

"The Fighting Trail"

Episode 1—"THE PRICELESS INGREDIENT."

Balterman leaned forward impressively in his chair.

"There is nothing further to be left to doubt, gentlemen," he said. "Only one thing remains; we must go ahead, though the cost be millions. Do you agree with me?"

The others about the directors' table merely stared. Men of millions, rulers in the world of finance, capable of hurling the stock exchange into furious panic by a mere utterance, they feared to say the words that would start the wheels of a nation turning to carry out a mighty aim. Still, as they stared across the table at Balterman, they shrank. Strong, wealthy, powerful as they were, Balterman was greater. He glared at them a moment and spoke again.

"I repeat, gentlemen, what I have just said." His words were quietly spoken and calm, but they carried the whole force of his character. He fluttered the yellow sheet of a cablegram in his fingers. "This message is decisive. It means possibly conquest for our country. Alone, it is enough for me. You know, all of you, that we control the greatest explosive in existence; you were present when the government tests were made and announced successful. You know, also, that cinnabar is a necessary ingredient of that explosive. We must have cinnabar and, gentlemen, I intend that we shall have it."

"The supply of California has been worked to the limit. Spain has emptied its mines. Every known source has been exhausted. There is but one man who can fill our orders. We must enlist the aid of John Gwyn. I do not know where he obtains the supply, and I don't care. I know that he can meet our demands, and I know that he is honest. I am satisfied. Gentlemen, what do you say?"

It took but a moment, after the decision had been reached by his conferees, for him to pick up the telephone and call a number. He did not delay an instant. Time, at this moment, meant lives. He reached Gwyn's secretary, then Gwyn:

"Mr. Gwyn?" he questioned. "This is Balterman. We would like to see you immediately on a matter of grave importance. We shall wait for you. Good!" Balterman hung up the receiver and turned again to the men about the table. "Gwyn is coming right over. You can take him absolutely into your confidence. He is surprisingly young for the influence which he wields, but the point to remember is that he is just as big as his job. And he's on the level."

The others nodded.

It was less than fifteen minutes before Gwyn was announced. He came into the room with a briskness that contrasted sharply with the august dignity of the directors who were de-

liberating over such a weighty problem, and shook Balterman heartily by the hand.

Balterman lost no time in getting to the point.

"We have been congering about our new explosive," he announced. "You no doubt have heard of it. There are certain ingredients which are essential in the manufacture of it and which we are desirous of obtaining. One of these is cinnabar. It is imperative that all our plans and operations be absolutely confidential, for there will be much in our actions that would be invaluable to the Central Powers. We realize that our every move, despite the discretion with which it is made, is closely followed by the agents of those Powers. You, Gwyn, are the man we have chosen to supply us with cinnabar, as we understand that you have an unlimited supply and because we know that we can rely upon your confidence."

"I thank you for the honor of taking me into your confidence," Gwyn replied, "and I can assure you that it has not been misplaced. I appreciate, however, as you must, the vastness of this task to which you are assigning me. Your demand alone will surpass all others that I have been receiving in the past—it will necessitate improvements and enlargements at the source of my supply in order for me to meet it, and I shall have to cancel immediately all orders for the future."

"But we shall pay you well," reminded Balterman.

"However," continued Gwyn, firmly, sweeping the assemblage with his eyes, "since we are agreed on the most important point, I can supply you with what you require. I happen to know gentlemen, no matter through what channels of information, that you cannot manufacture your new explosive without cinnabar. I believe, also, that I am the only man on earth who can locate the latter. Therefore, while you can exploit your explosive—the greatest in existence—I control it. My price to you, gentlemen—the lowest I can offer—is a bonus of two million dollars and the market price for all of the material with which I furnish you."

"Gentlemen," asked the leader, "what disposition do you care to make regarding Mr. Gwyn's proposition?"

"It is nothing! It is everything!" Balterman shouted impatiently. "The price may be ridiculous, but it is also reasonable—it is important. There is no need to dicker childishly with Mr. Gwyn. It would be useless. He understands our situation, as he informed us. He knows that we cannot secure cinnabar anywhere in the United States—or anywhere on God's earth, for that matter—except from him, and he intends to charge us for it accordingly. I don't blame him. He is a business man. Moreover, he controls our whole enterprise and its success, as well as the nation's welfare. And, gentlemen, Mr. Gwyn is a man to depend on. It is worth two millions of dollars, to my mind, to have his support instead of some one else's. I demand, in your own interests, that you accept this proposition. If you refuse, you may carry out your own affairs—I shall withdraw entirely, and sever my connections with this enterprise. You may do as you please. Gentlemen, what is your answer?"

