



THE GOLDEN TOUCH

THE STORY OF JOHN A. SUTTER

AMONG AMERICA'S WELL-KNOWN MEN were many who came from Europe to try their fortunes, and make their homes in this land of opportunity. One of the most appealing and important of these was a German-Swiss named John A. Sutter. Although he is now known chiefly because gold was discovered on his California property, Sutter's life was actually spent as a pioneer, a homemaker and a farmer.

Johan August Sutter was born at Kandern in Baden, Germany, of Swiss parents in 1803. At the

age of 31, he left his family in Burgdorf, in the Canton of Berne, and set out for the New World to make his fortune. He landed at New York, pushed westward to St. Louis, and from there he was soon traveling as a trader over the famous Santa Fe trail. Most of the American southwest was then Mexican territory, and in the summer of 1835, Sutter was crossing what was then the boundary line between the United States and Mexico. At this outpost, he asked to be directed to the hacienda of the head of the government in Santa Fe. A few moments later he was standing before the Alcalde. . . .

JOHN SUTTER: I'm John Sutter with a caravan of merchandise from St. Louis, Senor.

ALCALDE: You are an American, Senor?

JOHN SUTTER: I'm Swiss. But I hope to become an American.

ALCALDE: Ah, Senor. You should be a Mexican. That is the great country, the land of opportunity.

JOHN SUTTER: What more could I ask than the fine land of the American west?

ALCALDE: Ah. Then you have never seen California!

JOHN SUTTER: California. I've heard of it. Is it all they claim?

ALCALDE: There is no place to equal it. I cannot wait to return. Beauty, fertility—it has everything. And the climate! Ah, Senor, the climate!

JOHN SUTTER: If you will excuse me, I should like to present my passports, pay my duties and tend to my business now. Afterward I'll be glad to hear more of California.

ALCALDE: You can hear it all in one word, Senor. I would rather be a peon in California than a free man anywhere else in the world!

JOHN SUTTER: That should be easy for an Alcalde to arrange.

ALCALDE: Alas! The Mexican government has other ideas, Senor. It thinks I have value here.

JOHN SUTTER: I hope my cargo has one tenth your value, Alcalde.

ALCALDE: We need almost everything here. So no matter what you bring, it will quickly be converted into gold and silver.

JOHN SUTTER: Then I shall be as lucky as King Midas without his curse.

ALCALDE: Pardon, Senor. Who is he?

JOHN SUTTER: He's in a story I used to tell my children. A miser who wished that everything he touched would turn into gold.

ALCALDE: But where is the curse in that?

JOHN SUTTER: Why a man cannot eat and drink gold, Senor. And when King Midas touched food . . .

ALCALDE: Ah. I understand. It turned to gold and he starved! That is a good story. But fortunately, in California the greatest riches come from its golden sunlight.

JOHN SUTTER: Then some day I will go to California. To me, there is no gold so fine as a field of wheat ripening in the summer sun.

Three years later, John A Sutter started for California by way of the Oregon trail. Arriving in Vancouver in October, he found that he could not get south by land until spring. So he boarded a ship bound for Honolulu. From there he went to Sitka, Alaska, which was then Russian territory, with a load of merchandise. With the supplies he received in exchange, he sailed south and at last entered the picturesque city of Monterey, the capitol of Mexican California. In the patio of the bright adobe headquarters, Sutter was received by the governor, Alvarado. . . .

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: Senor Sutter, your papers are in good order and the letters you bring me from my friends in Honolulu speak most highly of you. What do you want of me?

JOHN SUTTER: I understand you are granting land. I want a place where I can make myself a home.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: We have occupied the best land here long ago. But perhaps you can buy some.

JOHN SUTTER: Unfortunately I have little money. But I do not ask the best land. I'm willing to go where the land is still fresh and new—and free.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: On the frontier?

JOHN SUTTER: Yes. I want a place I can make my own. I'll work to produce fields of grain and pastures for sheep and cattle. A good home. And my wife and children around me. Will you grant it to me? I'll gladly take land that's not wanted by your Mexican friends.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: What is not wanted by our citizens is wanted by our government.

