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FIREBAUGH'S FERRY

by John Putnam

It wasn't much of a town. The one ramshackle wooden building looked so poorly made that someone must've piled the barrels of beans, barley and wheat along the sides just to keep the place from blowing down in a good-sized wind. Next door a large round tent with 'saloon' scrawled in crude red letters over its open flap beckoned, and the rest of the posse ducked inside, their prisoner in tow. But I headed across the road to where wood smoke from a low chimney attached to a sod-roofed adobe carried the welcome smell of roasting meat.

I tied the mare to a rail, hopped down and pulled paper and pencil from my bags, then dodged a large trunk by the wall as I stepped inside. Indoors was refreshingly cool. Somehow this part of the world hadn't gotten the word that the seasons had changed and October shouldn't be as hot as July. There were four tables, two on each side of the door. A woman and boy were sitting to my left. I walked to the far right corner and pulled up a chair where I could see the flap of the saloon through the open window.

A small Mexican woman hurried up from the back wearing a grease-spattered gingham apron over a worn cotton dress, her hair tied in a red bandana, unease nestled in the corners of her dark eyes. "Buenos tardes, señor," she said in a trembling voice.

"Buenos tardes to you, señora," I replied, using almost all the Spanish I knew. I pointed to the fire in the back and rubbed my stomach.

"Hungry," I said.

"Oh, si, si," she gasped, seemingly relieved that I wanted food. "Carne asada con frijoles," she added.

I nodded eagerly. "Si," I answered. "Gracias. It smells good." I smiled honestly, happy at the prospect of a good meal for a change.

"Un momento, señor," she replied and hurried away.

I tossed my paper on the table and began to write. There was much to say. This was the end of the biggest story of my career with the Alta California and, in the twisted way we newshounds looked at things, was all because of my good luck. I'd been sent to the gold country to dig up colorful articles for the San Francisco readers, a kind of breaking in project for a new man fresh from the east. But no one expected me to fall right into the middle of the biggest manhunt this state had ever seen.

Tom Bell and his gang of hooligans had run roughshod over the territory around the Feather and Yuba Rivers for over a year, first robbing lone travelers along trails, then targeting the express companies that hauled in mail and supplies by mule to mining sites deep in ravines and canyons where no road existed and no wagon could go, then carried large amounts of gold back out. Poses had been sent from every town in the area—Downieville, Nevada City, Oroville—without finding a trace of Bell or his cohorts.

I'd had several dispatches that I wanted to get on the steamer to San Francisco as soon as possible so I had taken the Langston Company stagecoach south to Marysville. Later I learned it was at the California House stage stop in Camptonville when Tom Bell's spy had relayed information that the stage carried \$100,000 in gold. Six of them hit us about half past four that afternoon, but the driver whipped the team right past Bell and two of his men who'd tried to block the road. The guard started shooting, the gang fired back, and several of the men in the coach joined in. We made as much speed as possible to escape the

robbers, but two passengers and the guard were wounded, and a woman was shot in the head and killed outright. It was the first murder attributed to the Bell gang.

"Aquí, señor, carne asada, frijoles y tortillas." I near jumped out of my skin. I'd been wrapped so deep in my story that I hadn't noticed her coming with my meal.

"Gracias," I said as she put the plate in front of me, smiled awkwardly and backed away toward the rear of the café.

I dug into the food, rolling beef and beans together inside a warm corn tortilla, then ate it without a fork. My poor mother, bless her heart, would've had a conniption. I cleared the plate quickly, astonished at how hungry just riding a horse made me. But it had been a long ride, a month and a half, all the way from Marysville past Sacramento then many more miles south of Stockton to this God forsaken rat hole that scrounged its paltry existence from the few travelers who came here because a man name Firebaugh had started a ferry service across the San Joaquin River.

And it was the river that granted the only tinge of color to this whole drab world, with its clear blue water flanked by the green of sycamores and an occasional cottonwood. Everywhere else, as far as a man could see, there was nothing but dry, dead grass, brown dirt and dust. I shrugged; it was over now, I picked up my pencil again.

