

*The Man Who Is Weary of Europe*

1834. A steamer heading for America makes its way from Le Havre to New York. Among the desperados, one among hundreds, is John Augustus Sutter from Rynenberg near Basel. Thirty-one years old and in great haste to have the ocean between him and the European courts, bankrupt, a thief, and a bill forger, he has simply left his wife and three children in the lurch, obtained some money in Paris using fraudulent identification papers, and is now in search of a new existence. On July 7th he lands in New York, where for two years he is involved in all kinds of acceptable and absurd business. He becomes a furniture mover, a druggist, a dentist, a medicine salesman, a tavern owner. Finally, established to a certain degree, he settles in an inn, sells it again, and moves, following the magical march of the times, to Missouri. There he becomes a farmer, soon acquires a small property, and could live quietly. but people are always rushing past his house: fur traders, hunters, adventurers, and soldiers. They come from the West; they go to the West, and that word *West* gradually takes on a magical sound. First, he knows, there are plains, plains with enormous herds of buffalo, devoid of people for distances that can be traveled in days and weeks, hunted only by the redskins. Then come mountains, high, unclimbed, then finally that other country about which nobody knows anything specific and whose legendary wealth is extolled, the still unexplored California. It is a land where milk and honey flow, free to everyone who wants to take it—but distant, infinitely distant and mortally dangerous to reach.

But John Augustus Sutter has the blood of an adventurer. He is not tempted to sit still and farm his own land. One day, in the year 1837, he sells his possessions, outfits an expedition with wagons and horses and herds of oxen, and heads from Fort Independence into the unknown.

*The March to California*

1838. Two officers, five missionaries, and three women travel out into the endless emptiness in ox-drawn wagons. Across plains and prairies, finally over the mountains toward the Pacific Ocean, they ride for three months to reach Fort Vancouver. The officers have already left Sutter, the missionaries go no further, the three women have died of the privations along the way.

Sutter is alone. In vain they try to get him to stay in Vancouver, offering him a job. He rejects everything; the lure of the magical name has gotten into his blood. In a miserable sailing vessel he first crosses the Pacific to the Sandwich Islands and then lands, after endless difficulties along the Alaskan coast, at a forsaken place by the name of San Francisco. San Francisco—not the city of today that doubled its growth and grew into the millions after the earthquake—no, just a miserable fishing village, named after the Franciscan mission, not even the capital city of that unknown Mexican province California, lying fallow and neglected, neither civilized nor blooming, in the most luxurious zone of the new continent.

Spanish disorder prevails, increased by the absence of any authority, revolts, lack of work animals and people, lack of industrious energy. Sutter rents a horse and rides down into the fertile Sacramento Valley. One day suffices to show him that there is not only enough space for a farm, for a large estate, but for a kingdom. The next day he rides to Monterey, to the pitiful capital city, introduces himself to Governor Alvarado, and declares to him his intention to cultivate the land. He has brought Kanakas with him from the islands, intends to have these industrious and diligent colored people join him regularly from there, and volunteers to build settlements and establish a small empire. New Helvetia.

"Why New Helvetia?" asks the governor.

"I am Swiss and a republican," Sutter answers.

"Good. Do what you want. I'll give you a concession for ten years."

He sees that business is concluded quickly there. A thousand miles from any civilization the energy of a single individual has a different price than at home.

*New Helvetia*

1839. A caravan wheels slowly upstream along the bank of the Sacramento. Sutter is in the lead on horseback, with his rifle buckled on; behind him are two or three Europeans, then a hundred and fifty Kanakas in short garments, then thirty ox-drawn wagons with food, seeds, and ammunition, fifty horses, seventy-five mules, cows and sheep, then a small rear guard—that is the entire army that intends to conquer New Switzerland for itself.

Before them rolls a gigantic wave of flame. They set fire to the forests, an easier method than uprooting them. And hardly has the enormous blaze rushed across the land, on the still smoking tree stumps they begin their work. Storehouses are built and wells are dug. The ground, which needs no plowing, is planted. Pens are built for the endless herds. Gradually additions stream in from the neighboring abandoned mission colonies.

Their success is enormous. The plantings immediately produce five hundred percent return. The barns are filled to bursting; soon the herds number in the thousands, and in spite of the continuing difficulties in the country, the expeditions against the natives who again and again risk incursions into the blooming colony, New Helvetia develops tropically gigantic proportions. Canals, mills, and factories are built. Ships move up and down the rivers. Sutter supplies not only Vancouver and the Sandwich Islands but also all the sailing vessels that land in California. He plants fruit, the Californian fruit that is so famous and admired today. And behold, it thrives, and so he has grape vines sent from France and from the Rhine, and after a few years they cover the broad terrain.