JOHN SUTTER: I'll take land you cannot govern easily because it's far away.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: Will you be responsible for keeping order there?

JOHN SUTTER: Yes. And it'll be like an outpost for you, to protect your lands along the sea coast.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: Let me see. . . . There is—the Sacramento Valley. Some say it is beautiful, and fertile, and it's far away. I think it might do you very well.

JOHN SUTTER: I am ready to start any time.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: You are very confident, Senor.

JOHN SUTTER: I like—action.

GOVERNOR ALVARADO: Then, go and select your land. If you still want it a year from today, come back. I will make you a citizen of California and the ruler of your own land.

The land John Sutter selected was in the beautiful

valley, where the American River flows into the Sacramento. With firmness and justice, he gained the confidence of the Indians who lived there. They helped him and his white followers to build homes, plant fields, and tend herds of cattle and sheep. In a year, Governor Alvarado made him owner and ruler of the great farm empire he was founding. And as the years slipped by, men came inland from the coast, not wandering trappers, but home builders. In August of 1847, Sutter was in his headquarters, when John Bidwell, his right hand man, came into the room. . . .

JOHN BIDWELL: I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to interrupt your writing.

JOHN SUTTER: I have just finished. I have been writing to my wife and family back in Switzerland. It has been so long since I have seen them.

JOHN BIDWELL: They'll soon be able to join you. We've had a fine crop of wheat everywhere. The herds have increased by thousands. You're the owner of one of the most fertile valleys on earth.

JOHN SUTTER: I have everything in goods, but as yet no money. Even my supplies from Monterey must be paid for in beaver skins, salmon and tallow.

JOHN BIDWELL: You'll have plenty of cash one of these days. Every acre of your land is fertile—even the mountains! Your trees are already full grown and plentiful. That's what I came to see you about.

JOHN SUTTER: We cannot sell trees. Everybody has trees.

JOHN BIDWELL: I mean we need them for ourselves. We have such a good harvest, we must make new threshing floors at all the farms. But, it will take too long to hew the timber and smooth it by hand. We must build a saw mill.

JOHN SUTTER: Where?

JOHN BIDWELL: There is a good fall of water at the American Fork.

JOHN SUTTER: That's forty miles from here.

JOHN BIDWELL: I'll build you a road to it.

JOHN SUTTER: But then who will build the mill?

JOHN BIDWELL: There's a good man who's been working on the flour mill with me. Name of James Wilson Marshall.

JOHN SUTTER: Send for him.

JOHN BIDWELL: He's right outside.

JOHN SUTTER: I might have known you'd lose no time, Bidwell.

JOHN BIDWELL: (*calling*) Come in, Marshall!

JAMES MARSHALL: (*coming in*) Thanks . . . How do, Cap'n.

JOHN SUTTER: Fine. Sit down.

JAMES MARSHALL: Thanks.

JOHN SUTTER: So you want to build a saw mill on the American Fork?

JAMES MARSHALL: Sure I will.

JOHN SUTTER: For how much?

JAMES MARSHALL: Well, I don't want to be paid in any of the tin money you use around here.

JOHN SUTTER: Why, that's the best money there is!

JAMES MARSHALL: Just pieces of tin with stars stamped on them?

JOHN SUTTER: But every star means a full day's work. And a full day's work is equal to a fixed amount of wheat, land or cattle. We've got a whole schedule. Well, what's your proposition for building and managing a saw mill?

JAMES MARSHALL: One half of all the timber cut in it.

JOHN SUTTER: Sounds fair to me. Eh, Bidwell?

JOHN BIDWELL: I think it is.

JOHN SUTTER: Draw up the agreement, Bidwell.

JOHN BIDWELL: Yes, sir.

JOHN SUTTER: I'll make a note of it in my diary. I should think, Marshall, you'd be as well off with our tin coins as a pile of lumber out here in the woods.

