

# **THE BEST OF FRONTIER TALES**

**Volume 3**



**Featuring Tales by John Putnam – Edward Massey  
Jeff Richards – Kenneth Newton – Laura K. Johnson  
Mark Hinton – Gary Ives – Myles Culbertson  
Alex Artukovich – P. Garrett Weiler  
Steve Smith – Samuel Engelman  
Edited by Duke Pennell**

# **The Best of Frontier Tales**

**Volume 3**

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*Dedicated to those who love the creak of  
saddle leather, a dance hall piano, and  
the smell of horse sweat and gun smoke.  
Saddle up for some fun times!*

# **The Best of Frontier Tales**

**Volume 3**

**Winning short stories from  
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# **Stoddard's Gold**

**By John Putnam**

An old, all-too-familiar voice haranguing a small knot of drunken miners outside a riverside grog shop caught my ear as I hurried back to my home. I'd long thought him dead, and he looked near to it, beard wild and gray, eyes sunk deep inside a face with cheeks as bilious as any corpse. Busy men rushed past him without a glance but I stopped, just as I had three years ago. Today, here at the junction of the Yuba and Feather Rivers, Marysville had boomed as a supply center for the gold mines upstream, and I'd become an important part of that growth, all because of Stoddard.

After mining along the American River near Greenwood Creek that first winter, and doing quite well until our claim finally played out, Anderson and I had opted to move north in hopes of finding an even more productive spot. We'd heard rumors of big strikes near the Yuba River; so in late May we'd arrived in Nevada City, just another gold boom mushroom town called Deer Creek Diggings in those days. I'd left Caldwell's Store heading for the Bella Union where a French lady was supposedly dealing twenty-one when I first saw him. He stood out front, a smattering of drunken miners around him much like today, except back then Stoddard had fire in his eyes, grit in his voice, and one of the biggest nuggets I'd ever seen in his hand.

"Myname's Stoddard and this is what I found. Look at it," he cried, shaking the gold high overhead. "It's big and coarse, not smooth and small like the gold you mine downstream. Most men think that means it comes from closer to the source, closer to the mother lode. There's a lake full of nuggets just like this one high up in the mountains and who knows what else is there, but I need help to get it out. Injuns jumped us just after we found these nuggets.

♦ John Putnam ♦

We were forced to run for our lives and I haven't seen my partner since. I think they might've killed him. I need twenty-five good men who can shoot straight and aren't afraid of a scrap. Who here is ready to go? Step up."

"I'll go." It was Anderson, my close companion for the past year. He took a step forward into the circle of men then noticed me. "Come on Micah," he pled. "This is just what we're looking for, our big chance to make enough to get a good start in life."

"But it sounds so risky," I replied, my mind stuck on Stoddard's dead partner.

"Yeah, but is it any more risky than the dangerous trip we made together last summer, all the way from St. Joseph across plains, mountains and deserts just to get here?" he pointed out with a bit of heat in his normally well tempered voice.

"We didn't have a shooting fight with Indians then," I replied with my own fire.

Stoddard stepped right into our little dust up. "It ain't for sure we'll have a set-to with Injuns. The ones I saw could've been a hunting party. They weren't likely to live near the lake so I reckon they're long gone from there, but it's always best to be safe."

Anderson grinned at me. "See Micah, it's not so scary now is it?" he said in that cocky way he had.

I shrugged, knowing Anderson had won me over again, but still unsure of the size of the mess I was about to walk into. "Okay, I'll go, but only because you talked me into it," I countered; remembering the many things Anderson had convinced me to do since we'd been together. He'd been right more often than not.

As the other men moseyed off—either they already had a good paying claim or were far wiser than I—Stoddard stuck his nugget back into a leather bag. "Come inside," he offered. "Let's have a drink and I'll give you the details. We leave in two days."

Inside the saloon I saw her at once, sitting near the back playing cards with eight or nine miners. She was lovely, and the first woman I'd seen in months. I barely listened to Stoddard as he recited chapter and verse the details of our trip. When he was done I found a seat at her table. I lost a hundred dollars that night. Folks might think that a lot but I never minded one bit. Here men often lost ten times that at the turn of a card.



And even though she barely spoke to me, just being around a woman was worth every cent.

