

By L. P. HOLMES

First Installment

It was spring in the Three River Country. Over night almost, it seemed, the gentler season had arrived.

Even the great, moiling Athabasca River had softened its voice. When it first broke the ice-ribbed barriers of winter it had howled, and groaned and roared with release of pent-up power, crashing and pounding at the shuddering ice floes. But now, the initial battle over with, it had lowered its voice to a crooning, hissing murmur, its coppery food sliding swiftly away to the northward, where, thousands of miles distant, those waters would finally hold rendezvous with the silent Arctic sea.

John Benham, bent over the intricacies of a splice in a mooring line, whistled as he worked. Surging in the depths of his great chest was a wild, haunting happiness, which always came to him when the air, dim trails were open and beckoning. His face, bent eagerly to his work, was lean and brown, with brown, nose, lips and chin cleanly and strongly carved. His eyes, deepest, steady and sparkling grey, were flawless in their clarity. His heavy flannel shirt clung to wide, sloping shoulders and opened at the front to disclose a bronzed, pillar-like throat. His hands, weaving cunningly at the hemp, were big, strong and nimble. The tremendous virility of the man seemed to glow from him like some strange and powerful current.

Ellen Mackay, standing there on the crest of the sloping bank, distinctly sensed that current. It almost frightened her, yet it seemed also to awaken a nameless, responsive thrill which speeded the beat of her heart and set her pulses throbbing. And where she had approached in the first place, with a surety that verged almost on arrogance, she now hesitated, swayed by a curious timidity.

The man was unconscious of her proximity. The song of the river, had covered her light-footed approach. His head was bent over his work. Beyond him, about the remains of the noon fire, sprawled the sleeping forms of his men, while still farther on, five great, loaded freight scows tugged at the twanging ropes and shifted to and fro as tho they also knew the call of spring and were eager to storm the far leagues of the lonely land.

Ellen Mackay coughed, and was suddenly furious with herself to find that it had been a most apologetic cough indeed. The man's eyes lifted with alert swiftness, rested on the slim figure of the girl for a moment of startled wonder, then he rose to his feet with a lime surge of power which rippled over him like the wind across a sea of grass.

"You—you are John Benham?" Only by the strongest effort of will was Ellen able to keep her tone casual and business-like. The impact of this man's eyes were almost hypnotic. No wonder John Benham, the free-trader, was such a power among the fur gatherers of the North.

"Yes," came the quiet, deep tones, "I am Benham."

"I am Ellen Mackay. I have to leave immediately for Fort Edson. I had planned to go with De Soto's brigade, but I was delayed at Edmonton and DeSoto has gone on without me. Pat McClatchney tells me that you leave in the morning. If you will give me passage to Fort Edson I will see that you are well paid for your trouble."

For a moment Benham did not answer. His eyes rested steadily on the girl, unwavering, startlingly clear. Yet he did not look at her as other men had looked. His gaze was speculative, not personal—thoughtful, not amorous. "You are Ellen Mackay. Then your father is Angus Mackay, Hudson Bay factor at Fort Edson?"

"Yes. Angus Mackay is my father."

not understand. Should you go north with my brigade, your father would disown you. For I am Benham, a free trader—the free trader in your father's life. My name is anathema to him. He hates me unforgivably. He curses the very thought of my existence. He even—" Benham bit off further words with a click of his teeth. His great chest arched and his fists clenched to hard, brown knots. Strange fires flashed in his eyes. It was plain that he had just caught himself in time to keep from exploding into open rage. Suddenly he dropped to his knees and bent over his work again. "I'm truly sorry, Miss Mackay," he finished quietly. "But it is impossible."

For a long moment Ellen stood, swayed by many emotions, of which a rising anger was uppermost. This was the most unusual experience in her life. Why, the man had acted almost like a churl. His flat refusal was stunning with its impact, the more so because it had been so unexpected. For, during the past four years, man had vied with one another to jump to Ellen Mackay's bidding. They had gloried in acceding to her slightest request. Her four years at college in Winnipeg had been one long reign over all things masculine. Unconsciously this adulation had spoiled her. She had known no other law but that of her own personal whim. Men, apparently, were just automatons, made to be commanded. Yet, this man, this big, virile, savage had flatly denied her. Ellen's imperious head lifted, her rounded little chin stiffened and she turned on her heel and walked away.