The effect of Balterman's threat to withdraw both his influence and his capital was astounding. There was

not a moment's hesitation. The proposition was accepted.

Balterman turned to Gwyn. "We accept. Are you prepared to start for the west on the Limited tonight?"

"I am prepared," he answered, "to start anywhere in one hour. I am with you to the greatest extent of my power, and you can depend upon me absolutely. I need not say that I shall expect the same from you. I know I shall receive it."

Karl von Bleck, chief representative of the Central Powers in the United States, laid his newspaper on the desk before him and delved into thought. His secretary, seated at a desk nearer the door, tiptoed quietly from the room. When von Bleck thought, he thought of grave and important things and his secretary knew by precedent that he preferred to be alone.

Von Bleck, left alone, proceeded to read again the newspaper item which had so perturbed him. It seemed to stick from the rows of type in words that spelled the destruction of his nation, of his power, of his every interest; and yet he saw toward the last of it a ray of hope—the hope which he must make a reality. He read:

"The terrific power of the new allied shell is marvelous. It surpasses anything which the Central Powers have yet developed and promises to be the nation's salvation in the present great conflict. This remarkable power is due to the new explosive which has recently been invented and, with this explosive the munitions problem of the country will be revolutionized. The only drawback—which is truly a menacing danger—is the extraordinarily small supply of cinnabar, the chief ingredient of this new explosive."

He rose from his chair, laughing, though more with scorn than mirth, and passed through a door at his back to an adjoining room. There, leaning over a long table, were his associates ready to do his bidding, reading the code translation of a cable message they had just received and deciphered. They greeted their superior with dignity and relief. His mere presence and his austere mien were comforts to them.

Von Bleck was handed the cable, and he read it carefully. Then he smiled. His associates knew the meaning of that smile—they had seen it often on previous occasions. They knew, also, what the cablegram contained. Von Bleck spoke:

"The most important thing to our enemies at the present time is the perfection and supply of their new explosive. Therefore, naturally, the most important thing to us at this moment, is the destruction of this explosive; we must render it impossible for it to be made. The easiest and most effective way for us to do this is to cut off the supply of cinnabar, which is the chief and scarcest ingredient used in the explosive. It seems almost impossible to obtain it."

I learned but fifteen minutes ago through a confidential agent, that the contract for cinnabar has been given to a young American engineer named Gwyn. He has been receiving shipments of it from the west, by the Santa Fe Railroad. If we get Gwyn and buy him off or get his mine, we shall have accomplished our purpose. As you know this cable places at our disposal five millions of dollars to be used to this end. Gentlemen, I am going out to locate this engineer and offer him more wealth than he ever dreamed of. You shall remain here until I return or you hear from me. Good day."

Episode 2—"THE STORY OF YBARRA."

Von Bleck walked hurriedly back to his office, donned his hat and coat and

strode out, leaving the others in the inner office, conferring. That could mean nothing until they heard from their superior.

Ten minutes later, von Bleck was walking into the building in which was located the office of John Gwyn. He had mapped carefully out in his mind a proposition with which he intended to startle the young engineer. It was a proposition which would make Gwyn independently wealthy for the remainder of his life—and all that would be necessary for him to do would be to cancel the cinnabar contract.

As he passed through the revolving doors and waded toward the elevator a crowd was surging toward the street. One of these, a young, stalwartly built man, who carried a suitcase, fairly rubbed arms with the agent of the Central Powers. It was John Gwyn! Neither took particular notice of the other, they having never previously met. Gwyn went through the door to the street and von Bleck entered the elevator, to be driven upward to the former's office.

"Is Mr. Gwyn in?" he inquired of the secretary as he entered.

"I'm sorry, sir," was the reply, "but Mr. Gwyn left just a few minutes ago for an indefinite stay in the west. He was just in to clear up a few matters and left with his suitcase. Is something important? Perhaps I could help you. He has left me in charge, and—"

"It is important," von Bleck broke in, "and I can see no one but Mr. Gwyn himself. When does his train leave?"

"He goes on the Limited tonight," was the reply.

Von Bleck was about to leave the office when his eye caught sight of a picture hanging on the wall in the outer office. He walked over to it casually and scrutinized it. In the foreground was a young man, pipe in mouth, roughly clad in mining attire. Behind him was a stretch of typical mining country.

"Is this your employer?" he questioned.

"That is Mr. Gwyn," the secretary answered.

Von Bleck took another careful look at the picture and, thinking the young man, left the office.

