

However, political events were hastening forward.

And although Sutter was now a man to be reckoned with, to be listened to with respect, he was by no means sheltered from contingencies. Quite the contrary. Revolutions occurred one after the other. The struggle between opposing factions was fiercer than ever. Everyone wanted Sutter on their side, as much for his moral ascendancy as for his social position. Ultimately, each camp was counting on the contribution of the little army of New Helvetia. But Sutter never allowed himself to be drawn into these civil wars, and although, more than once, he saw his estates on the point of being invaded, his crops burned, his flocks scattered, his stores and granaries looted by yelling hordes who had just laid waste everything for hundreds of miles around, and who were excited by the sight of so much well-ordered wealth, he also knew how to extricate himself from these predicaments thanks to his profound knowledge of the human heart, acquired during his years of poverty in New York, and it was this which, in moments of crisis, sharpened his wits, his insight and his powers of argument. At such times, he was of a rare perspicacity, never put a foot wrong, schemed and manoeuvred, promised everything that was asked of him, audaciously bribed the leaders at precisely the right moment, sweetened men with brilliant arguments and with alcohol. As a last resort, he was prepared to have recourse to arms, but it was not so much a military victory that he desired (although force was on his side), as the safeguarding of his work, his labours, for he had no wish to see everything that he had just built up

destroyed. And, in spite of everything, he was often on the brink of losing it all in a single day.

He kept in constant touch with the United States, and it was precisely from that direction, from the government in Washington, that he had most to fear.

As early as 1841, Captain Graham, at the head of forty-six English and American adventurers, had hoped, by a bold stroke, to seize power and proclaim the independence of California. But Alvarado had got wind of the affair; he surprised the conspirators, massacred more than half of them and threw the rest into prison. Immediately, London and Washington seized on the incident to claim compensation for the murder of their subjects. London demanded 20,000 dollars and the United States 129,200 dollars for fifteen riflemen. A British corvette lay in wait off Vera Cruz. The Mexicans were forced to submit.

In the spring of 1842, the revolt led by the Dominican monk, Gabriel, was put down in a blood-bath.

In October 1843, a band of more than a hundred Americans arrived from Santa Fe and Governor Alvarado, unpopular because of his despotic rule and in fear of new disturbances, asked Mexico for aid. Santa Anna, the President and dictator, sent three hundred galley-slaves by sea. He had promised them land, tools, cattle and the restoration of their civil rights if they could succeed in kicking out the Americans. At the same time, he appointed a new Governor of California, General Manuel Micheltorena. This general was an honest man, full of good intentions, but he could do nothing to uphold the Mexican domination, which was rapidly disintegrating. He chose to set up his quarters in the old Mission buildings of Santa Clara, Los Angeles. He frequently visited New Helvetia to take counsel, but

Sutter, for his part, was preoccupied with the unyielding attacks of the savages, which were causing terrible slaughter.

Five more years pass, years of struggles, uprisings, riots and revolutions fomented primarily by the Cabinet in Washington, then comes the war with Mexico and the cession of Texas and California to the United States.

Sutter has obtained a further grant of twenty-two square leagues of land from the last Mexican Governor.

He owns the largest domain in the States.

---

## SEVENTH CHAPTER

---

27

Reverie. Calm. Repose.

It is Peace.

No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No: it is GOLD!

It is gold.

The gold rush.

The world is infected with gold fever.

The great gold rush of 1848, 1849, 1850 and 1851. It  
will last for fifteen years.

**SAN FRANCISCO!**

57

---

## EIGHTH CHAPTER

---

28

And all this is triggered off by the simple blow of a pickaxe.

These stampeding mobs of people. First, they come from New York and all the ports on the Atlantic coast, and then, immediately afterwards, from the hinterland and the Middle West. It is a veritable flood. Men pack themselves into the holds of steamers going to Chagres. Then they cross the isthmus, on foot, wading through the swamps. Ninety per cent of them die of yellow fever. The survivors who reach the Pacific coast charter sailing-ships.

San Francisco! San Francisco!

The Golden Gate.

Goat Island.

The wooden wharves, the muddy streets of the nascent town, which are paved with sacks full of flour.

Sugar costs five dollars, coffee ten, an egg twenty, an onion two hundred, a glass of water a thousand. Shots ring out and the 45 revolver does duty for a sheriff. And behind this first human wave come more, and still more, hurling themselves in a great tide, and coming now from much further away - from the shores of Europe, Asia, Africa, from North and South.

In 1856, more than six hundred ships enter the Bay; they disgorge an endless stream of people who instantly throw themselves into the search for gold.

San Francisco! San Francisco!

58

And another magic name: SUTTER.

The name of the workman who struck that famous blow with the pickaxe is not widely known.

It was James W. Marshall, a carpenter by trade and a native of New Jersey.

29

John Augustus Sutter, not merely the first American millionaire, but the first multimillionaire in the United States, is ruined by that blow of the pickaxe.

He is forty-five years old.

And after having ventured all, risked all, dared all and created for himself a way of life, he is ruined by the discovery of gold-mines on his lands.

The richest mines in the world.

The fattest nuggets.

The end of the rainbow.

30

But let us hear from John Augustus Sutter himself.

The following chapter is copied from a thick book whose parchment covers bear traces of fire. The ink has faded, the paper has yellowed, the spelling is shaky, the handwriting full of flourishes and curlicues; it is difficult to decipher, the language is full of idioms, phrases of Basle dialect and Amerenglish. While the hand that wrote it is touchingly awkward and full of hesitations, the narrative itself is told directly, simply,

59

even stupidly. The writer has not one word of complaint, he confines himself to narrating the events, enumerating the facts just as they happened. He does not exaggerate in the slightest degree.

I humbly translate:

31

'Towards the middle of January 1848, Mr Marshall, the carpenter from New Jersey who is building my mills, was working on the new sawmill at Coloma, high up in the mountains, fifty miles distant from the fort. Once the framework had been erected, I sent Mr Wimmer and his family up there, together with a number of workmen; Mr Bennett, from Oregon, accompanied them to oversee the installation and setting-up of the machinery. Mrs Wimmer did the cooking for the whole party. I still required a sawmill as I was short of planks for my large steam-mill, which was also under construction, at Brighton. The boiler and machinery for this had just arrived after a journey of eighteen months. God be praised, I had never expected to see a successful outcome to this enterprise, and all the oxen survived, thank the Lord. I also needed planks for the construction of other buildings and especially for a stockade around the village of Yerba Buena, at the far end of the bay, for there are now many vessels in the harbour and the crews are wild and unruly, given to looting, so that much of the livestock and provisions disappear, one knows not how.

'It was on a rainy afternoon. I was sitting in my room at the fort writing a long letter to an old friend in

60

Lucerne. Suddenly Mr Marshall burst into the room. He was drenched to the skin. I was very surprised to see him back already, for I had just sent a wagon loaded with foodstuffs and scrap iron up to Coloma. He said he had something very important to tell me and that he wanted to communicate it to me in the utmost secrecy; he begged me to conduct him to some isolated place, far from any possibility of being overheard or surprised by some indiscreet person. We climbed to the top storey, as he kept insisting that we must shut ourselves away in a remote chamber, even though there was nobody else at the ranch except my bookkeeper, who was downstairs in his office. Marshall asked me for something, I believe it was a glass of water, and I went down to fetch it for him. When I came up again, I forgot to lock the door behind me. Marshall had just that moment taken a rag out of his pocket, and was in the process of showing me a lump of some yellowish metal that he had wrapped up in it, when my bookkeeper came into the room to ask me for some information. Marshall quickly hid the metal in his pocket. The bookkeeper apologized for disturbing us and left the room. "For God's sake, didn't I tell you to lock the door?" cried Marshall. He was beside himself and I had a hard time calming him down and convincing him that the bookkeeper had merely come in on business and not with the object of surprising us. This time, we bolted the door and even pushed a cupboard against it. And Marshall again took out the metal. He had several little grains of it, each weighing about four ounces. He told me he had said to the workmen that it might be gold, but they had all laughed at him and taken him for an idiot. I tested the metal in *aqua regia*, then I read the entire article on GOLD in the *Encyclopaedia Americana*. Thereupon, I announced to Marshall that

61

his metal was gold, virgin gold.

'The poor boy almost went crazy. He wanted to jump on his horse at once and rush back to Coloma. He begged me to accompany him, post-haste. I pointed out that it was already dusk and that it would be better to spend the night at the fort. I promised to go with him the following morning, but he would not listen to reason and set off hell-for-leather shouting: "Come tomorrow, come early!" The rain was falling in torrents and he hadn't even stopped for a bite to eat.

'Darkness came down abruptly. I went back into my room. I was certainly not indifferent to this discovery of gold in the stream, in the foundations of my sawmill, no, indeed, but, like all the ups and downs of fortune in my life, I took it with a certain amount of detachment; nevertheless, I could not sleep that night, I was picturing to myself all the dire consequences and fatal repercussions that this discovery might have for me, but never for one moment did I imagine it would bring my New Helvetia to ruin! Next morning, I gave detailed instructions to my various work-crews and left at 7 a.m., accompanied by several soldiers and a cowboy.

'We were half-way up the winding track that leads to Coloma when we came across a riderless horse. A little higher up, Marshall emerged from the undergrowth. He had been halted by the storm and hadn't been able to go any further during the night. He was perished with cold and half dead from hunger. However, his exaltation of the previous evening had not subsided.

'We went on up the track and arrived at this famous El Dorado. The weather had cleared up a little. That evening, we made a tour along the banks of the canal; the rain had swollen the waters and both sides were awash. I operated the sluices, the canal emptied instantly and we

went down into the bed to search for gold. We found plenty of small particles and several workmen even handed me small nuggets. I told them I would have a ring made from this gold as soon as it became possible to have this done in California and, in fact, I did have this ring made, much later, in the form of a signet-ring; in default of a family crest, I had my father's printer's mark engraved on it, a phoenix being consumed in the fire, and inside the ring was the following inscription:

THE FIRST GOLD DISCOVERED IN  
JANUARY 1848

Then three bishops' croziers, the Basle cross, and my name: SUTTER.

'The following day, I rode round the whole extent of Coloma, taking careful note of its situation and the lie of the land, with particular reference to the water-courses, then I called all my people together. I explained to them that it was necessary to keep this discovery a secret for a further five or six weeks, to give me time to complete the construction of my sawmill, on which I had already spent 24,000 dollars. When they had given me their word of honour, I returned to the ranch-house. I was unhappy and had no idea how to extricate myself from this ill-fated discovery of gold. I was certain that such a business could not be kept secret.

