

Ellen gets Her Man

(P. 5)



EIGHTH INSTALLMENT
 "It—it is wonderful," breathed Ellen ecstatically knowing what it would mean to Angus Mackay to have this big shipment of high-grade furs come into his post. "And I pledge myself to see that the tribes are cared for. But how are you going to get the cargo to the fort?"

"You'll see," chuckled Whitlow. He turned to the 'breed again. "Where is Deteroux now?"

"The 'breed waved an arm upstream. 'M'sieu Deteroux, she's at dat Cree Camp on Mink Lake."

Whitlow shot a swift glance at Ellen, who distinctly paled at this information. "Was John Benham there also?" demanded Whitlow. The 'breed shrugged and shook his head. "I no see 'um."

"Very well," nodded Whitlow curtly. He unscrewed a notebook and pencil from his pack and

wrote a swift message to Angus Mackay. This he tore out and folded. Then, starting with the 'breed, he went slowly over the entire crew of the boats. Each man he stopped in front of he stared at closely and scribbled swiftly in the notebook.

The men were uncomfortable, nervous, and they would not meet his eyes. When he had made a complete round Whitlow came back to the 'breed and handed to him the note he had written to Angus Mackay.

"You will now head directly to Fort Edison," he ordered. "These furs you will turn over to Factor Mackay there, and also deliver this message I have given you. Then you will remain at the fort until I return. If one fur is missing or if any man in your crew is not there to report to me—let him beware."

The 'breed nodded vehemently. "She's been as you say, M'sieu." "Good. Now start immediately." The York boats were soon on the way, the oaks flashing in the sun. Ellen watched them until they were around the bend and out of sight. Then she looked at Whitlow.

"Do you think they will really deliver the furs?" she asked doubtfully. "What's to keep them from going straight on and never showing up again?"

"Whitlow worked long among the tribes and with the ignorant rivermen, Miss Mackay. If there is anything they fear it is to see you apparently writing down something about them."

"Perhaps some of the more superstitious ones feel you are casting some spell over them. At any rate, they do not understand, and what they do not understand they fear. So they'll be there—every man jack of them, and the furs will be delivered quite safely. You can depend on that."

"But there still remains . . ." Ellen left the sentence unfinished. "Deteroux," snapped Whitlow. "I'll tend to him now. Come Moosac, we must hurry."

Again the canoe shot upstream.

Whitlow and Moosac driving it onward with smooth, powerful, sweeping strokes. The stout maple paddle blades creaked and hissed, and the crystal water of the river surged about the canoe in foaming whirls.

Ellen, crouching tensely in her place, thrilled with a subdued but powerful excitement. She exulted hugely in the knowledge that John Benham was now exonerated from all stigma, and she knew abysmal shame that she should ever have believed him capable of criminal operations. But she was eager to see Deteroux in the custody of the law.

Two miles above where the York boats had been met, the canoe shot through the last tugging stretch of the river and glided out upon the emerald, flawless surface of Mink Lake. A mile away to the northeast a sloping, tree-clad point jutted. In the still air just beyond the point hovered a pale cloud of smoke.

Ellen pointed. "There is the camp," she stated.

The cadence of the paddle quickened. Ellen glanced over her shoulder at Moosac. The old Chipewyan had not noticed her survey. His eyes were fixed on that column of smoke and a strange change had come over him.

Expression showed into his wrinkled, brown face. No longer did it seem flat and stupid. Instead, by some strange force of inner excitement, each feature seemed to have sharpened. There was a new cast to his head. Something of the cruel, rapacious look of an eagle was there.

The old man's lips were moving. He seemed to be chanting silently. Despite herself, Ellen shivered.

It seemed to Ellen that in no time at all their canoe was rounding the point. The hoarse, unrecognizable murmur of many voices reached her ears. Through the intervals of the tepees she caught sight of a surging group.

No one noticed them as they landed. All eyes were on two crouching men who paddled about one another on moccasined feet. These men were stripped to the waist, their faces were bloody, their gleaming torsos splashed and carmined, and they were driving out terrific blows at one another with knotted fists.

One was John Benham—the other Bernard Deteroux.

Ellen Mackay never knew how she reached the inner edge of that crowding circle about the two fighters. But she was there, and then it seemed that utter physical paralysis gripped her.

Only her eyes were free, and she stared unwinking. She saw Benham whip a slashing punch which made a gory wreck of Deteroux's lips, and when Benham leaped in to follow up his advantage she saw Deteroux drive him reeling back with a wicked blow over the heart.

For a moment they seemed to rest, circling each other constantly, their eyes blazing with utter hatred; their mashed lips peeled back in animal snarls.

