

ELLEN GETS HER MAN

PAS



THIRD INSTALLMENT
SYNOPSIS: Ellen Mackay, on her way from school at Winnipeg, 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.

With axe and hammer and a handful of spikes, Benham went silently to work at the plow of the scow. With the poles spiked upright and a length of tarpaulin unearched from the cargo, he fashioned a small enclosure. To finish it off he brought out the blankets Pierre Bushard had provided for her and placed them in the new-built cubby.

"When we tie up for the night the men shall gather you enough spruce tips for a comfortable couch," he announced. "This will afford you reasonable privacy."

Then, without another word or look he stowed the axe away, strode among his men and stood there, bringing out a short black briar pipe which he clenched

affectionately in his teeth, to smoke calmly and disinterestedly.

The next halt was made at sundown. The scows were tied up, fires lit and the evening meal prepared. Benham himself did not come near her, but sent Pierre Bushard with several heaped dishes of savoury, steaming food and a pannikin of scalding tea. By the time she had finished her supper the Indians had brought numerous armfuls of fragrant spruce tips for her bed.

Ellen arranged her own couch, then, with sudden determination, went ashore. Benham faced her. "I'm going for a little exercise," she said defiantly. "Or am I a prisoner?"

"Not in the least," was the quiet answer. "Only do not go too far. It is nearly dark and these woods are uncharted."

Unconsciously, Ellen stayed longer than she had any intention. When she finally threaded her way back to the fire but a single figure remained seated before the fading flames. It was Benham. He looked at her without speaking.

A stir of response gripped Ellen. She knew he had been wait-

ing her return. "I'm sorry," she said, quietly. "Sorry if I've kept you from your rest. But somehow it seemed that I had at last come home, after being away too long. I realize I am very much in your debt."

Benham nodded. "I understand," he said, softly. "I too have been away—and come home. And I often sit like this. It is at night that all this speaks." A brief gesture encompassed the wilderness about them.

Ellen was startled. Most men she had known in the north country came hardened to its beauties. But there was something almost poetic in John Benham's simple words and tone. In some intangible way it seemed that a bond of friendship of common understanding between them was born at that moment.

For a long time Ellen stood there across the flames from that strange, still, elemental man. Her mind seethed with truant thoughts, and words that frightened her lay close to her lips. Then one of the sleeping Indians stirred in his blankets. The spell was broken. Ellen moved away.

"Good-night," she called softly. "Good-night—John Benham."

The low, sturdy log buildings which comprised the Hudson Bay Post at Fort Edson, were spread out against the rising slope of a low, thickly-wooded ridge which mounted from a short beach of shingle on the west shore of the Mackenzie River, the last and mother river of those three great streams which carried the brigades of the fur traders into the vast bosom of the north.

Down the Athabasca River to Lake Athabasca, from there along the broad, smooth reaches of the Slave River to Great Slave Lake, then at last into the twisting flood of the Mackenzie, John Benham's brigade had found its way. Long, dreamy days and still, mysterious nights had passed in number since the day of the start, and now, at the death of still another day, the brigade tied up there on the beach below Fort Edson.

Side by side on the leading scow Ellen Mackay and John Benham stood in silence and watched the end of the journey materialize out of the gathering river mists. A strange camaraderie had grown between these two. Time, enforced companionship and youth had worked slowly but surely upon them. They were not lovers in any sense of the word. If such fires burned within them, then such fires were smouldering ones, hidden, banked fires which would need to know the ache of absence before thoroughly and consciously realized. Yet each recognized in the other a kindred spirit, an understanding heart.

The parting was commonplace enough. Ellen stepped to the shore and her baggage was placed beside her. At the head of the slope by the fort buildings a group of Indians were gathering. Benham gestured towards this group.

"They will take care of your luggage," he said slowly. "It is best that I leave immediately."

Ellen hesitated. "That first day, below Cascade Rapids—the morning you discovered that I had stowed away—you spoke of exacting payment. I—what is that payment, John Benham?"

"The look he bent upon her was fathomless. "I would save you from that payment if I could now. But I'm afraid that you must pay, just the same. Not to me—but to others."

"I—I don't understand."

"You will." He held out his hand. "Good-bye, Ellen Mackay."

For a moment her hand trembled in his. Then he had stepped back on to the scow. His deep voice called orders. The Cres bent to the sweeps and a moment later the hungry river current was waiting him off into the mists.

Something gathered in Ellen's throat. She looked away and started feverishly up the slope. And now, coming towards her from the buildings was a little group of Indians, led by a stooped shambling, white-haired man.

Ellen looked aghast. "Father!" she cried, "Father!"