'And I was right. Barely two weeks later, I sent a white man up to Coloma with a load of tools and provisions; some young Indian boys escorted him. Mrs Wimmer told him the whole story and her children gave him some grains of gold. On returning to the fort, this man immediately went to the stores, which were situated outside my enclosure, and asked Smith for a bottle of brandy. He wanted to pay for it with the grains

of gold he had brought down from Coloma. Smith asked him if he took him for a dingo dog. The carter told Smith to come and ask me, if he didn't believe him. What could I do? I told Smith the whole story. His partner, Mr Brannan, sought me out at once and asked me a whole heap of questions, which I answered truthfully. He ran out without even bothering to shut the door. During the night, he and Smith loaded all their merchandise into wagons, stole some of my horses and left in haste for Coloma.

'After that, my workmen began running away.

'Soon, I was left alone at the fort with a few faithful engineers and eight sick men.

'My Mormon employees were more reluctant to leave me, but when gold fever infected them too, they threw their scruples to the wind.

'Now, beneath my windows, there was an unending procession. Every man who could walk came up from San Francisco and the other shanty-towns on the coast. Everyone closed up his hut, his cabin, his farm or his business and made his way to Fort Sutter, then up to Coloma. In Monterey and the other towns in the South, they believed at first that the whole thing was an invention on my part to attract new settlers. The procession on the road stopped for a few days, then it began again, worse than before, as these towns also joined the march. Whole townships were emptied; my poor estates were swamped.

'So began my miseries.

'My mills were at a standstill. The very millstones had been stolen from me. My tanneries were deserted. Large numbers of leather hides, in the process of preparation, were going mouldy in the cellars. Raw hides rotted away. My Indians and my Kanakas ran

away with their families. They all went prospecting for gold, which they exchanged for brandy. My shepherds abandoned their flocks, my planters the plantations, the workers their many trades. My corn was rotting on the stalk; there was no one to pick the fruit in my orchards; in the byres, my finest milch-cows were mooing themselves to death. Even my loyal body of soldiers had fled. What could I do? The men came to see me, they implored me to leave with them, to go up to Coloma and search for gold. God, but it was a cruel blow to me! I left with them. There was nothing else I could do.

'I loaded my goods and provisions on to wagons and, accompanied by a clerk, some hundred-odd Indians and fifty Kanakas, I went up to establish my gold-prospecting camp in the mountains, on the banks of the creek that today bears my name.

'To start with, all went very well. But soon, hordes of rough-neck profiteers swooped down on us. They set up distilleries and ingratiated themselves with my men. I struck camp and moved ever higher up the mountain, but no matter what I did, that fiendish brood of distillers followed us everywhere and I could not prevent my poor Indians and my poor, wild natives from the Islands from tasting this new delight. Soon, my men were incapable of carrying out the simplest task; they drank and gambled away their wages, or the gold they had found, and spent three-quarters of their lives dead drunk.

'From the summit of those mountains, I could see the immense expanse of land I had brought under cultivation, now given up to looting and fire-raising. Even up there, in my solitude, I could hear the sound of pistol shots and, coming from the West, the hubbub of crowds on the march. At the far end of the bay, I could see them

building an unknown town which grew larger before my eyes and, out in the roadsteads, the sea was full of vessels.

'I could stand it no longer.

'I went back down to the fort, having paid off all those who had run away and who did not wish to return with me. I cancelled all the contracts, and paid all the bills.

'I was ruined.

'I appointed an administrator of my estate, and, without even glancing at that rabble of parasites who had now installed themselves in my home, I left for the banks of the Feather River to see if my grapes were ripe. Only those Indians whom I had brought up myself accompanied me.

'If I had been able to follow my plans through to their conclusion, I should very soon have become the richest man in the world; as it was, the discovery of gold had ruined me.'

---

## NINTH CHAPTER

---

On the 17th of June, 1848, General Mason, the new American Governor, leaves Monterey to go and see for himself how much truth there is in the fantastic rumours that are circulating about the gold-mines discovered in the Sacramento basin. On the 20th, he is in San Francisco. The town, recently so crowded, is now completely empty and deserted; the entire male population has gone up to the diggings.

'On the 3rd of July,' says his report, 'we arrive at Fort Sutter. The mills are standing silent. Immense herds of beef cattle and horses have trampled down their enclosures and are grazing peacefully in fields of wheat and maize. The farmhouses are falling into ruins, a nauseating odour wafts from them. The fort itself is very busy. Ferries and barges embark and disembark mountains of merchandise of every kind. There are camps of covered wagons all around the outer perimeter. Whole convoys arrive and depart again. People are paying a hundred dollars a month rent for a tiny room, and five hundred dollars a month for a wretched, single-storey hovel. The blacksmith and the shoeing-smith, who are still in Sutter's service, earn up to fifty dollars a day. Over an area of more than five miles, the slopes of the hills are covered with a multitude of tents that dazzle the eye in the glaring sunlight. The whole district is swarming with people. Everyone is panning gold, some with the aid of little saucepans or tightly-woven Indian



baskets, others with the aid of the famous "cradles".'

*The Polynesian*, a newspaper issued in Honolulu, publishes a letter from which we quote the following extract:

'From San Francisco, our road led us through the valley of the Puebla as far as San José, a distance of some fifty miles. Never had I seen a more seductive country. The ground was dotted with flowers, a myriad of water-courses criss-crossed the prairies, the hills were covered with flocks of sheep. I had never seen such beautiful scenery. Then we passed the dilapidated buildings of the Santa Clara Mission, whose tiled roofs had caved in. We reached the banks of the San Joaquin, which we crossed by a ford; then we went up towards Fort Sutter, through country of astonishing fertility, which could support a huge population. But we did not encounter a single human being. All the farms were abandoned: the Americans, the Californians, the Indians, everybody was at the mining sector. After leaving Fort Sutter, we followed the steep banks of the American River and soon climbed the first foothills which rise up in terraces to the Sierra Nevada. At midday, we halted for lunch and a cup of coffee. While we were waiting for the water to boil, one of our company dipped his tin mug into a small creek that was running at our feet; it came up full to the brim with sand; he washed it and found four grains of gold at the bottom. By sunset, we had reached Captain Sutter's sawmill, where the first gold was discovered. We had just travelled twenty-five miles, through gold, silver, platinum and iron mines. The road was suitable for vehicles, even a town carriage could have negotiated it easily, and it ran through fairy-tale landscape, decked in flowers and traversed by thousands of little streams. I found a thousand white men there, busy panning gold. The average yield is about one ounce

per man per day, and each prospector makes about sixteen dollars. The deeper one digs, the higher the yield. At the moment, the record for the luckiest strike is held by a man who made himself two hundred dollars in a single day. The nuggets come in all sizes: the largest that has been extracted weighed sixteen ounces. All the mountains in this area contain gold and platinum. At a distance of five miles from this sawmill, they have just discovered the richest seam of silver ever known. These treasures are inexhaustible. . . .'

At news of these prodigious lodes, the Yankee spirit of enterprise came to the boil. In New York and Boston, ten thousand emigrants gathered, bound for California. In New York City alone, sixty-five societies were founded to exploit this new business. Sons of the wealthiest families invested in it and the capital amassed was counted in millions. In the space of a fortnight, one small hotel on Broadway saw five hundred men file through its rooms, and every one of them was on his way to the Far West. By October, twenty-one vessels had already left the great port of the East destined for the Pacific coast; forty-eight others were preparing to set sail; on the 11th December, the hundredth sailed out of the Hudson. 'The whole of New England is on the move and making its way towards the ports or preparing to travel overland across the continent; we have given up trying to count the ships and the caravans,' cries the *New York Herald* of that date.

And what a journey!

Those who chose the land route had months of hardship and privation to look forward to. Others had to round Cape Horn - leaving New York Harbour, they headed due south, through the Gulf of Mexico, crossed the Line and sailed down the coast of South America as far as Cape Horn, the cape of storms, then had to turn and sail as far to the north again, following the coast of Chile, recross the Line and make straight for San Francisco - a voyage of 17,000 nautical miles which took between 130 and 150 days to accomplish.

But the majority of the gold-seekers crossed the Isthmus of Panama. A veritable human torrent sailed down the Gulf Stream and tramped the beaches of Cuba and Haiti before hurling itself upon Chagres, a hot and pestilent hole wallowing in the swamps. If all went well, it was possible to struggle on, through villages full of degenerate Indians or leprous Negroes, and reach Panama in three days, in spite of shifting sands, mosquitoes and yellow fever. Then, in furious haste, the survivors embarked for 'Frisco.

This traffic was so heavy that one New York company began to build a railway. Tons of earth and gravel had to be poured into the swamps and thousands of workers left their bones there, but the line was completed. It is true that the sleepers sank beneath the weight of the convoys but the trains got through nevertheless and the journey to San Francisco was shortened by several weeks.

At the head of the line, a town sprang up; it was named Aspinwall after the director of the enterprise. Regular communications, by steamship, were established

with England, France, Italy, Germany, Spain and Holland. The little trains puffed their way to Panama, bearing cargoes of feverish Europeans who had come, dressed in red shirts, brown leather boots and corduroy trousers, to take their turn at tempting Dame Fortune.

San Francisco. California. Sutter!

Those three names echoed round the world, they were heard everywhere, even in the most secluded villages. They awoke men's appetites, their energies, their thirst for gold, their dreams and illusions, their spirit of adventure. And now, from every corner of the globe, solitary men were setting out, as well as sects, groups and corporations, all heading for the promised land, all converging on this EL DORADO where all one had to do was bend down and pick up gold, pearls and diamonds by the handful. On the quays of San Francisco South Americans, Kamchatkans, Siberian peasants and men from all the races of Asia, who had embarked in the ports of China, were arriving in a never-ending stream. Troops of Negroes, Russians, yellow men took their turn at occupying Fort Sutter, relieving the Germans, Swedes, Italians and French who had already gone up to the mines. People cohered into groups and multiplied with a rapidity unparalleled in history. In less than seven years, the inhabitants of the towns could be counted in hundreds of thousands and those of the whole region in millions. In ten years, San Francisco had become one of the largest capitals in the world. The little village of Yerba Buena had been swallowed up. Building land was fetching the same price as in London or New York.

Meanwhile, John Augustus Sutter was ruined.

Sutter's name is on the lips of everyone who travels up the Sacramento. Nevertheless, each man settles himself in the most propitious spot and there, where the soil offers up its treasures, plunges his hands in deep, grabbing all he can. Sutter's plantation, his farms, his entire domain, form a centre for the gold-panners. There are so many features inviting one to settle down there - the multitude of generous little water-courses, the judiciously-chosen site of the first farm, the extraordinary fertility of the soil, the tracks already laid out, the bridges and canals. One after another, villages spring into being. The fort crumbles into ruins. The very name of New Helvetia disappears. New names are given to the region and although Sutterville, Sutter's Creek and Sutter's County bear his name, Sutter himself does not see this as an act of homage but rather as a symbol of the ruination of his settlement and the calamity of his life.