"Whatcha' doin', mister?" It was the boy from the other table. I smiled at him. "I'm writing a story for my newspaper," I explained.

"I can write," he bragged and grinned back at me.

"Tommy, leave the man be. Come back here and sit down." The woman, likely young Tommy's mother, spoke out from the far side of the room. The slow ease of her words suggested a southern breeding.

"He's fine Ma'am," I replied politely. "Seeing such a good looking, tow headed boy is a welcome change from the rough

companions I've spent my time with lately."

"See Ma, I'm fine," Tommy whined.

"Do as I say, young man, right now," she barked, a no non-sense tone to her voice.

"Oh, Ma! I never get to do nuttin'," Tommy carped, but he shuffled back to her.

When I first walked in she'd been sitting with her back to me. Now she'd spun to shepherd her son and I stared deep into a sight little seen since this grueling chase had begun, a refined and gentle lady. A nose a tad too long coupled with a strong chin gave her round face an honest look in spite of the sadness of her expression. Auburn tresses curled loose below a dark green bonnet edged with lace, while a calico dress the color of a sweet honeydew melon barely concealed her shapely figure.

Yet nowhere about her could I see evidence of the hardship a life in this harsh country would impart on a woman. Her face and hands were smooth and free of the creases hard work and constant sun soon bestowed on those who survived here. Two large suitcases against the wall by her table, coupled with the steamer trunk that had almost waylaid me near the door, implied she had just arrived from far away, but left me to question why anyone would travel from anywhere else to come here.

She'd busied herself getting the boy settled and thankfully hadn't noticed that I'd been staring at her, but then she looked up and found my eyes. "You rode in with those men in the saloon. Who are they?" she asked and I could hear the same tremor in her voice as I'd heard from the Mexican woman.

"They're deputies, ma'am. They've just caught the most wanted outlaw in California," I answered.

Her face fell, her lips taut. "I see," she said curtly, but her hands, once folded delicately in her lap, were now clutched together in anxiety.

Her tension aroused my instincts. The story I'd just thought at an end could well have acquired new life. "Is there something I

can do for you, ma'am," I asked tactfully.

She stared deep into my eyes as if she wanted to see the darkest depths of my soul, searching for a clue to assure her that I would not betray whatever confidence she might choose to disclose. Then she turned abruptly toward her son, her back to me.

Thank you, sir, but no, there is nothing you can do," she snapped. And I realized at once that there was indeed more to this story, and that she knew, whether by instinct or from her careful examination of my inner spirit, the total extent of my inclination to spread her story to the world.

Immediately I felt the warmth as blood rushed to my face. "I apologize, ma'am. I'm a reporter by training. It's my nature to snoop into the private lives of others, but, like young Tommy, my own mother instilled in me a respect for a lady's privacy. I give you my word, I'll divulge nothing you tell me without your express permission and I will give you whatever help I can."

She turned back toward me, a skeptical look in her eyes. But her tightly clasped hands conveyed her need for a friend, a confidant. "Maria," she called to the cook, "is there something Tommy can do outside, maybe in the back? He's getting restless."

"Oh, si, señora. The chickens, they need to eat," Maria said in suddenly reasonably good English.

"Tommy, you know how to feed chickens don't you?"

"You know I do, Ma," Tommy answered.

"Run on back to the kitchen then and let Maria show you what to do."

"Okay, Ma." The boy scurried toward the kitchen then stopped and turned back to his mother. "Aren't we gonna go find my Pa soon?" he asked, and his mother's face instantly blanched white. But she kept her composure. "I'll see," she said in that way mothers have of easing their children's hopes slowly without having to say no right away.

Maria waved. "Come, Tommy, the chickens, they are hungry,"

she urged and Tommy turned toward her, glanced quickly to his Ma, but then followed Maria outside.