The next two days were busy. On Saturday Anderson went with me to buy two stout mules with packsaddles from a man on Brushy Creek to add to the two we'd come here with. We spent the rest of the day getting four months worth of food and our mining gear ready to go. Then on Sunday, while Anderson helped Stoddard recruit more men for our daring adventure, I rode to Selby Flat where I'd heard of a man willing to sell a new Colt revolver at a reasonable price. The idea of a fracas with a party of wild Indians still had me inordinately disconcerted and the pistol was a big step up from my one shot rifle.

And in spite of a planned early start in the morning, I couldn't resist the urge to see Madame Reynard one last time before we left for Stoddard's mysterious lake. Like before she looked as winsome as anyone I'd ever seen, her face flush and full with lips red like a ripe cherry, and her hair, soft and buff as a young spring fawn, draped about her slender neck in tight coils. I sat across the table from her and quickly lost fifty dollars while beguiled by the sparkle of the lamplight reflected in her deep blue eyes.

Then she stood and, looking directly at me, said in her thickly accented English, "It is hot here. I need air," and calmly sauntered across the room with every man's gaze following her, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, unsure if there was some special meaning in her look.

It seemed impossible that a woman so pleasing could have any particular regard for me, but without her here I also had no interest in gambling and, with a long, hard day likely in store for me tomorrow, I knew it was best to return to camp. I gathered the remnants of my funds and walked outside into the night. Once there I looked around for the Madame but since I didn't see her anywhere I went on to my horse.

"You are going with Monsieur Stoddard tomorrow, oui?"

It was her. I spun to the sound of the voice just as she stepped from the shadows, a look on her face that I could interpret in no other way than concern, but concern for what, for who? "Yes, how did you know?" I replied, honestly at a loss.

"One hears things in the Bella Union, mon ami. But you must be careful. There is a man, Monsieur Raush, who has pledged to follow you and take your gold for himself."

♦ John Putnam ♦

"Raush," I exclaimed. "I've never heard of him."

She stepped closer and I felt her hand on my arm. "He is a very big man and a very bad man, très mal. He has many others with him. He will kill you all if he must," she whispered, her mouth close to my face.

Once again my poor mind couldn't grasp the right words, but without a warning she threw her arms around my neck and kissed me quickly full on the mouth. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she breathed as she pulled away. "Find your gold then look for me when you return, s'il vous plaît." With that she disappeared into the darkness, leaving me still bewildered and unable to believe what had just happened.

Riding back to our camp along Deer Creek on that warm, moonlit night, my blood turned chill more than once at an unexplained sound from the woods, or a shadow that loomed threateningly over the trail. Madame Reynard had left me perplexed and ill at ease in no small way with her tale of Raush and his threats to kill us all for the gold that Stoddard would lead us to. But even more unsettling was why she'd done it, and the taste of her lips that lingered still on mine.

Her soft voice flowed again through my clouded mind. "Be careful, Micah Poole," she'd said, but I'd hardly spoken twenty words to her. How did she know my name? Few people here did. And then I'd let her run away without even asking her full name in return. Whatever caused such a lapse in my well-learned manners was beyond my reasoning at the moment.

"Look for me when you return," she'd said next. No matter which way I turned the words over in my head it all came out the same. She cared about me somehow. Why I couldn't fathom but the kiss seemed the proof of the pudding. Women don't do things like that for no reason, or are such things different in France? I had no idea. The only girl I'd ever kissed was Betsy Pike and that only one short buss before I left for California.

Then there were the Indians who'd probably killed Stoddard's partner. Maybe it was a hunting party that they'd happened to stumble across, but that was no guarantee that we wouldn't run afoul of another group along our way. Nearly every week on the trail to California there came a rumor of Indians killing white men, but I had personally seen no sign of any serious trouble. Still, deadly incidents happened, and all too often.

I knew little of Indians, and that mostly from the wild tales told on the trip west. We'd seen Pawnee riding in the distance as we crossed the

prairie to Fort Kearney. Soon after fording the South Platte a whole party of Sioux, men, women and children, passed right in front of us. And near Fort Bridger Shoshone came into our camp wanting to trade. They were a pathetic, lice infested lot but seemed harmless enough.

I tied Buddy, my young chestnut, to a long tether in the grassy meadow behind our camp, then pulled out the new Colt revolver from my saddlebags and stuck it into my waistband. I was a fair shot with a rifle, but had had little use for a handgun on my family's farm in Kentucky. Yet knowing I had a new repeating pistol so close at hand gave me some small comfort against the host of demons so recently rising around me.