Again in the street, he sought the nearest telephone booth and called the office.

"Gwyn leaves for the west tonight on the Limited," he told his conferees over the wire. "I shall be on the same train. I shall keep in touch with you while I am gone and, in the meantime, you attend to any other matters that may come up during my absence. As soon as I am able I shall wire you my address. I may need that five million before I get back."

The Limited was rattling over the rails toward the west with a speed that was astounding. Outside it was already dark, and the lights along the roadbed shot by so fast that they resembled sparks flying up a hearth chimney from blazing logs below. In the smoking compartment at the end of the car, John Gwyn sat perusing some papers. The portieres parted and von Bleck entered. He drew a cigar from his pocket and asked Gwyn for a match. The latter silently accommodated him.

"Pretty long and lonesome trip," the Central Powers' agent commented. Gwyn nodded. He was apparently in no mood for striking up acquaintances. But von Bleck persisted.

"I'm going out to 'Frisco,' he said. Maybe you're bound for there, too. My name's von Bleck; it's nice to know someone on the train."

"My name is Gwyn," the young engineer responded, glancing up from his papers and fearing that he might appear impolite by avoiding conversation. "I'm not going to 'Frisco,' though. I'm on my way to a place called Lost Mine in the wilds of the Sierras. Barstow is my getting-off point."

Late that night, when the sleeper was black with darkness, except for the fleeting rays of lights along the track that shone but for the briefest fraction of a second as they passed the ends of the car, a shadowy figure, clad only in a dressing gown, quietly and cautiously emerged from one of the berths. It moved rapidly along until it was outside of Gwyn's compartment; then bent over and peered in. A little pocket flashlight suddenly illuminated the car and revealed, huddled and awake to see it, the dark features of von Bleck. He covered the end of the light with his hand to dim its rays and put it between the curtains. Gwyn was sleeping soundly. Von Bleck watched him for a moment to see that he was not aroused by the light and then, satisfied on that score, reached across his body to a half-opened suitcase resting in a rack near the window. Slowly and carefully, so as not to awaken its sleeping owner, he lifted the suitcase from the rack and hurried back to his own berth.

For a quarter of an hour, von Bleck, in the seclusion of his sleeping compartment, studied the contents of Gwyn's bag. A small packet of letters, which had been tucked carefully at the bottom, held his attention the longest. For the most part these were of a personal nature, and contained nothing of interest to him, but finally one caught his eye. It was postmarked "Lost Mine" and was addressed in a flourishing Spanish hand. He opened it:

"Dear Mr. Gwyn: Am shipping your last order tomorrow. You need have no fear of the supply becoming exhausted for some time to come. When am I to be honored by a visit from you? I trust before long.

"Faithfully yours,

"CARLOS YBARRA."

Von Bleck smiled with triumph as he read the letter. It was the same smile that had played about his lips when he had met with his associates earlier that day. He folded the paper noiselessly and replaced it in the envelope. Then, as if realizing the length of time which he had kept Gwyn's suitcase he put the packet of letters back into the bottom of the bag and stole cautiously down the aisle to Gwyn's berth. A glance assured him that its absence had not been noticed. The young engineer was still sleeping heavily. He had been thoroughly tired by the strenuous events of the previous day and his hasty departure. It required but a moment for von Bleck to lay the suitcase back on the rack near the

window where he had found it and to hurry back to his own berth.

Gwyn arose early the following morning, dressed, and used several articles from his bag. He did not notice that it had been tampered with. In the wash room he met von Bleck, who was attending to his toilet and nodded to him. The latter returned the salutation and watched him keenly to see if Gwyn should appear the least bit suspicious that his belongings had been ransacked. He was greatly relieved to learn that he was not.

Early on the fourth day after leaving New York the Limited drew into the little western town of Barstow, at the foot of the great range of the Sierrita mountains. John Gwyn, his bag packed and his wraps on, was ready to alight and start on his important mission. As soon as the train came to a stop, the young mining engineer jumped lightly from the platform and proceeded to the local hotel, which was located a short distance from the depot. As the train chugged again, starting on the last lap of its journey to the west, von Bleck, who had been watching alertly from his seat for Gwyn to depart, jumped from his seat. He darted to the door, suitcase in hand, and whispered into the porter's ear, slipping a crisp bill into his hand at the same time. The colored worthy grinned knowingly and nodded. With a jerk he threw open the vestibule door on the side opposite the station. Von Bleck stepped down, grasped the handrail of the car and swung out. The train was moving rapidly now and the jump was perilous. The car was quite a distance past the station. Von Bleck took one glance at the ground flying by under the train, sprang into the air and went sprawling to earth.