For himself he builds houses and lush farms, sends for a piano made by Pleyel and has it brought the hundred-and-eighty-

day journey from Paris, and has a steam engine brought from New York across the entire continent by sixty oxen. He has credits and assets in the greatest banks of England and France, and now, forty-five years old, at the pinnacle of his triumph he remembers that fourteen years earlier he left a wife and three children somewhere in the world. He writes to them and invites them to join him in his principality. Now he feels the wealth in his hands. He is the lord of New Helvetia, one of the wealthiest men in the world, and will remain so. Finally the United States even tears the neglected colony out of Mexico's hands. Now everything is secure and safe. Only a few more years and Sutter will be the richest man in the world.

#### *The Fateful Thrust of the Spade*

1848, in January. Suddenly James W. Marshall, Sutter's carpenter, comes rushing into his house to see him. He says he absolutely must talk to him. Sutter is astonished. Just yesterday he sent Marshall up to his farm at Coloma to set up a new sawmill there. And now the man has returned without permission, stands trembling with excitement in front of him, pushes him into his room, closes and locks the door, and pulls from his pocket a handful of sand with a few yellow kernels in it. He says that yesterday, while he was digging, this peculiar metal caught his attention. He believes it is gold, but the others have ridiculed him. Sutter becomes serious, takes the granules, and makes the decisive test: it is gold. He decides to ride up to the farm with Marshall the very next day, but the master carpenter is the first to be seized by the terrible fever that will soon shake up the world. That very night he rides back in the middle of a storm, impatient to be certain.

The next morning Colonel Sutter is in Coloma. They dam off the canal and examine the sand. They only have to take a sieve, shake it back and forth a little, and the granules of gold remain bare on the black netting. Sutter gathers the few white

people around him, has them give their word of honor to remain silent until the sawmill is finished, then rides back to his farm solemn and determined. Tremendous thoughts move him. As far as he can remember, gold has never before lain so easily obtainable, so openly visible in the ground, and this ground is his, is Sutter's property. A decade seems to have been hurdled in one night. He is the richest man in the world.

#### *The Rush*

The richest man? No—the poorest, the most miserable, the most disappointed beggar in this world. Eight days later the secret has been revealed. A woman—always a woman!—told some passer-by and gave him a few kernels of gold. And what happens now is without precedent. All of Sutter's men immediately leave their work. The metalworkers run away from the forge, the shepherds from their flocks, the vintners from their vineyards. The soldiers leave their weapons behind. Everyone is as if possessed and with hastily procured sieves and pans they run to the sawmill to shake gold from the sand. Overnight the entire countryside is deserted. The milk cows that nobody milks bellow and die. The herds of oxen tear down their pens and trample their way into the fields where the crops rot on the plants. The cheese dairies do not operate, the barns collapse, the tremendous wheels of the gigantic enterprise stand still. Telegraphs send the golden promise spraying across countries and seas. And the people are already coming up from the cities, from the harbors. Sailors leave their ships; government officials leave their posts. In long, endless columns they pour in from the East, from the West, on foot, on horseback, in wagons, the gold rush, the human swarm of locusts, the gold diggers. An undisciplined, brutal horde that knows no other law but that of the fist, no commandment but that of their revolvers, floods over the blooming colony. For them, everything is ownerless. Nobody dares to stand up to these desperados. They slaughter Sutter's cattle. They tear down the

barns to build houses for themselves. They trample his fields; they steal his machines. Overnight John Augustus Sutter has become as poor as a pauper, like King Midas, smothered in his own gold.

And this unprecedented rush for gold becomes more and more powerful. The news has pressed out into the world. A hundred ships depart from New York alone. Enormous hordes of adventurers come across from Germany, from England, from France, from Spain in 1848, 1849, 1850, and 1851. Some travel around Cape Horn, but for the most impatient ones that takes too long, so they choose the more dangerous route over the Isthmus of Panama. A quickly formed company swiftly builds a railroad on the isthmus, and in the process thousands of workers perish with fever, just so that three or four weeks are saved for the impatient and they can reach the gold sooner. Enormous wagon trains move across the continent, people of all races and languages, and they all dig around in John Augustus Sutter's property as if on their own land. On the soil of San Francisco, which has been deeded to him through a sealed government document, a city grows at a fabulous pace. Strangers sell his land to each other, and the name New Helvetia, his empire, disappears behind the magical word: El Dorado, California.