John Augustus Sutter has retired into his Hermitage. He has rescued what he could of his herds and flocks. In spite of events, the first harvest brings him in 40,000 bushels. His vineyards and his orchards seem to be blessed. He could still exploit all this, for there is a shortage of foodstuffs in the area, due to the massive immigration, and more than once the locust-cloud of gold-seekers is threatened with famine.

But Sutter's heart is no longer in the work.

He lets everything go.

His most faithful employees, his closest confidantes have deserted him. No matter how well he pays them, they can earn more in the mines. There are no longer any hands to tend the fields. There is not a single shepherd left.

He could, once again, make a fortune - speculate, profiteer in the astronomic rise in the price of edible commodities - but, to what purpose? He sees his stocks of grain dwindling and, presently, the end of his provisions.

Other men will make fortunes.

He lets things go.

He does nothing.

Nothing.

Impassively, he watches the seizure and partition of his lands. A new land registry is established. New title-deeds are drawn up. The latest arrivals are accompanied by men of law.

Since the cession of Texas and California to the United States, the government in Washington has extended the federal laws to these two territories, but there is a dearth of magistrates and, at the time of the gold rush, no authority has any hold over these cosmopolitan multitudes lusting for gold. When the Governor of Monterey sends in troops to maintain order, the soldiers lay down their arms, drop bag and baggage and desert to the mines, and if a warship, sent

by the federal government to enforce respect for the law, disembarks an armed crew, they will vanish forever, drawn irresistibly to the mines. The commander cannot hold his sailors, not even with a wage of fifteen dollars a day.

The country is infested with thieves and bandits. The outlaws and the desperadoes lay down the only law - *their* law. It is the epic reign of the '45' and of summary justice. In the struggle for survival, might is right. Men are hanged with lassoes or shot down with revolvers. Vigilance committees are formed to protect the slowly-reviving civic life. Those who first took possession of the land can, as a last resort, go to Monterey to seek redress and have their property claims evaluated. The Governor addresses their just claims to the proper quarter and the government appoints a Commission of Inquiry. But Washington is too far away, the official commissions travel slowly, while the immigrants pour in in ever-increasing numbers, swamp the country, settle and multiply. By the time the gentlemen commissioners at last arrive on the spot, they can do nothing but report the overwhelming upheaval of men and affairs, total chaos where property is concerned, and if, by an unlucky chance, they take the time to study an individual case in detail, they are sure to be overtaken by events.

Ten large cities have sprung up. Fifteen hundred villages.

Nothing can be done.

Appeal to the Law.

The Law.

In September 1850, California officially enters the confederation of the United States. It is a State at last, a fully-fledged constitutional body, endowed with officials and magistrates.

And so begins a series of prodigious, costly and futile legal actions.

The Law.

The impotent Law.

The men of law whom John Augustus Sutter despises.

---

## TENTH CHAPTER

---

38

Basle, late December, 1849.

In Basle, they still know nothing about the discovery of gold.

Frau Sutter is staying at the famous 'Stork Hotel'. Her three tall sons and her young daughter are with her. A devoted friend, tutor to her children during the long absence and even longer silence of their father, accompanies her. Frau Anna Sutter, *née* Dübeld, is a tall, dark-haired woman who hides her excessive sweetness beneath an air of severity. Round her neck, in a gold locket, she carries a daguerrotype of John Augustus, taken at the time when the couple were engaged.

Anna Sutter has taken a long time to make up her mind. A letter addressed from New Helvetia and dated end of December 1847, summons her to California. Detailed instructions for the embarkation and voyage are attached, as well as an important letter-of-credit on the Passavant, Sarrazin and Co. Bank in Basle. The fact that Anna Sutter is undertaking this voyage today is thanks to her father, the old pastor of Grenzach, who has urged her to it in the name of Christian charity and for the honour of her children; it is also thanks to the devoted care of Martin Birmann, the tutor, who has handled all the travel arrangements and legal formalities, who has made the journey to the bank in Basle several times to obtain the necessary information, and has just brought back from there not only a large sum of money,

76

but sensational news. Today, Frau Sutter feels reassured, she knows that her husband, John Augustus Sutter, is a man of honourable reputation, accredited in the most important banks in Europe and that he is one of the largest colonists in America, the owner of an estate vaster than the entire canton of Basle, the founder of a country, the developer of a region, something like William Tell, for she cannot quite realize what New Helvetia is, and she has heard talk of war and battles; but what do her fears and her secret tremblings matter? She has been able to pay off all her husband's old debts and wipe out the infamous judgement of earlier times. Now, her duty calls her to a foreign land. She will obey that call.

The Chief Clerk of the Passavant, Sarrazin and Co. Bank has come to the hotel to bring her letters-of-credit on the banking houses of Dardel the Elder in Paris, and Pury, Pury and Son in Le Havre. He wishes Frau Sutter a pleasant journey on behalf of his directors and takes advantage of the occasion to speak to her about a cousin of his whom he would dearly like to see settled in America. The coachman is cracking his whip outside the front door. The proprietors of the 'Stork', Herr and Frau Freitag, are giving a farewell party in her honour and there is quite a gathering of worthy citizens, who are touched at the sight of this poor woman setting off on such a long journey. They overwhelm her with recommendations and good advice. Lost in a huge, high-backed armchair, Martin Birmann is weeping and sneezing into his handkerchief. On his knees, he holds a tapestry travelling-bag fastened with a heavy padlock. At last, the whole family is installed in the post-chaise and Martin Birmann bestows the precious bag on Frau Sutter, giving her a complete list, once again, of all it contains.

77

The coach jerks forward. There are cries of 'Hurrah!' The children laugh. The mother feels a great wrench at her heart. Martin Birmann takes a double pinch of snuff to hide his emotion.

*Bon voyage!*

*Bon voyage!*

39

The journey is swiftly accomplished. The post-chaise travels hell-for-leather. The family spends the night at Délémont. Next day, at Saint-Ursanne, they eat trout for lunch, and while the children go into ecstasies over the little town, which has preserved its medieval ramparts, Frau Sutter feels her heart contract at the thought that she is about to enter a Catholic country. That night they sleep in Porrentruy. Then, next day, into the land of the heathen, through the valleys of the Joye and the Allaine to Boncourt, Delle and Belfort, where they board the coach that comes from Mulhouse.

Now they gallop at full speed along the great highway of France, and via Lure, Vesoul, Vitrey and Langres, they reach Chaumont in time to catch the mail-coach to Paris. From Chaumont, they could certainly have taken the steam train which runs to Troyes, and from there reached Paris by the Iron Way, but, in one of the coaching inns, Frau Sutter has seen a leaflet containing drawings by a certain Daumier, drawings which delineate all the dangers to which this new mode of locomotion exposes its passengers. That is why, despite her instructions, she boards the public coach that arrives from Strasbourg; it is less dangerous, and besides, in this way

78

she will be able to remain a little longer amongst German-speaking people. The children, especially the boys, are disappointed.

In Paris, Dardel the Elder, her banker, warns her against too great a haste. It is in his home that she first hears of the discovery of gold. She is tempted to cry and run home to her father's house. Monsieur Dardel does not know exactly what is afoot, but he has heard that all the down-and-outs from Europe are going to California, and that they are fighting and murdering one another in the mines. He advises her to go no further than Le Havre and to obtain reliable information from his colleagues there before venturing to embark.

On the barge that sails down the Seine, there is a gang of men who look like cut-throats and gallows-birds; they form a little group apart from the other travellers. They are sitting on their luggage, talking quietly amongst themselves. Sometimes, furious arguments break out and one can hear, amidst shouts and imprecations, the words 'America, California, gold.'

Messieurs Pury, Pury and Son open their eyes very wide when they see Frau Sutter entering their office and learn from her own lips that she wishes to travel to New Helvetia.

'Why, yes, Madame, we know M. John Augustus Sutter extremely well, we are his commission agents and for many years have carried out substantial business deals on his behalf. Indeed, less than six months ago, we sent him a grand piano by sea. But things are changing, changing . . . we are not yet sure precisely what is happening; he is said to be the richest man in the world at the moment. It seems he has discovered gold, mountains of gold. We don't know exactly how much. Nevertheless, we feel it is our absolute duty to dissuade

79

you from embarking just now to join him. This is hardly the moment to go to California. During the last three months, Le Havre has been invaded by all kinds of adventurers bound for that country, men without law or religion, men who have committed the most heinous crimes in the town. This is not the moment to expose your sons, still less your young daughter, to such dangers. No, no one goes via New York any more, it takes far too long. We ourselves have chartered three steamers that go direct to Chagres, it's a much shorter route. Everyone is using this route now, there have been 712 departures already this month. But do reflect, Madame, just think of the risks you will run in such company! Be patient for a few months, we will seek instructions concerning you from M. John Augustus Sutter personally. You could . . .'

But, in the face of Frau Sutter's mulish obstinacy, Messieurs Pury, Pury and Son cease to insist. They do whatever is necessary for her. Anna Sutter and her children embark on one of their steamers, *La Ville de Brest*, a paddle-boat which used to ply the Jersey run but has now been chartered by the new maritime line in Chagres for the transportation of would-be gold prospectors.

The crossing takes forty-one days. There are eleven members of the crew and 129 passengers, many of whom help with the handling of the ship. Frau Sutter and her daughter are the only women aboard. The passengers come from every country, but are predominantly Frenchmen, Belgians, Italians and Spaniards. Five Swiss, nine Germans and one Luxembourger explain their enterprise to Frau Sutter in some detail. No, they have never heard of Sutter, but they have heard that California is a land full of gold, pearls and

diamonds. You just have to bend down and pick them up. So-and-so and what's-his-name have already made their way there, they are simply following in their footsteps, and others, many, many more of them, will be coming on behind them. Some of the early birds are already rich, it seems, worth millions. 'There is gold everywhere, Madame, they are simply shovelling it up . . .'

Aspinwall. Heat, humidity, humidity, heat. There are seventeen steamers in the roads, flying the flags of nine different nations. New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Portland, Charleston, New Orleans: the American hordes storm the little train from Panama. They shout, they yell, they jostle one another and while the engine is panting its way through the swamps, under a dense cloud of steam, passing the mud huts full of squint-eyed Indians and Negroes with suppurating limbs, a rude chant arises, keeping time with the rhythms of the train and bawled by a thousand male voices:

To 'Frisco!

To 'Frisco!

Sutter. Sutter. Sutter. Sutter.

Sutter. Sutter. Sutter. Sutter.

To 'Frisco!

Sszzzzz. K. Sszzzzz. K. Pug!

Welcome back again!

Anna Sutter clasps her daughter tightly in her arms. The boys lean out of the window to see the poisonous snakes in the swamps. A Dane and a German, coming down from New Brunswick, recount what they know of the great Captain Sutter. He is a king; he is an emperor.

