

THE WOMAN WHO BLAZED THE WAY

(Continued from page 13.)

the river bank. Purely by chance, as they groped their way through the woods, they stumbled on an abandoned wigwam—the summer quarters of some warrior who had moved into the central camp for the winter. As usual, a cache of food—corn and roots—had been left in the deserted lodge for the return of the owners in spring. The two women took up quarters in the empty wigwam for the night. They could see the forms of the Shawnee warriors against the camp fires down on the river bank at the Indian town. How soundly they slept that night, we may know. Towards day they were suddenly alarmed by the ringing of a bell, as if some one were coming in with pack horses. The odd German woman was paralyzed with terror. Mrs. Ingles sprang from a couch extemporized of branches and her blanket. She looked out. An old horse shivering in the night air had shambled up to the lodge. He was the wearer of the bell. The relief of the women knew no bounds. Hastily before the Shawnee village was astir, they gathered up in their blankets all the corn and roots they could carry and loading these on the old horse, took off his bell and set out at as quick a pace as they could urge the brute on up the Ohio.

TWO days found them far up the valley past what is now Ashland and confronted by the broad flood of Big Sandy River where it joins the Ohio. As at Licking River, the fording place on the Big Sandy was too deep for them, and again they left the Ohio to ascend stream to a crossing place. At what is now the town of Louisa a drift of logs had jammed. Mrs. Ingles dared not go farther up the Big Sandy lest she could not find her way back to the Ohio trail. With thwacks and coaxings they urged the old horse on to the jam of logs bridging the Sandy. Midway the poor brute had to flounder through the bridge and there he hung, legs entangled in the branches, unable to go forward or back. The women could not pause to set him free. They unloaded his pack of provisions, shouldered the packs themselves, crossed the Big Sandy and struck down to the Ohio again near what is now Huntington.

It was now almost December. Each night the cold grew tenser. Occasionally flurries of snow came down on the north wind. Winter had driven hunters from the woods, for they met no more Indians, but a more terrible peril befel Mrs. Ingles. Their stock of provisions had begun to run low, and as they toiled up the Ohio River over the wind-swept ridges of West Virginia towards the mouth of the Kanawha, Mary Ingles noticed that the old German woman had begun muttering and roving and scolding querulously as she marched. At night the danger was more gruesome. The old woman had plainly gone out of her head, and would sit up staring in the moonlight with wild threats that she must have food. And, of course, she blamed the younger woman for bringing her on this wild venture at all. Near the Kanawha, or New, or what was called Wood's River, they were lucky enough to find a half frozen deer carcass. That quieted the mad woman's craving for food, and while the German packed the meat in her blanket, Mrs. Ingles tore the remnants of one skirt into strips to bind up the feet of her companion and herself. They were now half way home. Wood's River or the Kanawha was well known to Virginia traders. Mrs. Ingles' one hope was to reach and pass the mountains before another fit of madness recurred to the old German.

Deer and quail and wild turkey they saw in abundance, but they had no firearms, and they dared not take time to pause and snare the game. As the crow flies the Kanawha River was about two hundred miles from Draper's Meadows, but by the winding of the river the distance was twice as far, and taking her courage in her teeth the brave Virginia girl led on at a run, keeping her com-

panion at a safe distance and turning only where the decrepit old German needed help up a cliff or across a stream or over a log. Why didn't she desert her helpless old charge altogether? Surely reason could have supplied good excuse to conscience. For two women to die would help neither of them. It was better that one should live than both perish. But Mrs. Ingles didn't reason that way. That's what I mean when I said that F. F. V.'s stood for something more than tinsel and veneer and pretence. In fact, it was in exactly that way that the old German woman was now talking. As they reached the towering cliffs near New River Canyon, both women became spent and half famished. The old German was raving again. Crowded against the foot of the cliff by the black waters of the canyon, they had to walk very close together and the querulous old German kept up a constant whine of reproaches.

At one place, a cliff fifteen-hundred feet high towered sheer across their path. The water was too deep for wading. They could not go forward, and it seemed hopeless to go back. The old woman was raving now with all the wildness of her spent energies, and Mary Ingles was on the verge of tears. But as Napoleon said, fifty years later, "To stand still is always to slide back." And up the cliff the Virginia girl began to scramble, dragging the unwilling old termagant after her. In places where foot-hold slithered away in crumbling clay they hoisted themselves up by the overhanging branches. Where the ledge leading up narrowed, both women crept hands and knees with freezing fear as the wind bellowed through the pass bringing up the awesome hu-s-sh of the black waters far beneath. Almost a day it took to scale the cliff, and once more they were down on the river bed following the trail past the Greenbrier and the Bluestone with the purpling folds of Peters Potts Mountains straight ahead. Mrs. Ingles knew the ground now. Could they but hold out for another week, she would reach Draper's Meadows, but the old German woman had become a terrible peril. She was raving mad, and with a flare up of last strength like the flickering blaze of a dying fire, she seemed to regain her lost energies and nightly, daily, was vociferously demanding that one of them die to satisfy the hunger of the other. The younger woman's answer was to flit like a shadow always to the fore beyond reach by day, and hide by night.

ONE night, on the upper rushes of New River, the German pounced on her hiding place with demand that they draw lots as to which would live. To Mrs. Ingles it was as if fate were playing with loaded dice, but to quiet the old creature she crushed her rising fear and lightly drew one of the proffered sticks. With the shout of a maniac, the old German cried out that was the stick which signified death, and before Mrs. Ingles could move the insane woman's hands were clutching at her throat. All that save the young Virginian was the old woman's weakness. Mary Ingles unclasped the thin emaciated hands of her mad companion, jerked free, and dashed to hiding too quick for the old German to follow. But it was plain she could no longer travel with the mad woman. The salvation of both lay in Mary Ingles reaching Drapers' Meadows quickly. As far as I can judge, she could not at this time have been more than fifty miles from home.

The lonely night wind sung down the river. The cries of the wild cats came from the forests on the mountain sides. And from the leafless trees sounded a sobbing and groaning as of a world in pain. Then the moon came up with ghost shadows. By the moonlight, Mrs. Ingles could see her way down to the river where she followed the little indurated game trail of the wild animals going to

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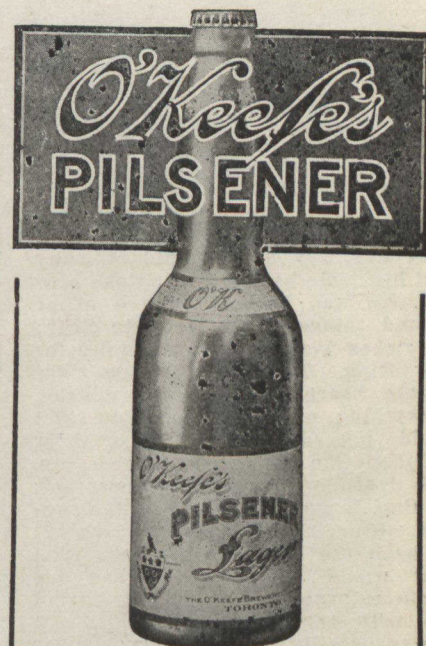
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