buschard. The next thing Ellen knew Pierre had taken her by the

elbow and was guiding her steps down the sloping bank of the river.

It was still out there, vastly except for the ceaseless beat of the river, while the night throbbled to the power of the limitless wilderness which stretched away to the north. A faint, haunting, quavering note drifted down from among the massed stars. The geese were winging north. All things were heading north, even she! Ellen found herself thrilling with a strange, wild ecstasy.
 There was a big Peterborough canoe pulled up on the shore, and in the bow of this Pierre placed the girl. Then he shoved off, balancing himself deftly in the stern, while he lifted and dipped a gleaming paddle. The buoyant craft trembled before the grip of the river, but headed against the current and stole silently upstream.

Ahead a jutting point loomed. Still as a wind-blown shadow they rounded the point and drifted bandwards again. Uncouth shapes took form in the night. Ellen recognized the loaded scows of John Benham's brigade. The canoe drifted in and gently nosed the nearest scow. Silently Pierre Buschard stepped to the scow and held the Peterborough firm.
 "Come, mam'selle," he whispered.

Ellen stepped out beside him. Pierre indicated the massed cargo of freight upon the scow. He lifted up one edge of the tarpaulin which covered the pile. "Under here," he breathed. "You must hide. For a day and a night you must hide, mam'selle. Den we will shoot dat Cascade Rapid. M'sieu Benham, she's not send you back after dat. I have put dat food and water and blankets, mam'selle. And Pierre, he's watch out for you."

Ellen gripped Pierre's huge paw with both her slim hands. "You are kind, Pierre," she murmured. "I will never forget this."
 "Bien," he grinned. "She's make me happy to help, mam'selle. You hide now, quick."

Her heart beating thunderously, Ellen crept beneath the edge of the tarpaulin and crouched quietly. She felt the slight quiver of the scow as Pierre left it. Alone now. Alone! Definitely committed to the great adventure. The future might bring—anything, but queerly enough, Ellen felt no fear. Only a stirring anticipation.

She remembered those strange, marvellously clear, almost hypnotic eyes of John Benham. The next time they rested on her—what would they mirror? Surprise, yes. Anger—almost scorn. Yet Ellen felt comfort somehow.

It was cozy there in the darkness beneath the tarpaulin. She stirred and felt about her. Then she blessed simple, big-hearted Pierre Buschard. For, in a crevice between the massed bales and boxes of the cargo was a bundle of food and the sleek, chill contours of a jar of water.

Ellen snuggled down into the blankets, covering herself with the warm, comforting folds. After a bit she relaxed all tension. The scow rose and fell to the surge of the river, creaking and complaining at its tether like a blooded horse, anxious to be gone.

Ellen's thoughts grew dreamy and clouded with sweet languor. The scow became a cradle and the great mysterious force of the river a gentle hand to rock it. Presently she slept.

When Ellen Mackay awoke again it was with a start and a short gasp of surprise. For a moment she scarcely knew where she was. Then all that had happened during the night came back to her and she relaxed. Close beside her a deep voice was booming. A moment she listened, then smiled. Her perturbation left her. In its place came a flood of warm dancing thrills. She began humming softly, keeping time with the cadence of the song the deep-chested riverman was singing. It was the old wild song of the river brigades, the Chanson de Voyageur. And it meant that the scows of John Benham's brigade were at last freed of their tethers; that they were now part and parcel of the great spring migration into the distant wilderness of the Three River Country.

The chill of early morning was still in the air, and Ellen was grateful for the warmth of her blankets. She lay there quietly, quietly content. Strange the transition wrought within the space of two short weeks. She thought of the school life she had left behind her; of the companionship, the gaiety, the luxury. A far cry indeed from her present position. Yet she knew no regret. It all seemed queerly vague and lacking in outline, somewhat like a half-remembered dream. Suddenly she realized that the inexplicable restlessness which had actuated her during those four years of nostalgia. It had been her own had been nothing else but a form country; the far country, that had been calling to her. And now she was going home!

Presently the riverman ceased his song, and then all the multitude of lesser sounds became manifest. The hoarse, throaty mutter of the river; the endless song of adventuring waters; the creak of stout timbers; the rasp of hard-swinging sweeps against the thole pins. Once the shrill hunting scream of the osprey echoed.

Several times she heard the soft shuffle of moccasined feet passing close beside her hiding place.