Then they closed again with a tattoo of smashing fists. Body to body they stood locked, motionless except for the knotting and crawling muscles of their shoulders, and their short, deep panting for hard-won breath.

They were magnificent brutes. Like his face Deteroux's torso was bronzed and coppery. Against it Benham's skin was startlingly white, gleaming like marble. Something caught in Ellen's throat, and her eyes misted as she saw the great livid bruises Deteroux's iron fists had wrought on that white skin.

If anything, Deteroux held the advantage of height and bulk. The dimensions of his shoulders were terrifying, and the knotted muscles across the back of them made him seem almost hunched.

On the other hand, Benham's muscles were long and smooth, and even to Ellen's tutored eye there was a like speed in his movements that his opponent lacked.

The fighters ripped apart as though by mutual consent, then stood toe to toe, slugging with a wild, ferocious abandon. The spate of fists on hard flesh seemed as sharp and clear as the blows of an axe.

The flurry slackened, and it was John Benham who gave back. Deteroux, his feet wide apart and leaning slightly forward, seemed as immovable as a giant rock.

As his opponent slipped away from him, Deteroux gave vent to a rasping snarl and leaped forward. Benham, poised and ready, drove him back with another crushing blow to the mouth.

Again they seemed to rest a moment, and then both sprang anew to the conflict, and again they stood with locked arms and writhing muscles.

Time edged on. The fighters seemed tireless. Their blows were still terrible, club-like. Ellen managed to tear her eyes away for a moment, and her swift, searching glance saw Whitlow standing at her side, his eyes cold and gleaming with intent on the fighters. At last Ellen managed to shake off the paralysis which had frozen her body. She gripped Whitlow's arm.

"Stop them!" she cried. "Oh—stop them!"

steel drawn to a magnet. She was just in time to see Deteroux explode into a mad cataclysm of ferocious movement. His arms whirled, and he flung Benham from him like a child.

Then he charged in with flailing fists. They crashed into Benham's face and jaw with crushing force. Benham toppled back, his head rolling.

A sigh went through the watching circle, a circle of savage faces gleaming with the stark madness of combat. It seemed as though Benham could not elude or recover from that beserk charge. He was bent back helplessly, and his knees were sagging.

Abruptly he caught himself, ducked into a crouch and side-stepped. Deteroux, unable to halt his charge, lunged past. And Benham smashed him under the ear with a blow which whirled the bigger man half off his feet.

Now it was Benham's turn to charge, and this time Deteroux gave way, lunging blindly from side to side, in a futile attempt to avoid the rapier blows that were cutting his face into a bloody mask.

Revelation gripped Ellen. She felt nauseated—sick. The start-brutishness of it all cast a dreadful spell over her. The hoarse, gasping, snarling breathing of the fighters, their bloody, swollen features, their grim, hate-filled, blood-rimmed eyes—it was a nightmare picture to the sensitive girl.

"Stop them," she cried again, her voice shrill and hysterical. "Oh—won't somebody stop them?"

One person in all the group heard her. And that person was John Benham. In the midst of his advantage he stiffened, and his hands dropped at his sides. His head swung on his shoulders and his bloodshot eyes rested full on Ellen's white face.

For just a moment the madness of conflict seemed to fall from

him. He relaxed. And in that moment Deteroux was upon him like a pouncing panther.

Dimly Ellen heard Whitlow's sharp cry of warning. Then she saw Deteroux's great paws wrap about John Benham's head, and saw Deteroux's steely thumbs dig into his opponent's eyes.

A gasp of sheer agony broke from Benham's lips. A shudder rippled through his body, and he gave way slowly, tearing frantically at Deteroux's wrists. Someone was shouting in Ellen's ear. It was Whitlow, and his face was white and accusing.

"You little fool!" he raged. "Now Deteroux will blind the boy—he'll blind him! And it's your fault."

Ellen's world reeled. John Benham's eyes, those clear, flawless eyes, helpless now before Deteroux's ferocious gouging. And her cry had made Benham drop his guard. She began to sob, little breathless sobs. "God!" she whispered. "Please—God!"

Continued Next Issue

Aged

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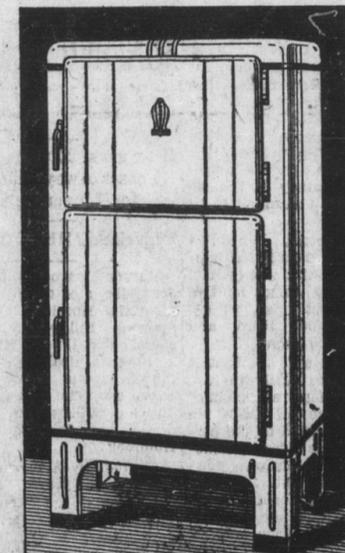
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