He rides on a white horse. The saddle is made of gold, the bit is gold, the stirrups, the spurs and even the horseshoes are also of gold. In his house, it is a perpetual feast-day and they drink brandy all day long. Frau Sutter faints away, her heart has ceased to beat. By the time she arrives in Panama, one lock of her hair has turned white.

The sun is like a molten peach.

Panama to 'Frisco aboard a sailing-ship. The crew are frightful-looking Kanakas, they fill her with dread. They are hideously maltreated. The skipper, an Englishman, cuts off the thumb of one of them to tamp down the tobacco in his pipe. As they draw near to the land of gold, the passengers become so excited that quarrels flare up over nothing and knives are quickly drawn. Frau Sutter is seized by an ague, a trembling in her limbs that lasts all the way to 'Frisco.

In San Francisco, she learns that New Helvetia no longer exists and that Sutter has disappeared.

40

Women. There are women who work the gold-diggings, jolly, rough wenches who are no better than they should be and who toil and die of over-work just like the men. They slave, blaspheme, swear, smoke pipes, spit and chew coarse black tobacco while wielding the pick and shovel all day long, so that they can go boozing at night and lose their gold-dust at cards. One shouldn't admire them too much for they are even more vindictive and violent than the men; they are particularly touchy on affairs of honour and quite ready to defend

82

their virtue with bullets, like those two Frenchwomen, legendary figures in the history of California, of whom Monsieur Simonin speaks in his *Relation d'un voyage en Californie* published in the *Tour du Monde* of 1862:

'... having spoken at length about the men, let us now spare a few words for the women, although their numbers in California are still very small.

'I will mention one, amongst others, whom the miners have nicknamed Joan of Arc. She works at the diggings like a man and smokes a pipe.

'Another, who is working a very productive claim, answers to the name of Marie Trousers, and owes this sobriquet to the masculine garment which she prefers to wear. ...'

41

A blazing sun.

A small group is climbing up to Fort Sutter, led by an old Mexican. Three young men and a young girl on horseback are escorting a litter slung between two mules.

This journey has exhausted Anna Sutter. She cannot stop shivering. She is shaking with cold.

Her eyes are glazed.

'Yes, Madame, the Master is at his Hermitage, a property he has on the Feather River. It's a beautiful place. He's in his vineyards. You must take the route across country. I'll send a reliable guide with you, to lead you along the mountain tracks, so that you can avoid all these vagabonds and rascals who are amongst us now. My wife will act as your guide, she's an Indian

83



and knows the whole area. Please tell the Master that Wackelnager himself, the manager, has abandoned everything to go in search of gold, and that Ernest, the shoeing-smith who was working with me till recently, has left too. Tell him I'm keeping an eye on everything and that I'm salvaging whatever can be salvaged. There's still plenty of money to be made here, but, for God's sake, let him tell me what he wants done! I'm all alone. Tell the Master it wouldn't be a bad idea if he came here himself and had a look around.'

It is Jean Marchais speaking, a Frenchman and the blacksmith of the fort. He has remained faithfully at his post, still working for his good master.

42

It is a beautiful California evening.

All day long they have been travelling through the abandoned farmlands of the Hermitage. Since leaving Fort Sutter, they have not encountered a living soul. This splendid domain, invaded by weeds and forest vegetation, is more tragic than the scrub of the mountains.

Now they come upon the silent mansion.

The party halts.

The only answer to the guttural cries of Sawa, the Indian woman, is the lugubrious howling of a dog. Finally, two Indians come out of the house, signalling with their arms.

The procession advances as far as the courtyard and the litter is set down.

'Mamma, Mamma!'

84

'Look, Mamma, we've arrived! Papa will be here in a minute. Sawa says he's been told of our coming.'

Anna Sutter opens her eyes. She sees everything on a huge scale - the immense empty sky, an alien land, a riot of vegetation and this great house that is strange to her.

A man comes out of the house, an old man.

Anna Sutter tries to sit up. She cries out:

'Johann!'

Immediately afterwards, there is a rattle in her throat.

Confused notions fill the poor brain of this pathetic woman. Everything is spinning round. Brightness and shadow. A great roar, as of rushing water, fills her poor head. She hears cries, and her memory receives a jolt. She remembers so many things now, and, suddenly, she distinctly hears the gentle voice of Jean Marchais, the blacksmith, giving her messages for his master. Then, humbly, she repeats his words, and John Augustus Sutter, who is bending over the head of his wife's litter, hears her murmur:

'Master . . .'

85

---

## ELEVENTH CHAPTER

---

43

Father Gabriel, the protector of the Indians, has just spent several days at the Hermitage. This morning, he is leaving before dawn, for his mission calls him back to his savages. He is a stern man and his utterances are famous amongst the tribes; he lives with the Sioux, the Osages, the Comanches, the Blackfeet and the Snakes, who listen to him as to an oracle. He travels everywhere on foot. John Augustus Sutter accompanies him along the track into the Sierra, as far as Round-Stone.

At the moment of parting, Father Gabriel grasps his hand and says to Sutter: 'Captain, a portion of the world's history has fallen on your shoulders, but you're still standing upright amidst the ruins of your former power. Lift up your head, look about you. There are thousands of people disembarking daily and coming here to work, hoping to find fortune and happiness. A whole new life is springing up in this country. You must set an example. Courage, old pioneer, this land is your true fatherland. Begin again!'

44

If Sutter has once more set his shoulder to the wheel, it is not for his own sake, but for his children's. He builds the farm of Burgdorf for his son Victor and that

86

of Grenzach for his son Arthur. Mina, his daughter, will have the Hermitage. As for his eldest son, Emile, he has sent him East to study law.

Father Gabriel supplies the necessary labour force for this renewed burst of activity; with his revered eloquence, he has managed to tear crews of Indians and Kanakas away from the distilleries and the gold-mines.

The Hermitage is now a Temperance Centre for the savages and the islanders.

The yellow races are also being taken on in ever-increasing numbers.

And prosperity is reborn. But it is not destined to last long.

45

John Augustus Sutter cannot forget the blow that has struck him down. He is a prey to morbid terror. More and more, he holds himself aloof from the work on the farm and this new enterprise no longer absorbs all his faculties, as it once did. The whole business scarcely interests him any more and his children are probably quite capable of succeeding on their own, as long as they heed his advice. He himself plunges into a study of the Book of Revelation. He asks himself a multitude of questions which he cannot answer. He believes that, all his life, he has been an instrument in the hands of the Almighty. He is seeking to discover the purpose, and the reason for this. And he is afraid.

He, the man of action *par excellence*, he who has never hesitated, hesitates now. He becomes withdrawn, distrustful, sly, avaricious. He is full of scruples. The

87

discovery of the gold-mines has turned his hair and beard white; today, his tall figure, his bearing as a leader of men, are bowed and curved beneath the weight of a secret anxiety that gnaws at his soul. He dresses in a long woollen robe and wears a little rabbit-skin cap. His speech has become halting, his eyes shifty. At night, he does not sleep.

Gold.

Gold has ruined him.

He does not understand.

Gold, all the gold that has been extracted during the last four years and all the gold that will be extracted in future, belongs to him. They have robbed him. He tries to make a mental estimate of its value, to arrive at a figure. A hundred million dollars, a thousand million? Oh, God! His head spins at the thought that he will never see one cent of it. It is an injustice. Lord, Lord, to whom can I turn for help? And all these men who have come here to ruin my life . . . why? They have burned down my mills, pillaged and devastated my plantations, stolen and slaughtered my flocks and my herds, laid waste all the fruits of my Herculean labours . . . is this just? And now, after murdering one another, they are founding families, building villages and towns and settling themselves on my lands, under the protection of the Law. O Lord, if this is right, if this is in the order of things, why cannot I, too, profit from it, and what have I done to deserve such total ruin? All these towns and villages belong to me, after all, as well as the people and their families, their work, their livestock, their fortunes. My God, what can I do? Everything has crumbled to dust between my fingers - possessions, fortune, honour, New Helvetia and Anna, my poor wife. Is it possible, and why?

Sutter seeks help, advice, something to hold on to, but everything slips from his grasp. At times, he even reaches a point where he believes all his misfortunes to be imaginary. And then, by a strange inward turning upon himself, he dreams of his childhood, his religion, his mother, his father; he dreams of all that respectable, hard-working background, and above all of his grandfather, that upright man, dedicated to order and justice. And he feels ashamed.

He is the victim of a mirage.

More and more often, he returns in thought to his distant homeland; he dreams of that peaceful little corner of old Europe where all is calm, well-ordered and methodical. There, everything is in its appointed place, the bridges, the canals, the roads. The houses have been standing forever. The lives of the inhabitants are uneventful: they work, they are content with their lot. He sees Rünenberg again, as if in a painting. He thinks of the drinking-fountain he spat into on the day of his departure. He would like to go back there and die.

One day, he writes the following letter:

'My dear Herr Birmann,

'My children have written to you about the terrible misfortune that had already struck me when my poor Anna came here to die on my doorstep. It was the will of Divine Providence to have it so. But do you know the full extent of my miseries? I do not want to keep harping on the story of this catastrophe which is, in effect, the

story of my whole life. God knows, I have puzzled over it enough in my mind during the last four years, and yet, I assure you, I cannot make head nor tail of it. I am not one to complain and yet it is a sorry sort of creature who writes to you, broken, worn out, exhausted, like an old work-horse. All the same, I must tell you that I have in no way deserved what has befallen me; whatever errors I committed in my youth, I have paid for with years of adversity. Let me explain that I lived in this country like a prince, or rather, in the words of our old proverb, I lived in this beautiful land of California "like God in France". It was the discovery of gold that ruined me. I do not understand it. The ways of Our Lord are devious and mysterious. It was my carpenter, Mr Marshall, who first brought the gold to light one day when he was working on the foundations of my sawmill at Coloma. After that fatal blow of his pickaxe, everyone deserted me - clerks, labourers, storemen, even my brave soldiers and my trusted personal assistants, in spite of the fact that I paid them all good wages. But they wanted more, and they robbed me, looted my property, then went off to search for gold. Gold is damned, and all those who come here, and all those who mine the gold are damned, for the majority of them disappear, and I ask myself how and why this happens. Life has been hell here during recent years. Men cut each other's throats, steal from one another, murder each other. Everybody has turned to banditry. Many have gone mad or committed suicide. And all this for gold, gold that is transformed into brandy, and after that into God knows what. Today, it seems as if the whole world is on my estates. Men have come from every country on earth, they have built towns, villages and farms on my lands and they have divided my plantations amongst them. They have built a city of

the damned, San Francisco, at the very spot I had chosen for the disembarkation of my poor Kanakas, who have also run off to look for gold and barter it for liquor. Most of them would have died like dogs by now were it not for the good Father Gabriel, who went after them and saved them from the clutches of Shannon, the king of the distillers, and brought them back to me, often at the risk of his life. I gave them work, and now they are employed at the Hermitage, alongside my good Indians, and on the two farms I have given to my sons, Victor and Arthur, as they have no doubt written and told you.