The fire burned low in our camp and I was disappointed to find Anderson tucked into his bedroll. I'd thought of nothing better than to talk with him about the events of tonight. Ten years my senior and married to a woman in Pennsylvania that he adored and spoke of constantly, I hoped he would have some soothing words for my troubled spirit. But not wishing to disturb my only true friend in California, I pulled off my boots, and crawled under my blanket as quietly as I could, making sure the Colt would be easy for me to get to, just in case.

Then Anderson rose on his elbow. "You've been at the Bella Union with Michelle Reynard again, haven't you?" he asked with a chuckle to his voice.

"Yes, I—"

"How much did you lose this time?" he demanded, still with a smile to his tone.

"Not so much," I mumbled, "but how do you know her first name?" I inquired with a lot more mettle, knowing Anderson to be dead set against gambling. He hoarded every ounce of gold he found and sent most of his money home to his wife.

"She asked about you today, while you were at Selby Flat. I think she's sweet on you, Micah."

I could tell from his manner he was teasing me about her now, and enjoying himself a great deal at my expense, but I needed some answers. "She warned me about a man named Raush who plans to follow us and take the gold we find at Stoddard's lake. Out of the blue she kissed me and afterwards told me to look for her when I get back. Then she ran off into the shadows." I said, all the while wondering if I would ever make it back here from wherever it was we were going.

◆ John Putnam ◆

"She kissed you, did she? I was right. She has set her cap for you, you Romeo," he laughed openly, enjoying his joke.

"I'm no Romeo!" I retorted, only knowing the meaning of the word because he'd used it to tease me about Betsy Pike when I'd told him about her one night along the trail. "But what about Raush," I asked. "He could be more dangerous than the Indians."

Anderson turned serious. "He could be. I saw him today too. He made quite a rhubarb when Stoddard told him we had as many men as we needed, threatened to follow us, and, yeah, even kill us if he didn't get his way. But he was drinking heavy. The truth is we'll likely slip out tomorrow before he sobers up. I'd worry more about the Indians than Raush."

"Well, if you say so," I muttered, unconvinced.

"You bet I say so. And when we get back here this fall, pack mules loaded with nuggets like the ones Stoddard has in his poke, you find that French gal and marry her. She's a catch. Her husband got killed a while back by a road agent who stole his gold. It left that lady in a whale of a pickle but she's done right well for herself it seems."

In spite of his teasing, Anderson's reaction to Madame Reynard and his suggestion that I marry her after we return from our trip did ease my mind a good deal, although the idea of wedding a woman I'd just met seemed too farfetched for my taste. Yet I knew that if I lived long enough I had to see her again, no matter what I had to do to find her. But it was the living long enough part that sat hard in my gut, twisting my insides into tight knots. The dual threat of unknown Indians and the all too real Raush wore deep across the grain of my better judgment.

"I still think this trip is risky, Anderson. First it was just Indians. Now there's Raush. Maybe we'd be best to stay here. Men are finding gold everywhere. Just tonight I heard more than a little talk about big finds on Rock Creek. Let Stoddard have his lake full of nuggets. Let Raush go with him," I implored.

"Micah, if you want to stay here and woo the French lady then you go right ahead. Lord knows you're at that age when a woman tends to settle heavy on a man's mind, and I'll grant there's a wagon load of danger in Stoddard's plan, but a man has to take some risks in life if he's going to make something special for himself. This is one of those things that could pay off beyond anything we've ever imagined. Now, you're as level headed

◆ *Stoddard's Gold* ◆

as any young man I've ever met, and you've grown as close to me as a brother, but you need to make your own decision about going."

As was his habit, Anderson had hit the core of my dilemma dead on, and moreover he'd trusted me to decide for myself, like he usually did. He was more a brother to me than my own flesh and blood who had never treated me with the respect Anderson does. I'm the youngest and Jacob is about Anderson's age. After our Pa died he'd run the farm with an iron fist, never once leaving me any say in what happened there, and because of his bullheadedness I'd left for California without his blessing. But I couldn't imagine parting with Anderson just yet, not after all we'd been through together.

"I feel the same about you, Anderson, and I can think of nothing I'd like less than our splitting up." I said without reservation. "But this venture with Stoddard has me as skittish as a raccoon that my old blue tick hound, Babe, ran up the elm tree beside our house, and it isn't just the Indians and Raush, it's Stoddard. I mean, what do we really know about him? Is he telling the truth? He could have gotten those nuggets anywhere."