She flew to him, to this stooped and gnarled patriarch. What had happened? When she had left, four years before, this father of hers had been tall, ruddy and stalwart, almost as tall and stalwart as John Benham. And now . . . How thin were his hunched shoulders! How feeble his step! She began to sob.

It seemed that neither could speak intelligently now. Slowly they climbed the slope together and entered the factor's cabin.

It was dusky in the cabin. The door closed behind them and the old man sank into a chair with a deep, quivering sigh. "So ye have come at last, lass," he said, and his voice was thin and high. "I was afraid—afraid ye had forgotten me, when De Soto passed without ye."

Ellen looked at him wide-eyed. "Father—could you believe that?" There was hurt reproach in her voice. "I came immediately. I am a Mackay," she finished proudly.

"Thank God for that, lass. And who was it that brought ye?"

Before she thought the name slipped out. "John Benham."

The old factor seemed to reel in his chair. His sagging head came up. His hands gripped the arms of the chair in bloodless in-

tensity. He stared at her like a man glimpsing some fearsome ghost. His tongue flickered over his lips.

"Ye came with—who?"

Something icy closed about Ellen's heart. Yet she had to answer. "With John Benham, father. He was very kind to me, where he had reason, perhaps, to be otherwise."

The old man started to his feet and began to laugh, in high, shrill, senile cackinnations. He stumbled to and fro across the confines of the room. Suddenly the laughter ceased and he began to curse—curse with a venom that was ghastly.

"Damn him!" he shrieked. "Damn him! He's taken every-thing from me now. All he had left to me was a wee bit of pride—and now he has taken that. You—the daughter of Angus Mackay—travelled from yon distant landing to this fort with that squaw's whelp, that thieving free-trader. And mark ye, little fool, he'll boast of it. Great God! Why did not the sickness of last winter take me off? I would have been spared this—spared this!"

Ellen was both sickened and frightened. There was something ghastly about this old man's walling rage and his imprecations. And this father of hers, who had wasted away to such a shell, seemed almost like another person to her. But she drew upon her young strength and went to him. Quietly but remorselessly she forced him back into his seat and dropped upon her knees beside him. She attempted to soothe him with words such as she would have used on a child.

"You must rest, father. You are not well. You have been too long alone. I am young and strong. You must let me take most of the load from your shoulders. I have not forgotten how to handle the Indians or to grade a fur."

Again the old factor laughed and it seemed to Ellen that all the elements of despair were in that laugh. He was shaking; a man palsied by the scalding out-pourings of rage and hate. Over and over again he muttered the name of John Benham, cursing and reviling. It was long before he quieted, and the reaction left him weak and shrunken. His eyes, staring out beneath shaggy brows were glazed and bloodshot. He panted weakly for breath.

At that moment all the murky shadows in the world seemed to close in on Ellen Mackay. During those thoughtless, carefree years which she had spent at school, some great tragedy had been enacted here in the fastness of the north. Alone and in silence this father of hers had fought some

great, overwhelming misfortune, to be slowly beaten down and shattered until it seemed that even his reason was tottering. And the cause of his misfortune had been John Benham! John Benham!

Something stirred and surged through her veins. Behind her was a long line of fighting ancestors, a lineage reaching to the far, gorse covered highlands of Scotland. Here before her lay battle of another sort, yet battle none the less. With a click of her white teeth she caught up the gage. Gone in an instant were all memories of that thousand-mile trip from the north. In a flicker of an eyelash she placed John Benham in new status. An enemy now—an enemy who had shattered and brought near to death—her father.

At last the insanity of rage left Angus Mackay. One thin hand came out and rested on Ellen's dark head caressingly. "Forgive me, lass," he murmured. "But only the great God knows what I have been through. It is hard at my age, to see defeat and disgrace looming just before the grave."

It was late when she kissed her father good-night and went to her room, the cozy little cubby that had been hers since a babe in swaddling clothes. A shaded lamp suffused it with a gentle, homely glow. It was carpeted with deep, rich furs, even to the enormous hide of a polar bear, in the

gleaming pelage of which she sank to her slender ankles.

Prepared by the loving hands of Gitchie, her bed lured her beneath a spotless counterpane. On a little table in one corner was a bowl of wood violets, which Moo-sac had gathered and which filled the air with fairy incense. Swiftly she disrobed, blew out the light and slipped between cool, caressing sheets. But as she relaxed the darkness brought many

thoughts and many images. Try as she would she could not keep a certain picture from drifting before her closed eyes. It was that of John Benham, as she had seen him many times. He stood before her again, clean, splendid, powerful, his strong, still face grim and purposeful; his brilliant eyes adream with the mystery of the wilderness.

Continued Next Issue

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