"Today, California is part of the American Union and the country is in a state of complete transformation. Loyal troops have arrived from Washington, but they have much to do yet before order is restored. Every day, newcomers arrive and there are still mountains of gold. As I have already said, most of the earlier arrivals have disappeared, nobody knows how. The Beast of the Apocalypse is roaming through the countryside now and everyone is very agitated. The Mormons have already departed with their carts laden with gold, and I had no heart to follow them. It is said they have built a city on the shores of Salt Lake, where they live now in debauchery and drunkenness, for they have planted vines, which they learned to do in my vineyards, where many of them worked before the gold was found. In those days, they were good men and responsible workers, but now it seems they too are damned. Am I really to blame for all this? There are moments when, pondering on my misery, I believe that I am. Bands of strolling players are also wandering about the countryside, and many women come here, Italians, Chileans and Frenchwomen, some of them looking for husbands, but they do not all stay. The first men to stake claims to

the land are all in litigation with lawyers in New York, who are issuing title-deeds to the new arrivals. Everybody is bringing lawsuits. For myself, I do not know what to do, I don't want to be just like the rest, but what should I do? This is why I am writing to you.

'This is the position:

'I am ruined.

'According to American law, one half of the gold extracted is mine by clear right, and we are talking about hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars' worth. Moreover, I have suffered an incalculable loss through the discovery of gold on my lands; my property has been overrun, devastated and despoiled, I am therefore entitled to compensation. In the third place, I am the sole proprietor of the terrain on which San Francisco has been built (apart from a narrow strip of land along the ocean-front which belongs to the Franciscan Mission) and of other sites on which towns and villages have been built. I possess all the title-deeds to these lands, which were given to me in the time of the Mexicans by Governors Alvarado and Micheltorena by way of reward for my services and in payment of my expenses at the time of the wars with the Indians on my northern frontier. Fourthly, hordes of new settlers have taken possession of my plantations and exhibit title-deeds which are flagrantly new, whereas I was the one to bring this entire region under cultivation, and I paid the Russians dearly for their small farms when they left. And lastly, the bridges, the canals, the ponds, the locks, the tracks, the roads, the harbour, the landing stages and the mills that I had constructed at my own expense, today serve the public welfare, so the State legislature must pay me for them. There remains also the question of all the gold that will be mined during the next quarter

of a century, and over which I have some rights.

'What should I do?

'It makes me ill to think of the sum that all this must represent.

'The trouble is, if I begin, it will be not one but a thousand lawsuits I must bring all at once; I must attack tens of thousands of individuals, hundreds of communities, the legislature of the State of California and the government in Washington. If I begin, it will be not one, but ten, a hundred fortunes that I will have to spend, although it is true that what I am claiming would make it all worth while (even before the discovery of gold, I was on my way to becoming the richest man in the world). If I begin, it will not be one new country I shall have to conquer, as it was when I landed for the first time, all alone, on the sands of the Pacific, but the entire world. They would all be against me, and I should have to fight for years and years, and I am beginning to feel my age, I am already hard of hearing, I fear my strength might let me down, and it is for this reason that I have sent Emile, my eldest son, to the Faculty of Law, for it is on him that all this immense business of the gold will devolve and, being on the inside, so to speak, he will know better how to avoid the traps and pitfalls of the law, and those men of law whom his simpleton of a father greatly fears. Yes, I confess it.

'As a matter of honour, I cannot lose everything, let it all go, just like that, without a word. It would be a crying shame, an injustice!

'On the other hand, I often ask myself whether I have the right to intervene, or whether there are not too many human interests at stake which are beyond my understanding, and if God who reigns in Heaven has not some particular design for all these people whom He sends

into this country? And I myself feel that I am lost in His hand.

'What should I do?

'Gold brings misfortune. If I touch it, if I pursue it, if I claim what is mine by indisputable right, shall I not be damned in my turn, like so many others whose example I have before my very eyes and of whom I have already spoken to you?

'Tell me, what should I do? I am ready for anything. To disappear. Abdicate. I could, on the other hand, set to work again and give useful support to Victor and Arthur, who are making very good progress. I could squeeze the maximum produce out of my farms, small-holdings and plantations, open up new areas of cultivation, extend the work of my Indians and Kanakas, throw myself into new speculations - in a word, make the necessary money for the lawsuits and press on till my strength is exhausted. But is all this really necessary? I am homesick. I dream of our beautiful little canton of Basle and would like to return there. God, how lucky you are, my dear Herr Martin, to be able to stay in your own home! I could sell the two farms and the Hermitage, liquidate everything, come home and settle the children in Switzerland. Should I do it, or would it be desertion, and have I the right to abandon this country to which I have given life and which, I feel, will rob me of my own? Tell me what I should do, dear Herr Martin Birmann, and I will follow your advice to the letter and obey you in everything, blindly.

'I am addressing myself to you because Father Gabriel mentioned you when he came to the farm to give my poor Anna decent Christian burial. He told me he knew you in his childhood. I believe he is a native of your village; from what I have heard, his name must be

März, but I am not too sure as he is as secretive as the Indians, to whom he is devoted body and soul, and he never speaks about his own people, except that once to tell me that he remembered you very well. In earlier days, when I was fighting on the frontier, he was my worst enemy; he bore me a grudge, resenting the fact that I, a compatriot, was making the Indians work, and bringing in Kanakas as forced labour, but, later on, he understood that I could never have achieved anything without them, and that they, for their part, could not have survived without me, once the Mexicans had abandoned them. As for the Kanakas, I have never been a wicked man, and Father Gabriel has been able to see that for himself. At the moment of my terrible misfortune, when all were deserting me, he was the only one to stand by me and he remained faithful to me from then on. Even now, it is only thanks to him that my children have been able to set up their establishments. He is a saint, may God keep him in His holy care, and may He keep you, too, dear Herr Martin Birmann, and bless you for having been a father to my children for so many years. Today, it is in the name of these same children that their father implores your advice: what should I do?

'Amen.

'Your brother in Jesus Christ,  
'John Augustus Sutter, Captain.'

John Augustus Sutter does not wait for a reply from the worthy old Martin Birmann, a solicitor by calling and voluntary treasurer of the community of John the

Baptist in his little village of Botmingen, in Basleland.

John Augustus Sutter begins a lawsuit.

His lawsuit.

A lawsuit that revolutionizes the whole of California and comes near to throwing the very existence of the new State into jeopardy. Everyone is passionately involved. Everyone has a personal interest in the case.

Above all else, John Augustus Sutter lays claim to exclusive ownership of the territories on which towns like San Francisco, Sacramento, Fairfield and Riovista have been built. He has had these lands valued by a committee of experts and claims 200 million dollars. He issues summonses against 17,221 individuals who have settled on his plantations, demanding that they vacate their premises and pay him damages with interest. He claims 25 million dollars from the legislature of the State of California for having taken over the roads, tracks, locks, mills, canals and bridges, and the installations in the Bay, and having placed them at the disposal of the public. Also, an indemnity of 50 million dollars from the government in Washington for its failure to maintain public order at the time of the discovery of the gold-mines; failure to stem the flood of the gold rush; failure to control their own Federal troops, who were sent into the area and deserted in gangs, thus becoming the principal element in the disorder and amongst the most ruthless looters; failure to take appropriate measures to reimburse both the State and Sutter personally for their share from the output of the mines. He submits, in the first instance, that he has rights to part of the gold extracted up to the present time and asks that a commission of jurists give an immediate ruling on the amount of gold due to him out of that which will be extracted from this day forth. He does not ask for any personal sanctions

against anyone at all, neither those people in authority who have failed in their duty of seeing that the law is respected, nor police officers incapable of upholding public order, nor prevaricating officials. He bears no man a grudge, but he demands justice, simple justice, and, in bringing his case to Law, he is putting all his trust in jurisprudence.

Emile has come back from the University and is devoting himself exclusively to this monstrous affair. He is assisted by the four most eminent legal experts in the Union. In his offices at the corner of Commercial Street and the Plaza Mayor, in the heart of San Francisco, he is surrounded by a flock of solicitors, clerks and scribes.

The cities put up their defence. San Francisco, Sacramento, Fairfield, Riovista and even the smallest communities appoint barristers for life, solely to concern themselves with this particular case, and to oppose Sutter's claims with all their strength and at all costs. Individuals band together, constitute defence syndicates, place their interests in the hands of the most famous lawyers, whom they bring out from the East at outrageous expense. Jurists are at a premium. Every member of the legal profession, down to the last shyster, is dragged in. In all the vast territories of the United States, one can no longer find a single barrister lacking his brief, nor a single man of law kicking his heels in a bar. Solicitors, notaries, bailiffs, articled clerks, scribblers and pen-pushers rush to California, where they swoop down like locusts amongst the cosmopolitan hordes of gold-seekers, who are still pouring in, for the rush is by no means over. This is a new rush, an unforeseen source of gold, and all these people are hoping to live off Sutter's lawsuit.

During this time, John Augustus Sutter never once sets foot in the capital. He remains on his property and he has recovered all his old energy and vitality. He draws on all his faculties and uses every weapon in his arsenal.

For he must have money, money and still more money to pay for all this legal red tape.

His lawsuit.

This lawsuit which is unfolding in the heart of San Francisco, the damned city which Sutter has never yet laid eyes on.

Four years go by, during which time the case follows its course before the tribunals.

Sutter manages to find the money for his insane legal costs.

All his enterprises are prospering. His small farms at Burgdorf and Grenzach supply San Francisco with milk, butter, cheese, eggs, chicken and vegetables. At the Hermitage, he has set up a fruit-preserving industry. His sawmills cut the planks and timber which are used in the building of the countless new villages. He has a nail factory, another for pencils. He sets up a paper-mill. Once more, he begins sowing acres of cotton and dreams of starting a spinning-mill.

The inhabitants of the country, already deeply indebted to him, watch in terror as he amasses this new

fortune and rises to ever more menacing power. Sutter is unpopular. Sutter is hated, but Sutter does not care. They cannot manage without his products and he squeezes the people as hard as he dare. 'Let them cough up, the dirty swine,' he is in the habit of saying when he is setting up some new business venture and anticipating its profits in advance. 'Let them cough up, then it will be they themselves who pay the costs of my case.' Nevertheless, by a strange paradox, this man who has such an insatiable need for money does not pan gold or distil liquor. On the contrary, he is in close contact with the religious sects of Philadelphia and leads an ardent temperance campaign amongst the Indians, the White and the Yellow races (he is dead against brandy, but not wine, of which the enormous quantity consumed in the region comes exclusively from his vineyards). And if any gold-diggers should happen to stray on to his property nowadays, he has them beaten without mercy, for they are the damned. Although he rarely opens it any more, the Book of Revelation is always buried in his pocket for, in spite of his crazy energy, there remains in the depths of his soul a great fear and, before God, he is none too sure of his rights.