I stood. "My name is Benjamin Eades, ma'am. I suspect that I've been in California only a short time longer than you, but if there is anything I can do, I'm at your service."

She sat sideways in her chair, hands again folded in her lap, head lowered. "That is kind of you, Mr. Eades," she began. "I'm Clara Hodges of Tennessee and you are right, I've only just arrived in this place." She spoke in her slow measured manner, all the while without looking in my direction, but then she turned and I felt a surprisingly hot glare from her eyes, much like heat from an open stove. "I was to meet my husband here," she continued. "He wrote and begged me to come as quickly as I could. He'd made a lot of money and bought a ranch. Now we could be together again, like he'd promised."

She looked down once more then dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief she'd held crushed in her palm. Yet she hadn't sounded tearful, or even sad. And to me it seemed as if a bitterness percolated deep beneath her words, not a rage that would boil over like an unwatched pot, but instead more the smoldering indignation of a stew set atop a small flame to simmer slow and long.

I held my tongue, sure she had more to say, unwilling to interrupt the flow of her thoughts, for even now she considered what could best be said and what must remain within her. She'd called herself Clara Hodges, but the man we'd captured, Tom Bell, was her husband. Each mannerism she'd used, every expression she'd made, confirmed it.

She had no trust in me, nor should she, but still she had an immense need for a friend. A change of plans so unimaginable, so shocking, so disastrous had hit her in little more than an instant with all the force of a locomotive at full steam. Isolated here at the end of the earth, a continent away from family and friends, she'd just seen the man she married, the father of her

child, drug into a tent saloon by a ragtag posse of vagabond deputies, and then heard him labeled as the most wanted outlaw in California by an equally scruffy stranger. Many women would have broken down under such a burden.

She dropped her hands back to her lap. "What did he do?" she asked quietly.

"A woman was killed—"

"No, I don't want to know," she interjected, her tone as sharp as a barber's blade. Then she frowned. "I'm sorry," she offered, softer now. "Did he kill her?"

"No one knows. Everybody was shooting. It could have been any of the gang. Still, he was the brains. He did the planning. He's responsible."

She stood and turned to the open window. "What will happen to him?" she asked.

"They're going to hang him, ma'am, just as soon as the Stockton stage comes through."

"Oh Lord!" she gasped and her hands flew to her face. "Won't he get a trial?"

"No ma'am. I'm sorry."

"But, that's not—"

"I know, it's not the way things are done back east, but it's how they're done here. He's admitted his crimes, and now he's making his peace with God."

"Oh, poor Tom," she dabbed at her eyes again. "But I'm not surprised. There was always something about him, something different, odd. He's so smart, but so hard to please. Everything always had to be his way. If someone crossed him he would lash out against them, sometimes violently, and yet, at the same time, he had a wonderful generosity. If he liked you he'd give you anything he could. He's a doctor you know, a surgeon and very skilled, but he never was able to dedicate the time necessary for such a demanding profession. He always wanted the easy way." I shuffled my feet, uncomfortable discussing her soon to be dead

husband, but felt I must say something positive about him. "I've heard how he once robbed a rider deep in a canyon, far from anywhere. He took the man's gold and his horse but left him enough food to stay alive until he could reach a town. Another time he shot a miner in the leg as he stole his gold then took the time to tend the wound before fleeing."

"That sounds like Tom," she said and turned to face me. "The place he bought is near here. Maria's husband, Juan, offered to take me there after the Stockton stage arrives, but that was before . . ." Her voice broke and for the first time I sensed her grief.

"We found him on a ranch a few miles up the river." I said. "It didn't look like much, a small adobe house, a barn and a few head of cattle scattered across this empty grassland. Surely you don't plan to go there now,"

"Where did you live before you came to California, Mr. Eades?" she asked.

"Baltimore, ma'am."

"You were raised in a city then?" she continued.

"Well, yes."

"This country may look like empty grassland to you, but to a cow or a horse it's heaven on earth. And to me, it's the only place I have to live. There is no choice."