John Augustus Sutter, once again bankrupt, stares as if paralyzed at this gigantic mass of discord. At first he tries to dig with them and even to exploit the wealth with his servants and associates, but they all abandon him. So he withdraws completely from the gold district to a secluded farm near the mountains, away from the accursed river and the unholy sand, to his farm *The Hermitage*. There his wife finally joins him with the three grown children, but soon after her arrival she dies of the exhaustion caused by the journey. But three sons are there now, eight arms, and with them John Augustus Sutter begins to farm. Once again, now with his three sons, he works his way up, quiet, tough, and uses the fantastic fertility of this soil. Once more he covers and hides a great plan.

*The Trial*

1850. California has been accepted into the union of the United States. Under the nation's strict discipline, wealth is finally followed by order in the gold-obsessed land. The anarchy is overcome, law takes its rightful place again.

And now John Augustus Sutter suddenly steps forward with his demands. All of the land, he claims, upon which the city of San Francisco is built, legally belongs to him. The state is obliged to make good the damage that he has suffered through the theft of his property. He lays claim to his share of all the gold that has been obtained from his land.

A trial begins in dimensions that humanity has never before seen. John Augustus Sutter files suit against 17,221 farmers who have settled on his plantations and insists that they leave the stolen land. From the state of California he demands twenty-five million dollars for having simply appropriated the roads, canals, bridges, dams, and mills that he built. From the Union he demands twenty-five million dollars in damages for destroyed property, in addition to his share of the gold that has been mined. He has had his older son Emil study law in Washington, so that he can conduct the lawsuit, and he uses the enormous income from his new farms for the sole purpose of paying for this expensive trial. For four years he drives it through all the courts.

On March 15, 1855 the verdict is finally handed down. The incorruptible Judge Thompson, the highest official in California, acknowledges the rights of John Augustus Sutter to the land as being completely justified and inviolable.

On that day John Augustus Sutter has reached his goal. He is the wealthiest man in the world.

*The End*

The wealthiest man in the world? No, once again no, the poorest beggar, the unhappiest, most defeated man. Again fate

strikes against him one of those murderous blows, but now one that knocks him to the ground forever. At the news of the verdict a storm breaks loose in San Francisco and in the entire country. Tens of thousands band together, all of the threatened owners, the mob of the street, the riffraff that are always ready to plunder—they storm the hall of justice and burn it down; they search for the judge to lynch him; and they set out, an enormous band, to plunder John Augustus Sutter's entire holdings. His oldest son shoots himself when harried by the bandits, the second is murdered, the third flees and drowns while returning home. A wave of fire rushes across New Helvetia. Sutter's farms are burned down; his grape vines are trampled under; his furniture, his collections, his money are stolen. And with merciless rage his enormous holdings are laid waste. Sutter himself barely escapes.

John Augustus Sutter never recovers from this blow. His work has been destroyed, his wife, his children are dead, his mind is deranged. Only one confused idea still flickers in the brain that has grown dull: the law, the trial.

Then for twenty-five years an old, feeble-minded, poorly clothed man wanders around the hall of justice in Washington. In all the offices they know the "general" in the dirty coat and the tattered shoes, the man who demands his billions. And again and again there are lawyers, adventurers, and rogues who extract from him the remnants of his pension and drive him to lawsuits all over again. He himself does not want any money. He hates the gold that made him poor, that murdered his three children, that destroyed his life. He simply wants what is rightfully his and fights for it with the querulous bitterness of the monomaniac. He lodges his complaint with the senate; he lodges his complaint with the congress, he confides in all kinds of helpers who, bridling the entire affair with pomp, clothe him in a ridiculous general's uniform and drag the unfortunate man like a puppet from office to office, from representative to representative.

That goes on for twenty years, from 1860 to 1880, twenty miserable pauper years. Day after day he loafs around the con-

gress hall, derided by all the officials, made sport of by the street urchins, he to whom the richest land on the earth belongs and on whose property the second capital city of the enormous empire stands and grows by the hour. But they let the irksome man wait. And there on the steps of the congress hall, on the afternoon of July 17, 1880, he finally has the heart attack that releases him. They carry away a dead beggar. A dead beggar, but one with a polemical treatise in his pocket which establishes for him and his heirs, according to all earthly laws, the claim to the greatest fortune in the history of the world.

Up to now, nobody has demanded Sutter's estate, no descendant has registered his claim. San Francisco, an entire country, still stands on foreign soil. Justice has still not been done in this case, and only an artist, Blaise Cendrars, has at least given the forgotten John Augustus Sutter the only right belonging to a grand fate, the right to amazed remembrance by posterity.