Towards the end of the fourth year, his adversaries strike a first, terrible blow against him. The offices of his son Emile are burned down and all the riff-raff of San Francisco dance round the flames as if it were a celebratory bonfire. The entire country is jubilant when it learns that the principal documents pertaining to the case have been destroyed, notably the original title-deeds to lands granted by Governors Alvarado and Micheltorena. At this news, the new settlers squatting on his lands are ecstatic and the inhabitants of the towns and villages parade the streets shouting: 'We've run the



wolves to earth! We've caught the old wolf by the tail!

On the face of things, John Augustus Sutter takes this blow without flinching but, although he redoubles his efforts and gives orders for his case to be prosecuted with even greater vigour, he feels, in his innermost being, that his strength is secretly waning, while his fears wax full.

He has received yet another blow from the Almighty.  
O, God!

I no longer have the strength to cry out. I will make no protest. Yet I cannot find it in my heart to submit. Do with me what Thou wilt.

I shall fight on.

---

## TWELFTH CHAPTER

---

50

On the 9th of September, 1854, the entire population of California is in a carvival mood.

They are celebrating the fourth anniversary of California's entry into the Union and the fifth anniversary of the founding of the city of San Francisco.

Already, throughout the previous fortnight, crowds have been coming in by every route and from every corner of the state. The capital is adorned with garlands and lit with illuminations; the Star-Spangled Banner flutters from windows, from rooftops and on all the surrounding hills. At night, fireworks shoot upward to burst in a luminous, crackling shower; salvoes of musketry and artillery reverberate incessantly. The theatres – the Jenny Lind Theatre, the first building to boast a stone façade, and the Adelphi, where a company of French actors are strutting the boards – are constantly packed out. At every street corner, demagogues harangue immense crowds, inspiring them with prophecies of the prodigious future that awaits this new country and this new city. This entire young nation unites in a single sense of its own strength and power, in a sentiment of burning patriotism for the Union.

The bars are besieged and the well-known saloons packed to the doors, and it is in these haunts, the Arcades, the Belle Union, the El Dorado, the Polka and the Diana, that popular enthusiasm wells up and spills over into demonstrations in honour of John Augustus

Sutter. Committees and delegations are formed; colonists, planters, labourers, gold-diggers, women, children, soldiers, sailors and profiteers betake themselves to the Hermitage *en masse*, and there, under his very windows, they acclaim Sutter, invite him, take him captive, drag him out by force and carry him in triumph to the city.

Along the way, the old pioneer is saluted on all sides as 'The Ancestor'. The whole population of San Francisco comes out to meet him. The cannon booms, the bells ring, choirs celebrate his apotheosis. Men wave their hats in the air, women wave their handkerchiefs while showers of floral tributes flutter down from the balconies. Clusters of human beings, like bunches of grapes, are hanging out into the void, applauding, cheering and shouting hurrahs.

At the Town Hall, Mayor Kewen, surrounded by the highest Federal and State officials, solemnly awards John Augustus Sutter the title of General.

Then there is a procession through the town.

It is the greatest fête that has ever been celebrated on the shores of the Pacific.

All eyes are fixed on the tall old man who is riding at the head of the troops.

John Augustus Sutter is mounted on a big white horse. He is holding his general's baton in his hand. Behind him come his three sons, then the First Californian Regiment, then the mounted artillery and the Light Cavalry.

General John Augustus Sutter parades through the streets of San Francisco at the head of the troops.

He is buttoned up in a black frock-coat which is too tight for him; its long skirts flap over his horse's crupper. He is wearing checked trousers and boots with wide gussets. A broad-brimmed felt hat is rammed down on his skull.

As he crosses the town, General John Augustus Sutter is prey to a strange emotion. All these ovations, the hurrahs, the wreaths of flowers that fall at his feet, the bells, the songs, the cannon, the fanfare, the multitude, the windows full of women, the houses, the office buildings, the first palatial edifices and the interminable streets, all seem to him unreal. It is less than six years since he was living here in the midst of savages, surrounded by his Indians and his Kanakas from the Islands.

He thinks he must be dreaming.

He closes his eyes.

He does not want to see any more, he does not want to hear any more.

He allows himself to be led.

The procession carries him along to the Metropolitan Theatre where a monstrous banquet, and some fifty speeches, await him.

An extract from the speech by Mr Kewen, the first Mayor of San Francisco:

' . . . This pioneer, full of high courage and spurred on by a strange presentiment, detaches himself from the happy memories of his youth, drags himself away from the charms of his own home, abandons his family circle, leaves his native land to come, by untrodden paths, and throw himself into a country full of danger and adventure. He crosses arid plains beneath a scorching sun, he traverses mountains, valleys, rocky chains. In spite of hunger, fever, thirst, in spite of bloodthirsty savages who lie in ambush for him, or stalk him on the open prairies, he travels onward, his eyes ever drawn to that point in the sky where the sun plunges every evening into the Western ocean. This point draws him on like a magnet, he keeps his eyes fixed on it, as the traveller in the Alps of his beautiful homeland keeps his eyes fixed on the summit of the mountain covered in eternal snows, thinking of nothing, as he crosses abysses and glaciers, but the grandiose panorama and the pure, refreshing air which is found at these altitudes.

'And, like Moses on the summit of Pisgah in biblical times, he stands on the snowy crest of the sierra, and his vision clears and his soul rejoices; at last, he sees before him the Promised Land. But he is more fortunate than the Lawgiver of the Israelites, for to him it is given to enter this blessed land, and he descends from the mountain armed with new courage and fresh vigour to brave the solitude and the privations and, in gratitude, he dedicates this new land he has just discovered to God. To God, to liberty and to his beloved country, Switzerland.

'In the history of vanished peoples, and of the centuries that are gone, the names of certain great men, whom one can never forget, stand out. Epaminondas, whose virtue and love of country shed a glorious light over the deliverance of Thebes. Hannibal, the courageous, who led his victorious armies over the Alps and trod the classic soil of Italy, will long outlive the history of Carthage. In naming Athens, one names her divine sons, and the name of Rome is consecrated by the glory of illustrious men. Thus, in future times, when the pen of the historian wishes to trace the origin and foundation of our dear Fatherland, which by then will be one of the most powerful countries in the world, when the historian wishes to describe the suffering and the hardships of the beginning, and recount the struggle for liberty in the West, then one name will shine forth above all others: it is that of the immortal SUTTER!'

Speech follows speech.

General Sutter is absent, lost in his reverie.

The thunder of applause sets the rafters ringing in the huge theatre.

Ten thousand voices clamour his name.

Sutter does not hear.

He is fiddling nervously with the ring he is wearing, turning it round, changing it from one finger to another and repeating and repeating, over and over again under his breath, the inscription he has had engraved upon it:

- THE FIRST GOLD -  
DISCOVERED IN JANUARY 1848

---

## THIRTEENTH CHAPTER

---

54

The beginning of 1855, like the end of the previous year, marks a new triumph for John Augustus Sutter.

On the 15th of March, Judge Thompson, the highest magistrate in California, announces his verdict in the Sutter case.

He acknowledges Sutter's claims as being just and well-founded, recognizes the grants made by the Mexican governors as legal and inviolable and declares that all those immense territories on which so many towns and villages have been built are the personal, intangible and indisputable property of John Augustus Sutter.

This verdict, together with the reasons adduced, amounts to a small volume of over two hundred pages.

55

Jean Marchais is the first to bring news of this verdict to the Hermitage. He finds Sutter engrossed in a booklet on the breeding of silk-worms.

Immediately, Sutter pounces on his frock-coat and brushes it with long, vigorous strokes. In effect, this judgement is directed against the United States; it is therefore necessary to obtain ratification from the highest Federal Court, swiftly and without delay. He has not a moment to lose. Out of a sort of childish vanity,

106

Sutter is eager to reach Washington before the official courier arrives with the verdict. He will present himself to the Court in person.

'What a fine man this Judge Thompson is,' he says, as he dons his handsome embroidered shirt. 'O God, I have never doubted Thee!' he murmurs as he pulls on his boots.

'I thank Thee, I thank Thee,' he pronounces aloud.

Then he buttons up his gauntlets and buckles on his heavy belt with the revolver in its holster. 'At last, they are giving me justice.'

Justice!

He puts on his broad-brimmed felt hat and looks at himself in the mirror.

He is happy and, perhaps for the first time in his life, smiles at his own reflection.

He bursts out laughing at the thought of the trick he is going to play on the official courier by arriving in Washington ahead of him, and delivering the great news himself! 'God, what a bolt from the blue it will be!' I'll cross the Sierra by the mountain tracks; that way, I can see Father Gabriel and tell him the news. Now, there's another good man. How pleased he will be, and Shannon will have to bite his tongue. Those villains had better watch their step, from now on *we* shall be the ones to lay down the law here. I'll get Bill, Joe and Nash to ride with me, that'll be enough. I can stay with the Mormons *en route*, and, if I travel through Nebraska, Missouri and Ohio, I'll be in Washington in a flash. My three Indians must come all the way to the Federal capital with me, and we must appear on horseback. Unless the Mormons can take me down the Platte River to catch the train. I hear the railway's reached Des Moines already.

107

'Ah, they're good souls, good souls . . .'

In his haste, he does not even bother to advise his sons of his departure, and it is only as he is jumping into the saddle that he shouts to Mina, who has come running from the poultry-yard: 'Tell the boys I'm going to Washington. We've won, we've won! The case is over. Tell them, and send Marchais to them. We've done it at last! Goodbye, my darling, see you soon!'

And, with his three Indians in his wake, he sets off like a whirlwind along the track that leads to the Sierra.

John Augustus Sutter leaves everything behind him. He has his verdict.

56

The little party has been galloping all day long, and all night and all the following day They have barely given the horses time to breathe. On the second night, at about three in the morning, Sutter and his three Indians emerge from the great forests and reach the Mission Post which the good Father has built at the entrance to the col. The night is pitch black. There is not a star in the sky. Heavy clouds are hanging over the peaks of the Sierra. Men and horses are exhausted.

Father Gabriel is standing on the edge of the stone terrace that supports his little chapel. He is surrounded by Indians, men, women, children. They are all gazing in the same direction. To the north-west, the sky is ablaze. A great glow invades the lowering sky.

'God be praised, is it you, Captain?' cries Father Gabriel.

'General, General!' protests Sutter, jumping off his

108

horse. 'They have promoted me to General! It's all over now, I've won my case. Judge Thompson declared in my favour. I've won. It's in the bag. I'm going to Washington at once to have the verdict registered. The country is ours now, we shall be able to work. Everything can go ahead smoothly.'

'God be praised!' says Father Gabriel again, 'I was anxious for you. Look at that great light over there.'

Sutter looks.

