

Ellen gets Her Man

(P. 5)



SIXTH INSTALLMENT
A tremendous, smoldering rage grew in her heart against the man responsible for all this. Gone were all her earlier memories submerged completely in the tawdry horror of what she had seen. Over and over to herself did she vow implacable vengeance. And by this time she had virtually forgotten her own dilemma. Her thoughts were only for those helpless, apathetic children, bewildered, dumbly protesting, doomed to slow, terrible death in the winter. And then, at noon one day, she came upon a camp of Crees on the border of Mink Lake.

Even as the prow of her canoe slithered upon the shingle beach before the camp she sensed the undercurrent of excitement with which the camp was being swayed. There was a jumble of movement about the tepees, the shrill yammering of squaws, the wailing of children, and the hoarse, guttural exclamations of the men. Not far from where Ellen landed there was a York boat, piled high with cargo, pulled upon the shore.

Her senses stirring with a strange trepidation, Ellen made straight for the center of the camp. In an opening among the tepees she came upon a strange scene. A knot of Indians were swaying back and forth in fierce struggle, and in the center of them loomed the tall figure of—John Benham!

For a moment things seemed to whirl about Ellen. Then she steadied, calmed by a cold, triumphant satisfaction. At last she had run the despoiler to earth. She pushed closer to the center of the conflict. She saw John Benham lash out with one fist and drive a short powerfully built buck to the ground. Others closed in, but Benham beat them back with short, driving blows, knocking many of the maddened bucks senseless to the ground. Finally the ring about him broke. He leaned over and swept something from the earth before him. When he straightened up again Ellen could see what he held. It was a full, unopened bottle of whiskey!

Hardly realizing what she was doing, Ellen forced her way through the jam and bedlam until she faced him, where she drew herself up proudly and looked the astonished free trader in the eye. "You!" he gasped. "Ellen—Miss Mackay." "Yes," she answered, her voice dripping with cold contempt. "It is I—you—you—contemptible hound! I've been following evidences of your—your trading activities for nearly a month now, and at last I see you in all your disgusting glory." She pointed at the bottle he held. "What was the matter? Wouldn't these poor unfortunates pay you enough in furs for that poison?"

For a moment Benham looked at her incredulously. "This," he muttered, almost stupidly. "This?"

Do you mean to say you think I have been trading whisky to the Indians?"

"I don't think—I know. I have been in a dozen camps and I have seen them, and what you have left to them. I hope the picture will be with you always, John Benham. I hope those poor, innocent babies and children, doomed to die of famine this coming winter, will haunt you in your grave. You—you—oh, you greedy, treacherous dog!"

Ellen was white-faced and trembling when she ceased her tirade of accusation, yet her eyes flamed with the fervor and light of a Crusader. Benham was silent, his face white, the muscles of his jaws bulging like coils of iron. Ellen spoke again, with biting scorn.

"You—your half-breed! And you brutalize and starve your own blood-brothers!"

"Stop!" The word burst from Benham in a tortured cry. The muscles of his face seemed to writhe, and into his eyes flamed something which caused Ellen to unconsciously give back a pace. For a fractional moment she thought he was going to strike her. Then, suddenly he grew quiet. His face hardened, his eyes grew cold. A curt, harsh laugh broke from his white lips. He turned away, and with a drive of his arm sent the whisky bottle hurtling against the bole of a nearby spruce, where it crashed to a thousand pieces, its contents running down the rough bark of the tree in an amber flood.

Without a backward look he strode off, and Ellen followed, carried away by her own scorn and anger. For he had had his innings. He had brought her father to the verge of ruin, and she was determined that he should know what her method of retribution would be. He should know in advance that before the season was over the redcoats from Regina would be on his trail.

She followed him beyond a tepee, then halted in surprise. An old squaw had stopped Benham and was facing him. The squaw was gnarled and bent, a wrinkled shrunken old crone.

"Thank you," the old crone was saying. "The Great Spirit will bless you, my son."

Benham patted the squaw upon one bowed, shrunken shoulder. "It is nothing, mother," he said slowly. "And the dog responsible for this shall answer to me."

Then, before Ellen could face him again, he had swung off into the forest.

Ellen went slowly back to her canoe, where Moosac awaited her, emotionless and stoic. Somehow the triumph she had imagined would be hers had gone flat—stale and tasteless. She was weary, weary body and soul. Two words kept ringing in her ears. "Son," the squaw had called him. And "mother" he had answered. And now a disquieting doubt, which she could not discard, haunted her mind. Apparently he had fought with the Indians to take the whisky from them, and then, he had crashed it against a tree. Of course this last could have been merely a gesture to mislead her. Yet, why should the old squaw have thanked him? And why—oh why—had she called him "my son?"