Unknown to her, John Benham watched her departure. A look of regret clouded his face, and there was grudging admiration mingled with that regret. It would be a cold man indeed who could not admire Ellen Mackay, and John Benham was not cold.

The city had failed utterly in despoiling the physical birthright of Ellen Mackay. She was sturdy, buoyant, intensely alive. There was no sickly, boudoir languor about her slender and vibrant body. Her stride was free, natural and full of grace. She did not slouch. She stood erect proudly so and the rich color in her smooth, olive cheeks had been placed there by a benevolent nature, not by the chemistry of man. Her features were lovely in their regularity and as cleanly etched as a pine ridge against the sunset. Her eyes were level, dark and aglow with the joy and mystery of life. And her hair was truly her crowning glory, a rich blue-black cloud of crisp curls.

The thought of such a girl as this sitting by his side during the long brisk days and mysterious nights of the river voyage ahead, stirred John Benham deeply. But only for a moment did such truant thoughts stay with him. With a hardening of his jaw and a shrug of his shoulders he discarded them. She was the daughter of Angus Mackay, which, in John Benham's eyes, seemed a damning fact beyond any correction. And so he went on with his work, the some of the cheer of his mood had departed.

When Ellen Mackay re-entered Pat McClatchney's little store there at Athabasca Landing, her anger and disappointment were easily apparent to the big, genial storekeeper. "He—he turned me down—flat," she burst out. "He's a brute."

Kindly old Pat nodded commiseratingly. "Ay," he mumbled. "Ay lass, he is a brute—but rather a magnificent brute at that. I was afraid. Now if ye had gone to him as old Pat suggested, and used a bit of trickery on him, no doubt he would have been glad to take ye. 'Twas the fact that ye are Angus Mackay's lass that spoiled things, I'll wager."

it over the more the wild daring of the thing intrigued her. In addition when she had told Pat, on arriving at Athabasca Landing, that it was imperative that she go north immediately to join her father, she had meant every word of it. Old Angus Mackay was a proud and haughty man, and knowing him as she did, Ellen knew that only the direst necessity could have caused him to write as he had in the letter she had received from him on the day she graduated from college. Her father needed her. Just why, she could only guess at. But he needed her, and the blood of the Mackays had always been thick and clannish. And that was why Ellen put aside her own feelings in the matter and finally agreed to Pat's plan.

"I'll do it," she said thoughtfully. "I'll do it—if you can make the arrangements as you suggest."

There was little in the way of packing for Ellen to do. During her years at college she had not forgotten that the north country was a country of essentials, not frills. A suitcase and a small trunk was all the baggage she had brought, and if it became necessary, she was ready to discard the trunk. So she soon had things in shape, then she stretched out for a little rest on the blankets of her bunk.

At first the tumult of her thoughts made even a hint of sleep impossible. She heard old Pat clumping about in the store, and after a bit came the rumble of his voice as he talked for a time with someone. Ellen's thoughts soon came back to John Benham. Her mind was made up to the fact that she disliked him thoroughly. But when she endeavored to isolate the reason for this she failed to get very far. In spite of the unreasonable rancor she felt, she had to admit, in all fairness, that her charge of rudeness on his part was not correct. She had asked him a question and he had given her a straightforward answer. That it had not been the answer she had desired and expected did not constitute rudeness. His words and manner had been respectful, but none the less adamant. And it was this latter fact, the Ellen hardly realized it, which had aroused her.

A masterful man. Ugh! How she loathed masterful men. With a little throb of consternation she remembered that simply by glancing at her he had shattered her self-applomb in a most disturbing manner.

And so John Benham and her father were at loggerheads. Very well, if Angus Mackay hated this free trader, then Angus Mackay's daughter would hate him also. She settled this fact in her mind with a clack of her little white teeth. She felt she could trust her father's judgment in such a matter. She wondered again just what the issue was between her father and John Benham. She mused over this to doze and soon fell asleep.

It was dark when she awoke. Pat McClatchney was shaking her gently by the shoulder.

"Come, lass," the old fellow rumbled. "Pierre Buschard is here. He would talk with you."

Ellen followed Pat into the store, now dimly lit by the yellow beams of a lamp. Standing just at the edge of the glow was a huge dark figure of a man. As Ellen entered, the stranger tugged off his red woolen cap and stood twisting it between two great paws.

"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?"

