



JOAQUÍN MURIETA
The California Bandit

LIFE OF JOAQUÍN MURIETA

ISIT down to write somewhat concerning the life and character of *Joaquín Murieta*, a man as remarkable in the annals of crime as any of the renowned robbers of the Old or New World, who have preceded him; and I do this, not for the purpose of ministering to any depraved taste for the dark and horrible in human action, but rather to contribute my mite to those materials out of which the early history of California shall one day be composed. The character of this truly wonderful man was nothing more than a natural production of the social and moral condition of the country in which he lived, acting upon certain peculiar circumstances favorable to such a result, and, consequently, his individual history is a part of the most valuable history of the State.

There were two Joaquíns, bearing the various surnames of Murieta, O'Comorenia, Valenzuela, Botellier, and Carillo—so that it was supposed there were no less than five sanguinary devils ranging the country at one and the same time. It is now fully ascertained that there were only two, whose proper names were Joaquín Murieta and Joaquín Valenzuela, the latter being nothing more than a distinguished subordinate to the first, who is the Rinaldo Rinaldini of California.

The Life and Adventures of

Joaquín Murieta was a Mexican, born in the province of Sonora of respectable parents and educated in the schools of Mexico. While growing up, he was remarkable for a very mild and peaceable disposition, and gave no sign of that indomitable and daring spirit which afterwards characterized him. Those who knew him in his school-boy days speak affectionately of his generous and noble nature at that period of his life and can scarcely credit the fact that the renowned and bloody bandit of California was one and the same being. At an early age of his manhood—indeed, while he was yet scarcely more than a boy—he became tired of the uncertain state of affairs in his own country, the usurpations and revolutions which were of such common occurrence, and resolved to try his fortunes among the American people, of whom he had formed the most favorable opinion from an acquaintance with the few whom he had met in his own native land. The war with Mexico had been fought, and California belonged to the United States. Disgusted with the conduct of his degenerate countrymen and fired with enthusiastic admiration of the American character, the youthful Joaquín left his home with a buoyant heart and full of the exhilarating spirit of adventure. The first that we hear of him in the Golden State is that, in the spring of 1850, he is engaged in the honest occupation of a miner in the Stanislaus placers, then reckoned among the richest portions of the mines. He was then eighteen years of age, a little over the medium height, slenderly but gracefully built, and active as a young tiger. His complexion was neither very dark or very light, but clear and brilliant,

Joaquín Murieta

and his countenance is pronounced to have been, at that time, exceedingly handsome and attractive. His large black eyes, kindling with the enthusiasm of his earnest nature, his firm and well-formed mouth, his well-shaped head from which the long, glossy, black hair hung down over his shoulders, his silvery voice full of generous utterance, and the frank and cordial bearing which distinguished him made him beloved by all with whom he came in contact. He had the confidence and respect of the whole community around him, and was fast amassing a fortune from his rich mining claim. He had built him a comfortable mining residence in which he had domiciled his heart's treasure—a beautiful Sonorian girl, who had followed the young adventurer in all his wanderings with that devotedness of passion which belongs to the dark-eyed damsels of Mexico. It was at this moment of peace and felicity that a blight came over the young man's prospects. The country was then full of lawless and desperate men, who bore the name of Americans but failed to support the honor and dignity of that title. A feeling was prevalent among this class of contempt for any and all Mexicans, whom they looked upon as no better than conquered subjects of the United States, having no rights which could stand before a haughtier and superior race. They made no exceptions. If the proud blood of the Castilians mounted to the cheek of a partial descendant of the Mexiques, showing that he had inherited the old chivalrous spirit of his Spanish ancestry, they looked upon it as a saucy presumption in one so inferior to them. The prejudice of color, the antipathy of races, which are

always stronger and bitterer with the ignorant and unlettered, they could not overcome, or if they could, would not, because it afforded them a convenient excuse for their unmanly cruelty and oppression. A band of these lawless men, having the brute power to do as they pleased, visited Joaquín's house and peremptorily bade him leave his claim, as they would allow no Mexicans to work in that region. Upon his remonstrating against such outrageous conduct, they struck him violently over the face, and, being physically superior, compelled him to swallow his wrath. Not content with this, they tied him hand and foot and ravished his mistress before his eyes. They left him, but the soul of the young man was from that moment darkened. It was the first injury he had ever received at the hands of the Americans, whom he had always hitherto respected, and it wrung him to the soul as a deeper and deadlier wrong from that very circumstance. He departed with his weeping and almost heart-broken mistress for a more northern portion of the mines; and the next we hear of him, he is cultivating a little farm on the banks of a beautiful stream that watered a fertile valley, far out in the seclusion of the mountains. Here he might hope for peace—here he might forget the past, and again be happy. But his dream was not destined to last. A company of unprincipled Americans—shame that there should be such bearing the name!—saw his retreat, coveted his little home surrounded by its fertile tract of land, and drove him from it, with no other excuse than that he was “an infernal Mexican intruder!” Joaquín's blood boiled in his veins, but his spirit was still unbroken, nor had the iron