Three days later Moosac beached the canoe on the shingle below Fort Edson. Another canoe was there, a strange one, with an official insignia upon the bow. Ellen paid scant attention to it. It seemed as though all the fervor of her campaign had left her. She only knew that she was very tired and very discouraged.

When she came to the door of the cabin she heard voices within. That of her father and another, a brisk, authoritative voice.

In the slight gloom of the interior Ellen did not at first see the stranger. She saw only her father.

"You—you found the proof you sought, lass?" her father asked.

Ellen nodded. "I found it." "You see," Angus Mackay turned to his visitor triumphantly. Then he remembered. "Ellen lass, this is Trooper Whitlow, of his Majesty Mounted Police. I have been trying to convince him that John Benham is trading whisky to the Indians. Rumors of such trading had leaked to the outside and Trooper Whitlow has been detailed to run these rumors down. He—he seems a bit hard-headed, but perhaps you can now convince him where I have failed."

Ellen looked at the red-coat quietly. She saw a sturdy man of middle age, already greying slightly about the temples. Whitlow's eyes were keen and blue, his jaw wide and stubborn.

"I am glad to know you," said Ellen. "And I believe I can prove John Benham's guilt."

Whitlow bowed. "I'm sorry to hear that, Miss Mackay," he said crisply. "I have known Benham for a long time and such activity as your father accuses him of does not coincide very well with my previous knowledge of the man. However, that is beside the point. If he is guilty, he shall answer to the law. I see that you are tired, but if you can spare me a few minutes and tell me what you have found out, I shall be obliged."

Ellen nodded and sank into a chair. For an hour she talked. She told of all the Indian camps she had visited and what she saw there. She told of brutalized elders and starving children. It was not a pretty story and before she had finished her father was muttering in anger and Whitlow's eyes had grown dim.

When she finally ended, Whitlow stared at the floor in thought. Then he nodded in quick decision.

"There appears to be little doubt, Miss Mackay," he stated. "You have piled up some very damning evidence, which upsets all my previous knowledge of John Benham. You see, as I said before, I have known Benham for a long time. And I don't mind saying that I am disappointed."

For even a relentless cog in the machinery of the law is susceptible to very human emotions. I admired John Benham. But human nature is not infallible. And greed functions in queer and powerful ways. The final straw is that Benham would use such tactics in a tribe of which he is an adopted member."

Ellen stiffened. "Adopted," she exclaimed, a slight tremor in her voice. "Adopted?" Why should they adopt him when he is a—half-breed?"

Whitlow stared at her. "A half-breed?" he demanded with a short brusque laugh. "Whoever told you that fairy tale?"

"Why—why— isn't he?" stammered Ellen.

"He is not. Anyone who claims he is, is guilty of vicious gossip. John Benham's parents were of finest British stock. They were missionaries. They died when he was but a child, taken off by scurvy during one of the famine winters. The finest tribute in proof of the affection by which they were held by the Indians is the fact that this certain Cree tribe adopted the boy and raised him."

Ellen and Angus Mackay sat in stunned silence. Ellen's thoughts were so kaleidoscopic she was utterly at a loss for expression. Yet enough it seemed, a black shadow had been lifted from her world. There was no reason for this emotion, no ground for it whatever, but it persisted and filled her with a growing thrill before her listless weariness immediately dissipated.

It was the old factor who found his voice first. "But—but Bernard Deteroux, of our company, claims to have proof that Benham is a half-breed."

"Then Deteroux is a liar!" stated Whitlow coldly.

Angus Mackay was a scrupulously honest man. Even what few enemies he may have had, had to admit this. That honesty came to light now.

"In that case," he muttered. "In that case I have done John Benham a grievous wrong."

"Spoken like a man, factor," nodded Whitlow.

He rose to his feet. "I must leave immediately. Benham's trail should be easy to pick up, seeing that he was at the Cree camp on Mink Lake when you left, Miss Mackay." He smiled slightly. "For official reasons I wish you might be a man for the next week or two. I would like you to be with me when I face Benham. Your evidence at such a time would be invaluable in wringing a confession from him. Given too much time after his capture for scheming, and he may think of a way out."

(Continued Next Issue)

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