"Ooi, oui, mam'selle," rumbled the big fellow. "M'sieu Benham, he's be mad lak' wolf at Pierre Buschard, but Pierre do w'at he can. You come wit' Pierre now mam'selle, and we must be quiet lak' lynx we'n he stalk dat rabbit."

Ellen, victim to a sudden tumultuous thrill, scurried away and donned her mackinnaw 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.

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, vast, 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 directly 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 bankwards 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 mus' 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, marvelously clear, almost hypnotic eyes of John Benham. The next time they rested on her—what would they mirror? Surprise, yes. Anger—almost surely. Yet Ellen felt comfort somehow.

It was cosy 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 a 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 brigade, 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, cheerfully content. Strange the transition brought 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 had been nothing else but a form of nostalgia. It had been her own country, the far country, that had been calling to her. And now she was 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-awung sweeps against the thole pins. Once the shrill, bustling 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, was covering grew thick and heavy. Before long she was bathed in perspiration, and she drank often of the water the thoughtful Pierre 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 twilight 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 warped 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, tho a new note had entered its voice. At first it was only a distant throb, but as time went on (Please Turn to Page Seven)

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South Hill

(Mrs. Earl Schoonover, Reporter) July 8.—Miss Mary Lou Clark... a few days with her grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. John Le... Independence. Mr. and Mrs. Earl Schoonover and daughter, Dorothea, and Mrs. Glenn Schoonover and Gerald, attended the Schoonover reunion at the home of Mr. and Mrs. William Beil the Fourth of July. Mrs. Anna Benjamin called at the home of her mother, Mrs. Alice Emore Monday. Mrs. Jerome Schoonover Woodhill remained over the week with the Schoonover family. Mr. and Mrs. Charles Moon, mother, Mrs. William Hunt, business callers in Canisteo Tuesday evening. Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Schoonover are enjoying a weeks vacation Warsaw and other villages friends and relatives. Mr. and Mrs. Everett Clark business callers in Syracuse Tuesday. Mr. and Mrs. Earl Schoonover and daughter Dorothea accompanied their mother and grandmother, Mrs. Jerome Schoonover to home at Woodhill Sunday and also dinner guests of their brother and family, Mr. and Mrs. Schoonover at Austinburg Pa. Ruth Schoonover returning with her uncle and family to the week. Miss Dorothea Schoonover cousin, Miss Ruth Spender of Austinburg Pa., are spending first of the week at Eggleston at the W. G. Girls House. Mrs. Otto Wyke and family. Mrs. Howard Barney spent Tuesday with Mr. and Mrs. Earl Schoonover.

Slate Creek

(Mrs. Raymond Stewart, Reporter) Mrs. Mary Mullen July 9.—The whole country was saddened when it was of the death of Mrs. Mary Mullen which occurred Friday, July 3:15 p. m. Mrs. Mullen was born April 23, 1881 in the town of village, on the farm now occupied by her son Dan. She was the daughter of Cassius M. and Wilbur Stephens. She was married in marriage to Herman Mullen August 28, 1901, and spent the life in this community for many years in the town of village and at last moving to farm on Bennetts Creek, where she died. Besides her husband, Mullen, she leaves five sons, Dan and Thomas of Hartsville and Raymond of Capisteno and daughter, Mary Dennis of Greenwood. (All living radius of three miles). Also children, one sister, Mrs. Mullen, two brothers, Darphens of Almond and Lylephens of Arkport. The funeral held at the family home Monday 2:30 p. m., and was largely attended. The profession of flowers the high esteem in which she was held by her friends, neighbors and loved ones. She was laid to rest in the Bennetts Creek cemetery.

Independence

(Mrs. Floyd Clark, Reporter) July 1.—Miss Anna Ladd and S. B. Crandall shoppers, Tuesday. Mrs. Carl Clarke and Catherine Marie Grewe were Mrs. Mary Howe at Northam, Tuesday. Jason Hawks was Sunday Cluster City, Pa., Sunday. Director and Mrs. S. E. and Mr. and Mrs. R. E. S. in Fillmore attending the meeting of the Daughters of the American Revolution Monday night. Mr. and Mrs. Elmer I. two sons of Stockton, California, and Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle New York City were Sunday at Linford, Potter's. Rev. W. L. Greene was calling, making plans for Vacation Bible School today, July 8th and run for The Wood family held in the parish house.

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