
JOHN JAKES

# CALIFORNIA GOLD

A NOVEL

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With the exception of historical figures,
all characters in this novel are fictitious.
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or past, is coincidental.


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Now I wish you to learn one of the strangest matters that has ever been found in writing or in the memory of mankind. . . . Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called *California*, very close to the Earthly Paradise . . .

—GARCÍ ORDÓÑEZ DE MONTALVO
*Las Sergas de Esplandián*
Seville, 1510

In reading the biographies of Californians, I found some recurring themes: restlessness rather than rootedness, innovation instead of tradition, freedom replacing responsibility. . . . I also found an obsession with bigness.

—CAROL DUNLAP
*California People*

I don't think of California as a place, you see. It is a certain kind of opportunity.

—JAMES D. HOUSTON
*Californians*

Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU

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# CALIFORNIA GOLD

THIRTY YEARS AFTER the Gold Rush, men and women of adventurous spirit began to discover the true gold of California. They found it hidden in her soil and her streams, in black oil and golden citrus, in seemingly impractical new inventions such as moving pictures and airplanes.

One such gold seeker set out in 1886, his destination a place steeped in legend, myth, and dreams. She was still a raw frontier, a land of stunning geographic contrasts, of parched savannas and snowy peaks, cold purple valleys and hot yellow deserts. She spilled across 158,700 square miles, and an entire 10 degrees of latitude north to south.

She had already known many cultures. Manila galleons had provisioned in her coastal bays, homebound for Europe with the riches of the Orient. Sir Francis Drake had careened his ship on her shore while searching for the fabled northwest passage to the Indies.

Early Spanish explorers waded her rivers and trekked her deserts in search of mythical cities paved with gold. Like a string of sacred rosary beads, twenty-one Franciscan missions were placed from San Diego to Sonoma. These first European settlers, the soldiers and clerics, practiced what they perceived as a benevolent despotism. In the name of God and civilization they enslaved the first Californians, native Indians whose most warlike activities were digging roots and weaving baskets.

As the years passed, others came to California in pursuit of good fortune or easy living. Mexican descendants of the Spanish soldiers settled on her hills to raise cattle on great *ranchos.* New England merchantmen sailed in to trade for tallow and hides—"California bank-notes," the Yankees called them. Imperial Russia planted a colony on the northern coast in search of furs and perhaps new territory, only to see it fail after a few decades.

By then a new, menacing breed had appeared: bold mountain

men who risked their lives to push through the snow-choked passes of the Sierras. They greedily eyed the sweet rich land sequestered behind the mountain barrier, and soon word of their discoveries filtered east. Many more "Anglos" were shortly on the way.

"Manifest destiny" was a banner the Americans carried from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In 1846 they seized California, and four years later she was ushered into the Union as the thirty-first state. By 1851 Americans were using the courts to steal the land-grant *ranchos* from their original owners.

All of this took place against the turmoil of a truly global event. On January 24, 1848, at Captain Sutter's sawmill on the south fork of the American River, a cry went up and echoed around the world: *"Gold!"*

Hundreds heeded it, then thousands. They walked or rode across the prairies and mountains, or tossed in reeking ships that carried them to California after they trudged through the pestilential heat of the Isthmus of Panama. Other ships voyaged around the Horn, many sinking in its raging storms. By foot and by horse, by wheel and by sail, these modern seekers of the golden fleece, these Argonauts, came. They hailed from farms and cities all over America, from Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Russia, China, Hawaii, Brazil, and scores of other places. During the peak of the Gold Rush as many as a hundred thousand of them were swarming into California each year.

A few found gold; most didn't. Those who did failed to keep it. The Gold Rush created not a single millionaire, not one family fortune.

Within ten years, however, other men with different perspectives began to seek and find the real gold of the Golden State. First among them were four shopkeepers, all of ordinary background but extraordinary avarice and energy, who planned, financed, and built the western portion of the first transcontinental railroad.

Other Californians began to strike it rich in silver mines just over the Nevada border. Still others found wealth in vast tracts of land where wheat could be grown bountifully and profitably.

Even by 1886, when she held almost a million people, California had not yet yielded all of her treasures. Despite the disillusionment of many who had already failed there, her shining myth remained undimmed. Her name was still a lodestone for the courageous and

hopeful, and she still sang her siren song to young dreamers around the world.

This is the story of one of them . . . and of some of those he met on his journey in search of California gold.