There, far over there, a great gleam lights up the sky and reddens it fitfully. It is not a forest fire, for it is way over there on the plain; it is not a prairie fire, for it is not summer-time and the dry season is still a long way off; nor is it crops that are burning, for the fields are still barren and untilled. And that direction - due north-west! There can be no doubt, it is the Hermitage!

'Ach, the bastards!'

Sutter leaps on to his horse, jerks its head round and rides for home as if the devil were on his tail.

57

The moment Judge Thompson's verdict is known to the public, the entire city comes out on to the streets. Groups form at every corner and the bars and saloons are invaded by a crowd of vociferous drinkers. Violent arguments break out. Orators improvise speeches. Distillers offer 'drinks on the house', and stave in casks of brandy in the market-places. The mood of the mob becomes threatening. Sutter has too many enemies. Spokesmen of the party that opposed him and all the men of law who are in league against him incite the

109

people, urging them to violence and mischief. Meetings are being held in every quarter of the town. In the evening, riots break out in San Francisco. The rioters set fire to the Law Courts, demolish the offices of the Clerk of the Court, destroy the Archives and storm the prisons. The populace are out to lynch Judge Thompson. Next day, the whole country is in a state of revolution and immediately men organize themselves into bands.

The authorities are powerless.

These people, who not so long ago acclaimed General Sutter, came to seek him out, to carry him off in triumph and give him a grand reception, an act of homage unique in the history of the United States, once more make their way to the Hermitage – but, this time, to attack it. There are about ten thousand of them and, as they advance, others hasten to swell the mob. The men are armed and there are wagons loaded with barrels of gunpowder. The Star-Spangled Banner floats above the heads of this disorderly multitude and it is to cries of 'Long Live America!' and 'Long Live California!' that everything in their path is pillaged, sacked, razed to the ground.

The Hermitage is burned down, the factories, workshops, sawmills, repair shops and windmills are blown up, the orchards chopped down, the irrigation pipelines perforated, the flocks and herds mown down by rifle-fire and any Indians, Kanakas or Chinese unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the marauders are lynched without mercy. Anything that bears Sutter's trademark is obliterated. The plantations are put to the torch, the vineyards ravaged. Finally, they attack the wine-cellars. And the destructive fury of the mob turns vicious – they kill, they break, they burn, they sack with such utter ruthlessness that even the poultry are

slaughtered by volley-fire. Then they go up to Burgdorf and to Grenzach, where they again wreak havoc, destroying everything, reducing it to ashes. They saw through the lock-gates, smash up the surface of the roads and blow up the bridges.

Ruins and ashes.

When Sutter returns home, four days after his departure, nothing remains of his vast enterprises.

Thin plumes of smoke still rise from the smouldering debris. Clouds of urubus, vultures and crows with bloodied beaks squabble over the carrion of horses and cattle littered about the fields.

From the branch of a wild fig-tree swings the corpse of Jean Marchais.

This time, all is lost.

Forever.

Sutter contemplates the disaster with a mournful eye.

John Augustus Sutter is worn out. His life, his suffering, his hardships, his energy, his will, his endurance, his work, his perseverance, his hopes have all been in vain. His books, his papers, his instruments, his weapons, his tools, his bear and puma skins, his furs, his walrus tusks, his whalebones, his stuffed birds, his collection of butterflies, his Indian trophies, his specimens of ambergris and of genuine amber, of auriferous sand, of precious stones and of minerals of all kinds have been reduced to a heap of hot ashes.

Everything that he holds most dear, everything that represents the life and the pride of a man,

has gone up in smoke.

General John Augustus Sutter no longer possesses anything of his own, except the clothes on his back, his viaticum and the Book of Revelation in his pocket.

He, who had hoped to become the richest man in the world!

Overcome with self-pity, he weeps for a long time. He is a broken man.

59

And suddenly he thinks of his children.

Where are they? What has become of them?

Then he begins to wander through the district, from farm to farm and village to village. Everywhere, they sneer at him, mock him, turn their backs on him. The people insult him. The children throw stones.

Sutter steels himself, says nothing, takes it all, the spite and the abuse.

He has a crushing sense of guilt.

He mumbles a prayer: 'Our Father, Which art in Heaven . . .'

He has fallen into a second childhood.

He is a pathetic old man.

60

Months pass. And then one day his sorrowful wanderings bring him to San Francisco.

He enters the city without being recognized by a soul.

112

He is frightened by the tall houses that rise up on either side, the intersecting streets, the swiftly-moving vehicles, the hurrying people who jostle him. Above all, he has a horror of the human face and is afraid to raise his eyes.

Misfortune dogs his footsteps.

He sleeps in the port and begs in the outer suburbs. He spends hours hanging about the waste ground where, only yesterday, stood the offices of his lawyer son.

One day, mechanically and without thinking, he goes in to see Judge Thompson. He finds his daughter, who has been given refuge there. Mina is in bed, she is suffering from nervous shock and has difficulty in expressing herself.

There, too, he hears news of his sons. Victor has again taken ship for Europe. Arthur was killed defending his farm. As for Emile, the eldest son, the lawyer, the one who had the whole business at his finger-tips and conducted the lawsuit, he has committed suicide in some squalid hovel.

As Sutter is stone deaf, he asks them to repeat this painful story twice.

'Thy will be done. Amen.'

113

---

## FOURTEENTH CHAPTER

---

61

At the foot of the Twin Peaks, there stands a large white house whose pediment and Ionic columns are made of wood. It is surrounded by a spacious park and flower gardens. This is the country home of Judge Thompson; he loves to spend his weekends there, inspecting his young rose-bushes with a volume of Plutarch under his arm. It is in this retreat that Sutter, little by little, is restored to life and consciousness.

His legs are weak and he has put on an enormous amount of weight. White locks tumble over his stooping shoulders. His left side is afflicted with a slight tremor. His eyes water perpetually.

Mina has made a quick recovery from her terrible shock, the natural resilience of youth and the maternal care of Mrs Thompson have sufficed to restore her. She is engaged to Ulrich de Winckelried, a young dentist; the wedding is fixed for Christmas, and she is so happy about it that she cannot abide the sight, nor the presence, of her old, broken-down father. That is why she stays with the Thompsons in their town house, where these good people, so simple, so cheerful, so human, are always ready to guide and advise her in the setting-up of her new household.

Once again, John Augustus Sutter is all alone.

114

62

He paces to and fro beneath the trees or stands for hours in contemplation before a newly-blossomed rose. He never speaks to anyone. Sometimes, he will stop without ceremony in front of one of the gardeners, make a gesture as if to ask him something, then turn his back and walk away without opening his lips. The wind stirs the skirts of his frock-coat. He seeks the most secluded alley-ways to walk in. In the distance, the boom of the Pacific surf can be heard.

Twice a week, Judge Thompson comes out to see the General.

63

In all the vast territories of the United States, Judge Thompson alone understands and feels compassion for the plight of the General. Thompson is an enlightened man with a broad and well-balanced outlook; he fulfils his duties with the utmost integrity. Having made a thorough study of Greek in his youth, he has preserved a love for the humanities, a lofty system of reasoning and a taste for logical, unbiased deduction that he is capable of carrying to its ultimate conclusion. His mind is naturally inclined towards the contemplative mode. Thus he grasps the tragic aspect of John Augustus Sutter's life.

He has taken all the General's interests into his own hands, reviewed the whole affair and spent entire nights bent over the dossiers of the case. He has nothing with which to reproach himself. His verdict was arrived at in

115



a full knowledge of the facts, according to the dictates of his conscience as a man and as a high court magistrate; in all equity, he pronounced in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the law. But, but . . . today, he understands that it is not so much a question of law as of saving a man, an old man, and he listens to the counsels of his heart. And when he comes to see the General, he makes a point of preaching reason to him.

Meanwhile, he offers him a refuge and sees to it that he gets all the care and attention his condition requires.

64

'Listen, General, you've suffered enough, don't persist with this business that has brought you nothing but misery. This is what I suggest you do, I've been thinking about it for a long time. Renounce all claims against individual persons. Give up all your proprietary rights to those plots of land that passed long ago into other hands and are now registered in new names; give up once and for all any idea of getting your hands on your percentage of the gold extracted, or to be extracted in future - believe me, neither the State legislature nor the Federal government itself will ever succeed in collecting one red cent of it. Declare yourself ready to come to terms for, let us say . . . one million dollars' indemnity, payable in cash, and I will do everything in my power to obtain the money for you. If you're absolutely determined to work, you could very well demand new territory and you will get it easily; you know perfectly well the one thing we're not short of hereabouts is land, and, thank God, there's plenty of

116

room still for newcomers. But don't go on with this futile business that will get you nowhere. You know as well as I do that there are too many vested interests, and everyone is intriguing against you in Washington. Trust me, and give up the game, it's not worth the candle.'

'Judge Thompson,' the General invariably replies, 'Judge Thompson, you judged the case and pronounced a verdict according to your conscience. And today you talk to me about money! Tell me, what am I suing for? I am suing for justice, nothing else. The highest court in this land must declare whether you were right or wrong. And it will pronounce. Besides, I am not appealing to mere man, but to God. I must carry this matter to the bitter end, for if I do not obtain justice in this world, it is a consolation to me to think that I will obtain it in heaven, and that one day I shall sit upon the right hand of the Lord.'

'But think of your children, think of Mina who is soon to be married. One day, she'll make you a grandfather.'

'Judge Thompson, a man like myself is damned and has no children. That is surely the sole error of my life. Arthur was killed, Emile committed suicide, and you told me yourself that we must consider Victor as lost, since he disappeared when the *Golden Gate* was shipwrecked in the open sea at the exit from the Magellan Straits. And, since I no longer possess anything, and cannot give her anything, I shall not be harming Mina by taking this matter to its conclusion; on the contrary, if I win, I shall have provided for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren and for seven times seven generations.'

'But what are you going to live on?'

'God, who has stripped me of everything, will provide for me as he nourishes the birds and the beasts.'

117

'I implore you not to leave here, you can stay as long as you like.'

'Yes, yes, I will go to Washington, at Christmas, after Mina's wedding. Then, we shall see whether there are any honest judges in Washington.'

65

Mina marries her dentist and the General departs for Washington, at Christmas, just as he has always said. He is armed with a recommendation from the Mayor of San Francisco, and, in his pocket, Judge Thompson's verdict keeps company with the little volume of the Book of Revelation. Thompson has also managed to persuade the State legislature to pay the old General a pension, a pension for life of three thousand dollars a year.

118

---

## FIFTEENTH CHAPTER

---

66

The years pass. In Washington, the General has become a familiar figure; everyone knows that big, flabby body, those feet dragging along in down-at-heel boots, that old frock-coat, stained and sprinkled with dandruff, and that large bald head that wobbles beneath a battered felt hat. All Washington knows him, and every government bureau.