Don Carlos Ybarra trudged up the last few steps to the summit of the mountain beneath the burden of two heavy wooden cases which he bore upon his shoulders. They were a heavy load for one so old as the rugged Spaniard, but he was strenuous and energetic, and his muscles were hardened by years of rustic living in the west. His gray hairs were a symbol of feebleness. Don Carlos was a man, and sturdy, and would be until the end. As he reached a clump of bushes beside the footpath on which he was walking, he paused to look suspiciously about for a second, and then parted the shrubbery, revealing the entrance to a spacious cave. He tore his way through the bushes, allowing them to close behind him, deposited the two cases among many more that were hidden in the dark corner of the cavern and came out again. Once more he looked carefully about him, as if to satisfy himself that no one had been observing his actions, and then started to walk toward a little hacienda several hundred yards away which served as his mountain dwelling. Precisely at the moment that he turned his back, two glaring eyes, filled with hate, appeared from behind the undergrowth, but a few yards from the cave's entrance. It was "Shoestring" Drant, a human coyote, ever stalking Don Carlos.

Episode 3—"WILL YAQUI JOE TELL?"

At that moment Ybarra, shuffling on toward the house, halted a moment to watch it run away. Either through coincidence or by kindness of Providence, the frightened rabbit dashed toward the entrance of the cave. As it was about to enter there for shelter, it took a sudden turn and fled in the opposite direction with renewed speed. Ybarra was immediately suspicious. Something—perhaps someone—must have frightened the animal. He uttered a little cry. Perhaps someone was in his cave! He turned and called:

"Joe! Joe!"

Yaqui Joe, the relic of a dauntless tribe of earlier days, Ybarra's faithful servant, appeared in the doorway. Don Carlos motioned to the cave. Joe understood. The old Spaniard, his days for physical combat passed, went on toward the hacienda, leaving the Indian to see to the safety of the cases.

When Ybarra entered the house, he was welcomed warmly by the one bright ray in his shattered, lonesome life. It was a young and very beautiful girl, whom he called Nan. She was dark, of the Spanish type, but nevertheless sparkingly American. Ybarra often described her to strangers as the kind of a girl an orphan always imagines his mother was. And that was description enough, both of beauty and of character.

"What's the matter, father," she asked nervously. "Why did you call?"

"I thought perhaps those two mad men from Lost Mine Shoestring Drant and Cut-Deep Rawls, were about again. Yaqui Joe is looking around now. Don't be alarmed." He tapped her on the shoulder. Despite his assurances, Nan was alarmed. She feared the men whose names her father had mentioned, for often before she had heard of their maniacal intention of abducting her.

The following morning things occurred rapidly and unfortunately at the little mountain town of Lost Mine. Von Bleck and Gwyn arrived at the same hotel a few minutes after each other. The secret agent of the Central Powers got in first, and Gwyn met him in the dining room as he was eating breakfast. Both were clad in rough western attire, having ridden the entire distance from Barstow by horseback, though along different roads.

At the first sight of him Gwyn comprehended. He had been followed. In an instant he recalled the conversation on the train, remembered how von Bleck had attempted to talk business. Everything that had passed between them flashed like a bolt of lightning into his mind. He had no doubt that his suspicions were true. He walked over to the Central Powers' agent, and without a preliminary word, said:

"Von Bleck, you've gone about far enough. I know who you are, and what you want. Look out. I'm working to save my nation—you are working to destroy it. I wouldn't for a moment allow such a little thing as your life to stand between me and my mission here. I warn you, keep off my trail!"

Von Bleck said nothing. He merely sneered.

Gwyn ate a hurried breakfast and, after inquiring the way to Ybarra's mine, started out upon the back of a hired horse to find it.

It was said that the occurrences at Lost Mine that morning were unfortunate and that, for when von Bleck had finished his meal and decided, despite Gwyn's caution, to follow the young mining engineer to his destination, and foil his plans, if such a thing were possible, he asked which trail to follow to Ybarra's. The name he found by reference to his notebook. As fate ruled, his appointed guides were none other than Shoestring Drant and Cut-Deep Rawls, who had prowled about the Spaniard's dwelling on the previous evening.

After they had led him several miles into the mountains, they discovered that he, too, was an enemy to Don Carlos Ybarra, and due both to von Bleck's shrewdness in the situation and that of the outlaws, they struck a bargain. It was an immense bargain, almost as great and important as the one made by Gwyn and Balterman, but the conditions under which it was made were sharp contrast to the other. It was agreed that if von Bleck, through the aid of the outlaws, should gain possession of Ybarra's cinnabar mine the outlaws were to be paid the fabulous sum of one million dollars, in addition to which von Bleck was to aid them in what was more important than the money to their minds—the abduction of Ybarra's daughter, Nan.