JMC

PRELUDE

# CALIFORNIA DREAMS

1886

THE THREE HANGED MEN turned in the wind as the timbers of the gibbet creaked and the blizzard covered the shabby coats of the dead with shrouds of white. The boy was frightened of the three, with their closed eyes, fishy white skin, purple throats. He knew them all: O'Murphy, Caslin, and Uncle Dave, Pa's brother. They frightened him nearly as much as this sudden storm.

It came down off Sharp Mountain like a howling wolf, building the drifts an inch higher during the short time he stood by the gibbet. It stung his face, the snow more like pellets of ice, and drove against him so that he resembled a shrunken old man with white hair.

The blue medicine bottle dropped from his numb right hand. Frantic, he pawed in the drift till he found it and then put it in the left pocket of his poor coat, the only one without a hole. The bottle came from the store operated by the mine company—the Pluck-Me Store, Pa called it, because that's what it did to all the miners, plucked them clean.

He started to run through the growing drifts. Hard going: soon his breath was tearing in and out in loud gasps. The storm gripped his bones and made them ache, and he felt he'd never be warm again, never see sunshine again. Stumbling past the last of the hideous frame duplexes where some of the miners lived, he feared he'd never see Pa again, because drifts twice as tall as he was blocked the path home.

He wanted to cry but didn't, because he'd learned that lesson already. Even at seven years old, you didn't cry. If there wasn't enough food—and there never was—you didn't cry. If the winters were endless, freezing, without sun except for a feeble yellow-white glow in the haze now and then, breaking your heart because you longed for warmth and light, you didn't cry. If the mine's hired detectives hanged your uncle for conspiring to strike, you didn't cry. If you were out here, lost, afraid for your life and immortal soul, you still didn't cry.

He ran, slamming through a drift, battering it with both fists, the wind yelling and sobbing and chittering in his ear. His hair was white. Bolting left, he lost his balance and tumbled onto his side. He came up spitting snow and, wild with fright, cupped his hands around his mouth. "Pa? Pa,

help me!" Under his nails dark deposits showed; the dirt came from his work, picking and sorting the anthracite with forty other boys. He had Pennsylvania black gold under his nails, but he couldn't spend it.

He feared there'd be no answer. Stumbling, he nearly fell again when he heard a distant voice. "Mack? Mack—son!"

"Pa, where are you? I can't see you. I'm lost."

"Mack, I've been searching for an hour." The voice receded as he ran toward it.

"But where are you?"

"Over here, this way."

*This way this way.* The sound whirled round and round him, the voices multiplying, echoing, confusing and frightening him more. He screamed for Pa, and swerved to the left, then right, running faster, his cracked old shoes somehow lifting him above the snow, carrying him on between cliffs of snow that formed a steadily narrowing canyon. "Pa! Pa?" he cried, and a hundred answering voices gibbered at him from all directions, the human sounds and the storm's cry a hopeless tangle.

He heard a rumbling, felt it in his feet deep in the drifts. The rumbling grew, and the snow cliffs on both sides shuddered and began to rain down showers of white.

He ran into something solid and cried out. Snapping his head back, he saw the three hanged men. He'd run in a circle. Around the gibbet, ramparts of snow reached up to a sky he was seeing for the last time.

"Help me," he said to the dead men as the snow cliffs burst open; great blocks of white hurtled down. "Somebody help me."

The hanged men opened their eyes and looked down.

He started to scream, but no sound would come. His mouth open, he watched tons of snow descending on him with a roar like the end of creation. Again he tried to force a scream out. Nothing. His throat was silent, dead.

But there was screaming enough. The storm screamed for him, louder, and louder, and—

His eyes flew open. The terrible sound gripped him until he sat up and his mind started to function. There was a thin scrawl of smoke along the horizon. Again the freight train signaled with its whistle, now quickly fading, the train dwindling in the west and leaving nothing but the smoke above the rolling harvested fields. He forced himself to breathe deeply; that slowed the beat of his heart.

The nightmare recurred every few months. It was as familiar as a friend, but not nearly as welcome. It was compounded of drab memories: the cold, sooty, hopeless world of the coal patch, the little village of Irish and Welsh mining families between Pottsville and Port Carbon, Pennsylvania, where his pa had raised him; and of terrifying ones: He'd been lost for half an hour in just such a snowstorm when he was sent on an errand at age six.

He hadn't really been in danger of losing his life, but he might as well have been, so terrified was he before his pa came with a lantern to carry him home.