"Ma'am, you can't run a ranch by yourself, not here. How will you survive?"

"What would you have me do, go to San Francisco and work in a gambling house, or worse?" Indignation dripped from her words and left me at a loss while she continued, "My father raised cattle and bred horses in Tennessee, Mr. Eades. I do have some knowledge of what is involved."

She wore a look of determination and I realized her mind was set. "At least allow me to accompany you there," I offered.

"Perhaps I can help get you settled in."

"I would be most grateful, Mr. Eades, but, please, call me

Clara,"

A sudden commotion rumbled in from the rear of the room and Tommy bounced through the back door. "I fed the chickens, Ma. It was fun," he yelled, excited and happy.

She turned to her son. "I'm glad, Tommy," she said with a sudden, unexpected smile then looked to me. "This trip has been so hard on him," she explained.

Maria had followed Tommy inside. "Juan, he is coming with the wagon, señora. The stage to Stockton will be here pronto," she said just as a two-wheeled farm cart pulled by a floppy eared nag rolled up to the front of the café and a short Mexican man in a wide brimmed straw hat jumped down, wrestled the steamer trunk into the back then climbed onto the seat and moved the cart away. The clatter of hooves grew from the south. The Stockton stage was coming at a dead run.

Mrs. Hodges spun toward me, panic in her eyes. "I can't have Tommy see this," she whispered and I knew she referred to what would follow the departure of the stage.

No mother would want her son to see his father hanged, and the stage would only stay long enough for a change of horses and a quick meal, a half hour, maybe less. Then Tom Bell, or Hodges, or whatever his name, would be hauled from the tent and strung up from a nearby tree. I'd seen it happen before. I'd heard their plans. I had no doubts.

"Maria, would Juan object if I borrowed his cart to take Mrs. Hodges to her ranch, I'll return it as soon as I can." I asked. Her dark eyes darted from me to Clara, whose hands were again clenched tightly together, knuckles white, worry etched deep in her face. Across the road three men from the posse lurched out of the saloon, drunk, loud and carrying a rope with a hangman's knot tied on one end. "Madre de Dios," Maria exclaimed. "No, señor, Juan would not mind, but I will tell him for you. You must go quickly, I think. Come."

Clara took Tommy's arm and Maria hustled both of them out

the door. I grabbed my report, the two suitcases and followed. The cart waited just past the end of the building. I threw the bags beside the trunk just as the stage pulled up in front of the adobe amid loud shouts from the driver and weary snorts from the horses. Tommy and his mother were already sitting on the crude cart bench. I climbed up beside her.

"Thank you so much, Maria," Clara said as I snapped the reins. "Vaya con Dios, señora," Maria replied and we rolled slowly toward the river then onto the ferry that waited there for the Stockton stage. As the ferryman pulled on the ropes that inched us across, I looked back to see Juan replacing the stage team with four fresh mustangs while Maria ushered the passengers inside the adobe for their meal.

The flat-nosed boat banged into the far pier and off we rode. Soon the small settlement was hidden behind the trees that flanked the stream. I felt a hand on my leg and knew at once it was Clara. I looked over into eyes as brown as the grass around us.

"Thank you, Ben," she said warmly and it came to me that she was right, this was a good place to raise cattle and horses, and maybe even kids if she was willing.

The End

– John Putnam

Born and raised in a small South Carolina town John went on to graduate from U.C. Berkeley with a degree in music, but found a laptop keyboard more his forte than a piano. He still lives and works in Berkeley and while researching for his blog, MyGoldRushTales.com, he uncovered his love for the excitement and adventure of the California gold rush.

His first four short stories won story of the month in Frontier Tales. John's first novel, *Hangtown Creek*, sets the scene for his second gold country story in which a pretty girl sweeps young Tom Marsh off his feet and when Tom decides to look for her missing pa he quickly finds himself eyeball to eyeball with the deadliest fiend in the gold country. *Into the Face of the Devil*, was published in 2013 by Pen-L Publishing.