Meanwhile Nan and Yaqui Joe had gone to Lost Mine with a shipment of cinnabar to be sent to Gwyn's New York office. Nan left Joe in charge of it, with instructions for him to await the mail while she hurried back across the mountain trail to her father, whom she did not care to leave alone.

She was riding leisurely along the narrow trail that led around the side of one of the mountains, when suddenly rounding a curve, she met Gwyn face to face. The path was not wide enough for both horses to pass easily, and there was a sheer drop of more than hundred feet into the valley from it. Nan's horse, frightened by the sudden appearance of Gwyn, reared and started to turn in his tracks. One of his feet slid over the edge of the trail and he commenced to fall. Gwyn, in an instant, was out of his saddle and beside her. It was useless to try to save the horse. Already he had lost his balance. Gwyn caught Nan just as she was about to go over the edge, and dragged her back to the trail, while her mount tottered on the brink for a brief second and toppled into space.

Nan, when she had recovered from the shock of her narrow escape, murmured her thanks and was wondering how she would reach her home when Gwyn astounded her by revealing his identity. He, also, was agreeably surprised to discover that she was the daughter of Don Carlos Ybarra, whom he was on his way to see. He had lost himself in the mountains, and was trying to find his way out when they met on the narrow trail.

That night, shortly after dusk, when the Sierras were clouded with the evening mist, three figures emerged on horseback from the woods and advanced across the little clearing to Ybarra's hacienda. Von Bleck and his desperadoes had returned. They dismounted, Von Bleck leading, dashed up to the hacienda, bolted through the unlocked door and faced the occupants with drawn revolvers. Von Bleck had calculated that this would be all that was necessary, but even such efficiency experts of the Central Powers' "system" as he was sometimes calculate incorrectly. Neither Gwyn nor Ybarra threw up their hands in surrender. Instead they drew their own weapons and gave furious battle. Von Bleck and the outlaws fired. Gwyn and Ybarra returned the shots. In the excitement no one was hit. For several minutes the fight raged—hand to hand at times—and then Don Carlos fell, a bullet in his head. Gwyn's gun was snatched from behind, and Nan was caught in the ironlike grasp of the chuckling Cut-Deep.

"Get it! Get it!" von Bleck yelled. "Hurry up, and then run!"

The outlaws rushed together toward the kitchen and suddenly stopped. They listened. Through the open door came the sudden clatter of hoofs upon the grass. The marauders knew immediately what it meant. Yaqui Joe, returning from town, had seen the spot where Nan had fallen and had seen her horse in the gully below. He was rushing to the house for Don Carlos. The position became dangerous. Taken thus by surprise, they might all be killed. Cut-Deep released Nan and ran to the cover of the kitchen. Von Bleck followed, just as Yaqui Joe burst into the door and fired. The bullet pierced his hand, but von Bleck leaped into the kitchen before he could shoot again, slammed the door and bolted it.

For several minutes Gwyn and Joe hurled their bodies against the portal. At last it sagged and fell in with the two men, battered and bruised, sprawling upon it. They looked up quickly, expecting to meet a volley of shots. Nothing happened. The kitchen was empty!

An open window with broken panes told the reason. But a few feet from it, the cover torn off, was an old wooden chest. Yaqui Joe rested his eyes upon it for a second. Then with a little cry ran to it and began rummaging through its contents.

"They've got it! They've got it!" he fairly shrieked. And then reaching down one side, his finger pressed on something. The inner side flew open, revealing two large, sealed envelopes, yellow with age. "But they haven't got it all!" he shouted almost joyously. Rushing past Gwyn and Nan who stood mystified in the center of the room, he ran into the adjoining room and knelt beside Ybarra. The old Spaniard opened his eyes dazedly and smiled at his servant. He took the envelopes from him and proceeded to tear them open.

"Joe," he ordered, "follow their trail. Get it from them." The old Indian, hesitating not a moment, rushed out of the door, and in another moment could be heard galloping away through the night. Gwyn and Nan were beside Ybarra by this time. The girl looked down into the Spaniard's face and saw there a hidden terror. He was dying.

(Continued next week.)

1895

A Custom
that started
22 years ago
and today is
growing faster
than ever—

POSTUM

instead of tea or coffee

"There's a Reason"