JAMES MARSHALL: I can turn that lumber into gold, in San Francisco.

JOHN SUTTER: Money is scarce even there.

JOHN BIDWELL: Yes. It's strange no gold has been found in California. . . .

JAMES MARSHALL: Maybe it's here, but just buried too deep for our plowing and digging to turn up.

JOHN SUTTER: I'd give half my land for enough of it to bring my family over here. Sometimes I get so lonely for my wife and children I wish every blade of wheat, and every head of cattle were made of solid gold.

JAMES MARSHALL: Might as well make a good wish while you're at it, Capt'n, and wish it were the stones in the Sacramento.

JOHN SUTTER: You can laugh but it isn't funny to me.

JOHN BIDWELL: Here's the agreement about the saw mill. If you men don't mind waking up from your pipe dreams, you can sign your names here.

JAMES MARSHALL: Maybe this saw mill will change your luck, Capt'n. There may be real money in those woods.

JOHN SUTTER: I only want enough to bring my family here to me.

The work at the saw mill progressed slowly. After the mill race was dug, there was trouble with the tail race. The stubborn rock made it hard to dig deep and wide enough to carry the water from the mill. Meanwhile, California became a part of the United States, and the wild new territory now flew the American flag. Then one day, January 24th, 1848, Marshall rode into Sutter's Fort in great excitement. . . .

JAMES MARSHALL: Capt'n Sutter!

JOHN SUTTER: Yes? Why hello, Marshall. You look all het up as though it was summer.

JAMES MARSHALL: Are we alone?

JOHN SUTTER: Yes.

JAMES MARSHALL: I'll bolt the door.

JOHN SUTTER: You're very secret and mysterious, Marshall. What are you so excited about?

JAMES MARSHALL: This!

JOHN SUTTER: Looks like just an old dark bottle to me.

JAMES MARSHALL: Take it up. Look at what's in it.

JOHN SUTTER: Well . . . Hm. It's heavy. And . . . Why . . . it looks like . . .

JAMES MARSHALL: It is! It is! It's gold! GOLD!

JOHN SUTTER: How do you know? Have you tested it? Maybe it's fool's gold.

JAMES MARSHALL: Feel the weight of it? Bite into it. I've beat it with rocks. It's malleable. Soft and heavy. It's gold, I tell you!

JOHN SUTTER: Where did you get it?

JAMES MARSHALL: In the tail race of the saw mill. The gravel's full of it. It's everywhere. You're a rich man. You're worth millions, billions!

JOHN SUTTER: I'm not so sure of that.

JAMES MARSHALL: It's your land isn't it?

JOHN SUTTER: I don't know. It was when California was Mexican country. But now it's occupied

by the United States, I don't know for certain whose it is.

JAMES MARSHALL: Can't you do something to make sure?

JOHN SUTTER: I can send a copy of my lease to the American Governor for official approval.

JAMES MARSHALL: Do it quick. There's no time to lose.

JOHN SUTTER: I'll do it now. You can take it to the governor.

JAMES MARSHALL: No. No. I got to get back to the saw mill.

JOHN SUTTER: Then I'll send Bennett.

JAMES MARSHALL: We've got to keep this secret.

JOHN SUTTER: Don't the men know what you've found?

JAMES MARSHALL: They've watched me. But they think it's just scraps. Not worth losing their pay for. A day's pay! Why, I can pick up more than that in 15 minutes!

JOHN SUTTER: (*softly*) Gold!

JAMES MARSHALL: You'll have everything you want in the world now, Capt'n—if you can just keep it secret and move fast.

As Sutter watched Charles Bennett sail down the Sacramento River to get official confirmation of his lease of land from the Indians, he knew it would be no easy matter to keep the great Bonanza a secret.

Bennett was a loyal and staunch follower, but his pride in Sutter's empire might be his undoing.

Bennett stopped off at Benicia on his way down the river to Monterey, and dropped into Pfister's general store to hear the news of the day. . . .

CHARLES BENNETT: Hello, there, Pfister!