In the dream he always died, killed by the sunless world of his boyhood, where there was never enough food, never enough firewood, never enough in a miner's bobtail paycheck because of all that the company deducted for rent, groceries, lamp oil, miners' candles.

For most of those who had squandered their few years of health and vigor mining Schuylkill coal, there was never enough hope. In that respect Pa was an exception. Pa had his memories. Pa had his book. Pa had California.

He'd bequeathed all of those things to his son, who now combed a burr out of his hair and stepped over the golden leaves at the base of the tree till he was free of the shadows of the limbs and could lean his head back and let the hot autumn sunshine soak into him. It wasn't as good as the sunshine of California, he was sure, but it was a foretaste.

His name was James Macklin Chance. Macklin was his Irish mother's maiden name. She'd died bearing him, and perhaps his pa had always called him Mack because of his love for her, and his loss. He stood five feet, ten inches, and had a trim, hard frame developed during his years as a mine boy. Though he'd been out in the open almost constantly in recent months, he was only marginally darker than he had been the day he left Schuylkill County forever. He was still a pale easterner.

Mack had inherited his father's straight brown hair and the hazel eyes of the mother he never knew. His beard, which he'd let grow for this journey, was distinctly lighter and redder than the hair above, and it hid a strong chin. He had a broad, likable smile when he felt like displaying it, but his early years in the mines had built a pugnacity into him too.

He relieved himself behind the tree and then hunkered over the big blue bandanna that carried his worldly goods, which consisted of a large clasp knife and the book. He wore corduroy pants and an old jacket of denim, much too heavy for this heat but necessary on the final stage of his journey. He'd set out with no money at all. The settlement after the mine accident was a princely $25, for which he'd signed a paper saying the mining company was absolved of all responsibility. Burying Pa properly had used up the entire sum.

Mack untied the bandanna and debated between the bruised apple and one of the crackers now hard as wood. He chose the cracker and then took out the book, brushing crumbs from its embossed leather cover. Inspecting each corner to make sure none was bent, he then smoothed his palm over the raised lettering, whose feel he knew by heart. The cover said:

THE EMIGRANT'S GUIDE
TO CALIFORNIA
& ITS GOLD FIELDS.

Below this was the author's name, T. Fowler Haines, and a date, 1848. The book measured six inches by three, and was half an inch thick. Mack opened it to the title page and smiled as if meeting an old friend. BASED UPON PERSONAL EYE-WITNESS EXPERIENCES OF THE AUTHOR. And PUBLISHED AT NEW YORK CITY BY THE CASH BROS. PRINTING CO. PRICE 15 CENTS (WITH MAP). Now leafing through the little book his father had carried all the way to California and back again, his eye touched on a favorite line.

> The El Dorado of the early voyagers to America has been discovered at last, giving riches to some, and new hope to all.

His pa had believed that all his life, even though he was one of the thousands of failed Argonauts who came home with nothing but memories of a golden land of sunshine and promise. Mack believed it too, and now that his pa's accident had set him free of responsibility—he'd never had any loyalty to the mine company, or to the cheerless cold land in which it bled its victims of their strength and hope—he was on his way to prove the words of the remote and godlike T. Fowler Haines. In California, he'd never be cold again, or poor.

Mack once more brushed off the book, considered whether the upper right corner might be slightly bent—it was not—and then tied up the bandanna and resumed his walk west through Union County, Iowa, as the morning wore away.

A half hour later he came on two farm boys rolling around and punching each other in the dirt. He jumped in and pulled off the one on top, a stern light in his hazel eyes.

"You let him alone."

"Ain't none of your business," the bigger boy said. "He's my brother."

"I don't care—you're a whole head taller."

"What gives you any right to butt in?"

"Why," Mack said with a touch of a smile, "I just like to stand up for the underdog when he can't stand up for himself. It's something my pa taught me." Then he lost the smile as he pointed his index finger near the bigger one's face. "So you pay attention to what I say. Don't let me catch you bullying again."

"Yes, sir, awright," said the bigger one, now less sure of himself.

"Is there a town anyplace close?"

"Three miles on," said the smaller boy.

"Good. I have to find some work so I can buy some food."

The frame building, the depot of Macedon, Iowa, baked in the midday heat. Rails polished to a dazzle by the sun ran away east and west through the vast fertile prairies, where silos and barns broke the horizon. Mack stepped up into the shade at the east end of the trackside platform, drawn by the sound of a loud, whiny voice. He'd been scrutinizing Macedon's