"It's a good point, Micah. I believe his story about finding that gold in the lake," he said. "But in all truth, Raush has been rattling at my predictions more than I wanted to let on to you. I got a sense Stoddard knew him somehow, that there was bad blood between them. But when I asked Stoddard about it he denied knowing the guy. How about we meet up in the morning like we planned. If Raush is there causing trouble we'll back out of this trip. But if everything looks good, then we go. Sound fair to you?"

"Well, I guess I'm willing to go that far anyhow," I agreed, mostly because the idea of saying a final farewell to Anderson right now seemed a whole passel less appealing than the more distant and uncertain danger from Indians or Raush.

"Fine," Anderson declared. "Now let's get some rest. Lord knows we'll need it. Good night." And with that he rolled over and pulled his blanket tight.

"Good night," I echoed and curled up under my own bedroll, but sleep came slow. Yet when it did, in colors more vivid than any provided by nature, I watched an unfolding tableau as my mind dove deep into the many and various plots and ploys a band of angry Indians would use to protect their land. Then the brightness paled, just as colors do after sundown, and I probed the dark shadows of subterfuge and skullduggery

♦ John Putnam ♦

that Raush might ply to wrest our hard earned gold from us after we'd beaten back the savage attack of the red men.

All too soon I woke to the sounds of Anderson working over an early morning campfire, coffee brewing over the flame with leftover beans and bacon warming nearby.

"Morning," I said, then flipped back my blanket and sat up.

"Breakfast will be ready in few minutes," he said in the down to earth manner he started each day with.

I picked up my bedroll, and walked to the meadow where I saddled Buddy and loaded the mules. By the time I returned Anderson had a plate of food and a cup of coffee waiting for me. I ate quickly and soon we were riding up to Caldwell's Store. There I counted ten men waiting, none seemed like they might be Raush. But I looked over to Anderson and, understanding my trepidation well, he shook his head no. It was a good sign. Maybe all my fretting had been for nothing.

Stoddard arrived before we'd had a chance to greet the others in the party and with a hard look around he asked, "Any more men coming?" When no one spoke up he added, "Let's go then," and without further ado struck out toward the Yuba River.

Anderson and I waited for everyone else to leave town just in case Raush would show up late, but when he didn't Anderson turned to me. "Do we go?" he asked.

I shrugged, still ill at ease about it all. "I guess so," I said. We had made our deal last night, if Raush wasn't around causing trouble we would go, and I wasn't about to break my word to a friend. "I thought there would be more men here though," I went on.

"It just means more gold for us," Anderson asserted and then led our four mules northward. I followed, head swiveling constantly to the rear, right hand on the handle of my new Colt revolver, nerves ragged. Raush could show up at any time.

Just north of Selby Flat we came to Rock Creek, and though no one was mining where we crossed men were hard at work both upstream and down and the place had all the signs of productive gold country. Again I had to wonder why we were chasing Stoddard's dream of a golden lake when we could find all a man would ever need right here. And yet I'd worked in the gold fields long enough to know how fickle a miners fate can be. One claim

along a stream like this can hold pockets worth thousands of dollars while just a few feet away another plot can be close to worthless. Still, the men who worked hard and kept at it almost always made money while those who lazed the day away then gambled late into the night most often didn't.

We came to the South Yuba a little after midday and nooned across the river from a large group mining along Illinois Bar. The break gave me a chance to get acquainted with the men that would be my companions for the near future. There were three eager, friendly brothers fresh down the Siskiyou Trail from Oregon named Carl, Thomas, and the youngest, Zeke, who was about my age. And so too was Lem, who'd mined Deer Creek last winter with his father, Jedidiah, and done pretty well, according to Lem.

Four southerners, Ike, Jake, Luke and Harry, were all business. They called themselves the Natchez Mining Company, and had traveled by steamship to Panama then crossed the jungle before taking another steamer to San Francisco. They'd gotten to the mines early last summer and then worked the rich placers around Hangtown for almost a year. None of these men had gotten wind of Raush's threats and I wondered if there were a dozen more miners somewhere who had heard them and then decided not to show up.

But the most peculiar guy in this whole impromptu expedition looked more like the mountain men around Fort Bridger than any miner in California. He gave his name simply as Bird and carried a rifle with a bore as big any I'd ever seen. He called it a bear gun and that's about all the tight lipped Bird bothered to disclose before he walked off to the riverbank alone.