PFISTER: Well—hello, Bennett! What's the news from Sutter's fort?

CHARLES BENNETT: The flour mill's nearly finished. We're waiting for the mill stones.

PFISTER: They'll have a long wait. The cart with one of the stones broke down. I hear Sutter's building a saw mill.

CHARLES BENNETT: Yep. He has plenty of fine timber to be cut for the asking.

PFISTER: Timber. Humph! Plenty of that around here. Too bad he didn't have real luck like they had over to Monte Diabolo.

CHARLES BENNETT: What's that?

PFISTER: Coal. They found coal there, scads of it. I tell you, man, Californy's going to be a great state some day.

CHARLES BENNETT: Coal? Pshaw! That's nothing.

PFISTER: It's more than Sutter's got.

CHARLES BENNETT: Oh, no, it ain't! Not by a darn sight.

PFISTER: You fellers up the valley are just dirt

farmers . . . digging crops out of the ground—that is if there ain't no frost, or drought, or flood. Now coal. . . .

CHARLES BENNETT: Coal, eh? We're got something a heap sight finer and better than coal. . . . Look at this.

(holding out his hand)

PFISTER: What's that?

CHARLES BENNETT: What do you think it is?

PFISTER: It—it looks like gold. Is it gold?

CHARLES BENNETT: I ain't saying it is, and I ain't saying it ain't.

PFISTER: Why there must be 6 ounces of it. That's a lot of money! Where did you get it?

CHARLES BENNETT: I ain't come from no place but Sutter's.

PFISTER: Gosh all Jupiter! Gold! Boys, boys, come on over here! Look at this! Gold! Sutter's gold!

Bennett dashed on to Monterey to see the military governor. While he was making the return trip, a wagoner came into the saloon, run by C. C. Smith, at Sutter's Fort. . . .

WAGONER: Wipee! Hello, there, Smith! Look at this!

C. C. SMITH: What is it?

WAGONER: Gold!

C. C. SMITH: Gold! Where did you get it?

WAGONER: I was up to the saw mill with some supplies. Just picked this up at lunch time.

C. C. SMITH: Joe, you're a thief!

WAGONER: And you're a fool!

C. C. SMITH: I would be if I thought gold was lying around waiting to be picked up for the asking.

WAGONER: You're a fool if you don't believe it! I tell you everybody up there is picking up some of it when they got nothing better to do.

C. C. SMITH: Nothing better to do? You idiot! What else could be better than picking up gold without work. It's just some of that fool's gold.

WAGONER: It won't be fool's gold till it belongs to you, Smith. It's the real thing I tell you! Here's Captain Sutter. You can ask him. He knows about it.

JOHN SUTTER: What's all the rumpus, Smith?

C. C. SMITH: This fellow here says there's gold at your saw mill.

JOHN SUTTER: So you've heard about it already?

C. C. SMITH: Is this it?

WAGONER: Tell him it is, Capt'n. I picked it up in the tail race same as everybody else. It's the genuine article ain't it?

JOHN SUTTER: Yes. It's gold right enough.

C. C. SMITH: Is there much of it there?

JOHN SUTTER: I'm afraid there's a great deal of it.

C. C. SMITH: You're afraid? Why Captain Sutter

let me congratulate you, sir. You'll be the richest man in California!

CHARLES BENNETT: (*Rushing in*) Captain! Captain Sutter!

JOHN SUTTER: Bennett! I'm glad you're back. What luck?

CHARLES BENNETT: Why, sir—you see, Captain, sir—

JOHN SUTTER: The governor refused?

CHARLES BENNETT: No, sir. Not exactly refused, sir. You see, Californy ain't Mexican now and it ain't exactly part of the United States yet, either. There ain't no laws apply here now. Governor Mason says he couldn't confirm your lease if he wanted to.

JOHN SUTTER: I see. Then until the United States takes over, there's no real authority in California.

CHARLES BENNETT: Of course, they'll confirm your land for sure then, but meanwhile—

JOHN SUTTER: Yes. I understand. Meanwhile we're all just squatters.