At first, thanks to the intrigues hatched by his enemies, he met with a rather frosty reception, but nowadays . . . well, so much water has flowed under the bridge, many of his adversaries have long been laid to rest and many of the officials transferred. Today, nobody is exactly sure what he wants - this mad old man, you know the one, the old General who fought in the war with Mexico and drivels on about gold-mines. He's certainly got a bee in his bonnet, a whole hive of them. And in the government offices it is a favourite sport to send him on from one department to another, knocking at endless doors. The General knows every nook and cranny of the law courts and all the staircases of the various Departments of the Administration; he comes and goes, climbs up, climbs down, knocking, rapping, waiting patiently outside closed doors; he walks thousands of miles, covers the same ground over and over again, retracing his steps, caught like a squirrel in a cage.

But he never abandons hope.

119

Throughout these long years, John Augustus Sutter has lived on his general's pension. 'Lived' is something of a euphemism, for, in reality, his pension has been gobbled up every year by shyster lawyers, shady business men and petty officials in the Administration who, one after the other, have promised to win his case for him.

In 1863, a young Danish swindler, just arrived from New York, meets Sutter at a religious assembly, takes his documents from him and, next day, introduces him to an accomplice who passes himself off as secretary to the Attorney-General. These two sharks get the old man completely into their clutches. Sutter writes to Judge Thompson, telling him his business is in the hands of God, and that the Attorney-General himself is to plead his cause. He asks for ten thousand dollars to pay the Attorney-General. Mina, to whom he has also written, sends him a thousand dollars. He manages to obtain probate and have his deceased wife's meagre dowry sent to him from Switzerland. All the money he collects is handed over to the two crooks, until one fine morning, seeing that there is nothing more to be got out of the old man, they disappear.

And still he receives frequent visits from lawyers, genuine as well as false, who get him to explain his affairs to them and then make him sign mountains of papers in which Sutter waives all claim to a quarter, a half, three-quarters or even the whole sum in case of success, for what does he care about money, gold, lands? It is justice he wants, a judgement, a verdict.

Years pass. Years of poverty and wretchedness. He works at all sorts of menial tasks in order to survive: he

shines shoes, runs errands, delivers messages and washes dishes in a cheap eating-house for soldiers, where his title of general and his horror of whisky have made him popular. Nowadays, Mina sends him a hundred dollars a month and this money goes to every kind of tout and go-between, anyone who knows how to wheedle it out of him. He gives away every last dollar to set his lawsuit in motion.

In 1866, Sutter presents himself before Congress and claims one million dollars in cash and the restitution of his estates. He has been put up to this by a Polish Jew.

In 1868, Sutter sends an appeal to the Senate. He sets out the facts at great length and declares he will be satisfied with five hundred thousand dollars and his lands. This request is the brain-child of a sergeant of infantry.

In 1870, in a new appeal addressed to the Senate (which has been drawn up by a man named Bujard, a photographer from the Swiss canton of Vaud), Sutter claims no more than one hundred thousand dollars, renounces all other indemnities, gives up all rights to his lands and undertakes to leave the soil of the United States and return to Switzerland, where he will settle in the canton of Vaud, 'since I cannot,' he says, 'having once been the richest man in the world, return in poverty to my own canton and become a charge upon the parish of my forefathers'.

In 1873, he joins the sect of the Herrenhütter, entrusts his case to the Council of the Seven Johannite Elders and signs an act by which he donates all his eventual fortune and all his Californian possessions to the fraternity 'in order that the corrupting stain of gold may be washed away from these beautiful valleys by Adamite purity'. And the case starts up again, directed this time by a barrister who is both founder and spiritual director

of this German-American communist phalanstery.

Sutter leaves Washington and settles down in Lititz, Pennsylvania, in order to be baptised and purified according to the great Babylonian rite. He is now an immaculate soul and lives in intimacy with Our Lord.

68

The Herrenhütter of Lititz are established on large estates where an immense acreage of corn is grown and communally exploited. They also possess an oil-well. Sacks of corn and barrels of oil are sent down to the coast; by way of a trade-mark, they are stamped with the paschal Lamb *couchant*, holding a banner between its feet. On this banner, standing out in bold black type, are the initials J.C., which stand not for Jesus Christ, but for Johannes Christitsch, the founder, director and grand master of the sect. This man, a Serbian, contrives to function at the same time as a shyster lawyer and as a formidable, shrewd and enterprising business man; he is in the process of building up one of the largest industrial fortunes, on the backs of some four hundred 'enlightened ones', almost all of whom are of German origin.

The principal articles of faith in this phalanstery are: communal ownership of women and chattels, the regenerative sanctity of labour, certain rules of Adamite life and a belief in visions and states of possession. The only gospel is the Book of Revelation. That is why Sutter soon becomes famous in the little parish for his profound knowledge of this book, and for the personal interpretations he puts upon it.

122

69

The Great Whore that sitteth upon many waters is Christopher Columbus discovering America.

The Angels and Stars of St John are in the American flag and, with the inclusion of California, a new star, the Star of Absinthe, has come to be inscribed upon the Star-Spangled Banner.

The Anti-Christ is Gold.

The Beasts and the Satans are the cannibalistic Indians, the Caribbean natives and the Kanakas. They are also the Negroes and the Chinese, the black and the yellow races.

The Three Horsemen are the three great Redskin tribes.

Already, one-third of the immigrants from Europe have been decimated in this country.

I am one of the twenty-four Elders, and it is because I heard the Voice that I have come here amongst you. I was once the richest man in the world, I was ruined by gold . . .

A Russian woman lies at Sutter's feet in a state of ecstasy while he comments on the visions of St John and narrates episodes of his life.

70

But Sutter cannot even be left in peace to indulge this harmless folly.

Johannes Christitsch is his evil daemon, Johannes Christitsch, who has had the case reopened and is

123

conducting the whole business, pushing ahead with it, determined to win no matter what the cost. Every week, Christitsch goes to Washington, where he intrigues, solicits, circulates officially-stamped documents, brandishes dossiers, rummages in the archives, brings new evidence to light and generally bestirs himself to set all this colossal procedure in motion once more. Very often, he brings Sutter with him, or sends him into town alone; he shows him off, puts him on exhibition and forces him to speak. He has appointed himself Sutter's manager. He has unearthed an old general's uniform and dressed Sutter up in it; he has even hung a few medals on his chest.

And the General's martyrdom begins again, as he goes from office to office, from one legal department to the next. Highly-placed officials take pity on the old man and his lamentable history, they take careful note of the case, promise to take steps on his behalf and see that he gets satisfaction. When he is on his own, all sorts of rogues stop him in the street and make him recount the tale of the discovery of gold, and Sutter becomes confused and mixes bits of the Apocalypse and Herrenhütter stories into the tale of his own life. He is completely unhinged; every urchin in Washington recognizes the General's madness and derives huge amusement from it.

The old madman.

The richest man in the world!

What a joke!

In 1876, thanks to Johannes Christitsch's relentless intriguing, Sutter is named Honorary President of the Swiss section at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. Christitsch takes advantage of this to establish relations with members of the Consulate; he dreams of instigating a diplomatic move to resolve Sutter's case.

In 1878, he and Sutter settle permanently in Washington. The affair is well under way, important political figures are concerning themselves with the case. Sutter has a kind of return to rationality, he is somewhat calmer and less prolix when he talks to people in the street.

At the end of January 1880, John Augustus Sutter is summoned to the Capitol and he learns that the Federal government is 'about to recognize your services forthwith'. In high places, they 'find your case interesting, your appeal just and your claims in no way exaggerated'. They are ready to award him a huge indemnity.

From this moment on, Sutter escapes completely from the clutches of Christitsch. He is once more very agitated and feverish. He cannot keep still for a moment, and wanders the streets night and day. He is constantly running to the Capitol. He besieges officials at all hours, asking if there is any news, if Congress has yet given its verdict. He is importunate, he badgers certain Congressmen, even in their own private homes, and is accompanied on these visits by a gang of ragamuffins who refuse to leave 'their' General's side, and who applaud whenever Sutter makes a scene, for nowadays he easily becomes violent and abusive and his little band delights in exciting him still further. The General is very proud of his popularity with the common people. In his mind,

these children symbolize the Army of the Just.

'When I win my case, I shall give you all my gold,' he tells them, 'the gold that will be due to me, just gold, purified gold.'

God's gold.

72

One day, in the street, he runs across three male nurses who are taking a man to the asylum. He is a tall old creature, filthy dirty and dressed in rags, he is waving his arms about furiously, gesticulating and shouting. He manages to break free from his guardians and throws himself on the ground, rolling in the mud, filling his mouth, his eyes and ears with it and avidly plunging his hands into mounds of rubbish and ordure. His pockets are full of unspeakable filth and his bundle of possessions contains nothing but pebbles.

While the nurses are strapping him up, the General watches this man closely and suddenly recognizes him: it is Marshall, the carpenter. Marshall recognizes him too, and, as they are dragging him away, cries out to him: 'Boss, boss, I told you the truth - there is gold everywhere, everything is made of gold!'

73

On a hot afternoon in June, the General is sitting on the bottom step of the monumental stairway that leads up to the Capitol. His head is as empty as the heads of a

126

great many old men; it is a rare moment of well-being, he is doing nothing but warm his old carcass in the sun.

'I am the General. Yes. I am the General . . . ral . . .'

All of a sudden, a child of about seven rushes down the great marble staircase, four steps at a time. It is Dick Price, the little match-seller, the General's favourite.

'General! General!' he shouts to Sutter, hurling himself on his neck. 'General! You've won! Congress has just delivered its verdict! They're giving you a hundred million dollars!'

'Is it true? Is it really true? Are you sure?' Sutter asks him, holding the child tightly in his arms.

'Of course, General, and it seems it's already in the papers. Jim and Bob have gone to get some to sell! Me, too, I'm going to sell lots of newspapers this evening, heaps of them!'

Sutter does not notice seven little guttersnipes who are splitting their sides with laughter beneath the tall portico of Congress and who are making signs at their little pal. Sutter rises to his feet, holds himself very erect, says but two words, 'Thank you!' then beats the air with his arms and falls down like a log.

General John Augustus Sutter died on the 17th of June, 1880, at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Congress was not even in session that day.

The urchins run away.

The hour strikes in the immense deserted square and before long, as the sun descends, the gigantic shadow of the Capitol falls over the General's corpse.

127

---

## SIXTEENTH CHAPTER

---

74

John Augustus Sutter died at the age of seventy-three.

Congress never delivered a verdict.

His descendants never took any action, they abandoned the case.

His inheritance remains unclaimed.

Today, in 1925, and for just a few more years, there will still be time to come forward, take action, stake a claim.

Gold. Gold. Who wants gold?

Paris, 1910-1922.

Paris, 1910-1911.

Paris, 1914.

Paris, 1917.

Le Tremblay-sur-Mauldre,  
from November 22nd, 1924  
to December 31st, 1924.