Stoddard roused us from our rest much sooner and with a sense of urgency far more pressing than I thought necessary. His face taut, eyes darting repeatedly to our back trail, he badgered men to mount up and cross the river with wild waves of his arms and language strong enough to bring a blush to the cheeks of a lumberjack. But if others in the group felt as I did they hid it well. The Oregon brothers and Lem splashed into the water laughing and joking as if this was a simple summer outing. Bird had already crossed and I caught sight of him through the trees as he climbed the ridge.

I took the mules from Anderson. He'd put up with them all morning and deserved a break. We crossed the South Yuba together then Anderson dropped back behind our mule string much like I had this morning. Wary

♦ John Putnam ♦

that Raush would soon show up, I'd kept a close eye to our rear all along the way, and now I noticed Anderson spent as much time looking over his shoulder as I did. He worried about Raush too.

Soon we were enveloped in a deep forest of sugar pine with trunks as large as twenty-five feet around. I thought of the sawmill not many miles from my home in Kentucky and how just a few of these monstrous trees could keep it in timber for a year. In this one stand of pines alone there must be enough wood to build a thousand towns each a thousand times as big as Nevada City. The wealth of California lay not only in its gold, it seemed.

One of the new mules we'd picked up Saturday caused me no end of bother and I'd fallen behind the rest of the group. But I had no trouble following their track; eleven horses and twenty-one mules leave a clear trail along the forest floor. Near sundown I came to a small creek running southwest down from the ridge. I stopped to let the animals drink their fill of the cool, clean water. Anderson rode up from behind me.

"Any sign of Raush," I asked as he jumped to the ground and led his pinto to the creek.

"I saw no indication of Raush or anybody else following us," he said and then pointed upstream. "But he sure looks interested in something down our back trail."

I turned to look and there, atop a large rocky prominence above us, sat Bird on his mustang, peering into the valley we'd left just hours earlier.

"Yeah, he seems real engrossed in something," I agreed. "He's a strange one. He's the only man here who only brought one mule, and I'd bet everything we found last winter that he's never washed out a single pan of gold in his whole life."

"If you'd been more interested in what Stoddard said and less in what Madame Reynard looked like that night in the Bella Union you might remember how we were told that Bird was a trapper who worked around here for years and he's supposed to help Stoddard find this lake we're going to," Anderson said in the condescending tone he always used when I'd not been paying attention to business like he thought I should. And he was right.

"Do you think he's looking back at Raush?" I wondered.

"Why don't you ride up and ask him. I'll take care of the mules. They don't seem to cause me as much trouble as they do you anyhow," he said.



"But you had them all morning," I protested, always one to pull my fair share.

"Go on now. We'll both rest easier if you know what's happening down in the valley."

I grinned. "Thanks Anderson," I said sincerely, then hopped on Buddy and sped up the hill. Near the top of the outcrop Bird's mule stood at the forest's edge contentedly chomping at the lush saw grass that grew there. I saw no sign of a pick or shovel handle sticking out anywhere from the pack, it seemed like Bird didn't have any plans to mine.

He sat there on top of his horse as still as the statue in front of our county court house back home. He didn't move a muscle, not even a twitch, as Buddy's iron shoes clattered across the rock to his rear. And when I stopped beside him he didn't turn to me, but instead calmly raised his big bore bear gun to point down the hill to where a thin blue ribbon of the South Yuba slashed across the dark green tops of sugar pine. "That what you come up here to see?" he asked.

Far below, in the middle of the stream, I saw a man on horseback, looking no bigger than an ant, headed this way. And as he passed from view behind the treetops another man, this one leading a mule, rode into the river, and then another, and after him still more until I had counted fifteen men and maybe twice as many mules, and I knew others had crossed before I got here. If it was a mining party it was awfully big and very well supplied. "Is it Raush?" I asked.

"Like as not," Bird said with a voice as smooth as a traveling tent preacher, and completely lacking the faintest tinge of fear.

"How many did you see," I asked as my hand instinctively caressed my Colt.

"Four dozen, maybe more," he said then turned to me. "You scared, boy?"

I looked deep into his cold gray eyes and knew he could read me like a book. "I guess I'm a little on edge," I muttered. It was all I could force myself to admit to.

"If that's Raush you'd damn well better be more than a little on edge. The man's more dangerous than a mad dog," he asserted, still without a hint of fear about him. Then, as he calmly turned and rode away, I broke out in an icy, bone shivering sweat.