At first these sounds were soothing, but with a passing hour or two, restlessness seized the crouching girl. Her hiding place was far from uncomfortable, but it was irksome to remain so still and quiet when every fibre of her being called for freedom and action. She began avidly to crave sight of that world which lay just beyond the thin covering of canvas.

It was the rising sun which made Ellen's position particularly uncomfortable. The heat, under that canvas grew thick and heavy. Before long she was bathed in perspiration, and she drank often of the water the thoughtful Pierre Buschard had provided. The crawling hours seemed intolerably long. She did her best to sleep those hours away, but a fitful doze was the best she could accomplish. By the time nightfall brought blessed coolness again her head was aching and her muscles tormented with the inactivity. But when, by the efforts and shouting of the Cree Indians, she knew the scows were being daped into the bank to tie up for the night, renewed energy came again to her, and she smiled in triumph. One more cool, friendly night in hiding, and in the morning the brigade would shoot the Cascade Rapid. After that she would be safe in making her presence known to John Benham. For, once, below the rapid, he could not send her back without expensive delay and labor.

The scows were in movement when Ellen awoke on the following morning. Again some member of the crew, invigorated by the sparkling dawn, was roaring out the river song. And again the river was speaking to her, though a new note had entered its voice. At first it was only a distant throb, but as time went on the throb became a deep rumbling roar. Cascade Rapids!

Fresh activity arose on the scows. Directions and advice were shouted back and forth. The creak sweeps on thole pins became staccato, firmer. The scows began to pitch and rock. Ellen, even in her walled-in covert, could distinctly feel the increase in speed. The thunder of the rapids arose to crashing proportions. Then it seemed as though a giant hand grasped the scow and hurled it into utter chaos.

Mad waters! The hoarse, quivering roar of the pent river beast, battling the barriers of confinement. Spray arose to tingle the lungs. The scow leaped and danced like the merest cockleshell. If men were shouting now, then their voices were being beaten back at their lips.

Ellen was not frightened. Rather was she thrilled to her fingertips. Hers was the true pioneer blood, which beat rich and strong and vibrant in the battle with natural forces. Abruptly she swept aside the tarpaulin and stepped forth. Confinement had become intolerable. The men at the sweeps did not seem to notice her. With quick, thrilling steps she ran to the front of the scow and braced herself there. Spray drenched her, the wind of their speed clutched at her face, her throat, her hair, her clothes, whipping the latter tight about her slim, valiant figure.

Presently Ellen turned. The crew spied her now, stolid, dark, stoic-faced Cree Indians, and they stared at her in shy unwinking amazement. Eyes from other scows had marked her presence also, and she saw Pierre Buschard grinning broadly and waving at her. Then one of the big craft headed in towards her own. When the scows were still a good three yards apart a big, bare-headed figure cleared the space in one clean leap of splendidly coordinated muscles, and a moment later John Benham was beside her.

"Well," he said slowly, his voice steady and deep. "I see you've won. And by the grin on Pierre Buschard I can guess how you did it."

Ellen's courage came back with a rush. She smiled. "I was desperate," she answered. "It was the only way. I hope you will not be angry with Pierre. He was very kind. And as I said at first—I will pay you well for your trouble."

Benham raised a depreciating hand. A queer hardness twisted his mouth and a certain glint of triumph shone in his eyes. "My payment is already assured," he said grimly. "I'm a good hater. I'll exact my pound of flesh."

Ellen stared at him. In a space of seconds he had become somehow stern and savage. A ripple of fear shot through her. It couldn't be—surely—

"Don't worry personally," he stated with a swift, harsh laugh, reading her thoughts with disconcerting ease. "You'll be quite safe. And Pierre is an old and valued friend. He meant well."

A crimson tide again flowed across Ellen's face. "Thank you," she said stiffly. "I'm not afraid."

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Benham nodded and turned away. Going back to the crew he snapped a few terse orders. The Cree leaned muscular bodies against the sweeps and under Benham's directions drove the scow up to the bank and tethered it there.

Ellen's uneasiness grew. Was he going to send back after all? Was her triumph to be so short lived? Then she breathed more

easily. Benham, axe in hand, had leaped ashore and was swinging the gleaming blade in swift, powerful strokes among the slender poles of a dwarf birch thicket. In ten minutes' time he had felled and trimmed a full dozen of the tapering poles and had passed them aboard. A moment later the scow was again out in the river, scudding northward.
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