WAGONER: I reckon I'll be getting back to the saw mill.

CHARLES BENNETT: I'll go with you.

JOHN SUTTER: You'll be needed in the fields tomorrow, Bennett.

CHARLES BENNETT: I'll be working only in the gold fields from now on, Captain!

(*Bennett runs out*)

C. C. SMITH: What's the matter, Captain? You don't seem pleased. You ought to be jumping with joy. You'll be the richest man in the world. Everybody says so.

JOHN SUTTER: It will be lucky if I have enough left at Hock Farm to make a good home for my family now.

C. C. SMITH: But I don't understand. Surely all this gold really belongs to you. I heard them call it Sutter's gold.

JOHN SUTTER: But they'll take it for their own just the same. And nobody can stop them.

C. C. SMITH: But there must be enough for all.

JOHN SUTTER: The more there is, the poorer I'll be. Don't you see? They will come here by hundreds, by thousands. All my workers will leave me. The wheat will rot in the fields. My sheep and my cattle will wander away into the wilderness. They will be shot for food by anyone who is hungry. Miles and miles of land. All lost for gold. Like the story I used to tell my children. King Midas . . . with his golden touch.

C. C. SMITH: I see. Well, help yourself to anything you want, Captain. I'm going after the boys to see if I can find some gold myself.

In 1849, the Gold Rush started in earnest. Almost overnight, 42,000 prospectors thronged Sutter's lands, maintaining squatter sovereignty. His lands were no

longer a wilderness. They were over-run by a horde of people, many of them lawless and wild. In 1849, Sutter's son, John, joined him. In 1852, they were joined by Sutter's wife, Anna, and their children. He brought them to Hock Farm, which was all that was left to him of his land grants. One evening a year later, John Sutter and Anna were standing on the porch in front of their modest farm house. . . .

ANNA SUTTER: You are very silent, Johan. Is it because the view is so quiet and beautiful?

JOHN SUTTER: No, Anna. I was thinking how many years I worked to bring you and the children to California. I thought to make a great lady of you here. I thought I had everything. Then—they find gold. And when you get here—I have nothing.

ANNA SUTTER: This is a nice farm, Johan, and I like it.

JOHN SUTTER: It was just a little corner of my land. And I wanted so much for you and the children.

ANNA SUTTER: Look. Here comes a horseman at full gallop.

JOHN SUTTER: It's our boy, John. Something must be wrong.

ANNA SUTTER: Maybe he brings us good news.

JOHN SUTTER: There is no good news any more, Anna.

JOHN: (*riding up*) Father! Father! I've got news from Sacramento!

JOHN SUTTER: What is it?

JOHN: The Supreme Court has decided the land is all yours! All of the first grant.

JOHN SUTTER: All!

JOHN: Father, you're a great man again.

ANNA SUTTER: Your father has always been a great man.

JOHN: You'll be rich again, father.

JOHN SUTTER: No. I'm afraid it's too late. I shall always be poor.

JOHN: But why? The land is yours. The courts say so.

JOHN SUTTER: But how am I going to get it? Thousands of squatters are living on it. They say it is theirs.

JOHN: You can make them give it back.

JOHN SUTTER: That will take money.

JOHN: Money? Why all the gold is yours!

JOHN SUTTER: Not till I get every squatter off my land and move it myself. That will mean fighting every one of them, one by one, through the courts.

JOHN: All that land, and gold, all ours—and we can't touch it!

JOHN SUTTER: It's the curse of the golden touch, son. My sheep and cattle, my fields of wheat and corn, even the view up the Sacramento Valley—everything turned to gold.

ANNA SUTTER: No, John. Not everything.

JOHN SUTTER: Anna! What is left?

ANNA SUTTER: We are left, Johan—

JOHN SUTTER: Forgive me, Anna. I was only thinking of what I wanted for you.

ANNA SUTTER: I have all I want, Johan. My family all together and a good home.

JOHN SUTTER: Anna, I should have known! I have no gold but I am still the richest man in the world!