so far entered his soul as to sear up the innate sensitiveness to honor and right which reigned in his bosom. Twice broken up in his honest pursuit of fortune, he resolved still to labor on with unflinching brow and with that true *moral* bravery, which throws its redeeming light forward upon his subsequently dark and criminal career. How deep must have been the anguish of that young heart and how strongly rooted the native honesty of his soul, none can know or imagine but they who have been tried in a like manner. He bundled up his little movable property, still accompanied by his faithful bosom-friend, and again started forth to strike once more, like a brave and honest man, for fortune and for happiness. He arrived at “Murphy's Diggings” in Calaveras County, in the month of April, and went again to mining, but, meeting with nothing like his former success, he soon abandoned that business and devoted his time to dealing “monte,” a game which is common in Mexico, and has been almost universally adopted by gamblers in California. It is considered by the Mexican in no manner a disreputable employment, and many well-raised young men from the Atlantic States have resorted to it as a profession in this land of luck and chances. It was then in much better odor than it is now, although it is at present a game which may be played on very fair and honest principles; provided, anything can be strictly honest or fair which allows the taking of money without a valuable consideration. It was therefore looked upon as no departure from rectitude on the part of Joaquín, when he commenced the business of dealing “monte.” Having a very pleasing exterior and

The Life and Adventures of

being, despite of all his sorrows, very gay and lively in disposition, he attracted many persons to his table, and won their money with such skill and grace, or lost his own with such perfect good humor that he was considered by all the very beau ideal of a gambler and the prince of clever fellows. His sky seemed clear and his prospects bright, but Fate was weaving her mysterious web around him, and fitting him to be by the force of circumstances what nature never intended to make him.

He had gone a short distance from Murphy's Digging to see a half-brother, who had been located in that vicinity for several months, and returned to Murphy's upon a horse which his brother had lent him. The animal proved to have been stolen, and being recognized by a number of individuals in town, an excitement was raised on the subject. Joaquín suddenly found himself surrounded by a furious mob and charged with the crime of theft. He told them how it happened that he was riding the horse and in what manner his half-brother had come in possession of it. They listened to no explanation, but bound him to a tree, and publicly disgraced him with the lash. They then proceeded to the house of his half-brother and hung him without judge or jury. It was then that the character of Joaquín changed, suddenly and irrevocably. Wanton cruelty and the tyranny of prejudice had reached their climax. His soul swelled beyond its former boundaries, and the barriers of honor, rocked into atoms by the strong passion which shook his heart like an earthquake, crumbled around him. Then it was that he declared to a friend that he would live henceforth

Joaquín Murieta

for revenge and that his path should be marked with blood. Fearfully did he keep his promise, as the following pages will show.

It was not long after this unfortunate affair that an American was found dead in the vicinity of Murphy's Digging, having been cut to pieces with a knife. Though horribly mangled, he was recognized as one of the mob engaged in whipping Joaquín. A doctor, passing in the neighborhood of this murder, was met, shortly afterward, by two men on horseback, who fired their revolvers at him, but, owing to his speed on foot, and the unevenness of the ground, he succeeded in escaping with no further injury than having a bullet shot through his hat within an inch of the top of his head! A panic spread among the rash individuals who had composed that mob, and they were afraid to stir out on their ordinary business. Whenever any one of them strayed out of sight of his camp or ventured to travel on the highway, he was shot down suddenly and mysteriously. Report after report came into the villages that Americans had been found dead on the highways, having been either shot or stabbed, and it was invariably discovered, for many weeks, that the murdered men belonged to the mob who publicly whipped Joaquín. It was fearful and it was strange to see how swiftly and mysteriously those men disappeared. "Murieta's revenge was very nearly complete," said an eyewitness of these events, in reply to an inquiry which I addressed him. "I am inclined to think he *wiped out* the most of those prominently engaged in whipping him."

Thus far, who can blame him? But the iron had en-

The Life and Adventures of

tered too deeply in his soul for him to stop here. He had contracted a hatred to the whole American race, and was determined to shed their blood, whenever and wherever an opportunity occurred. It was no time now for him to retrace his steps. He had committed deeds which made him amenable to the law, and his only safety lay in a persistence in the unlawful course which he had begun. It was necessary that he should have horses and that he should have money. These he could not obtain except by robbery and murder, and thus he became an outlaw and a bandit on the verge of his nineteenth year.

The year 1850 rolled away, marked with the eventful history of this young man's wrongs and trials, his bitter revenge on those who had perpetrated the crowning act of his deep injury and disgrace; and, as it closed, it shut him away forever from his peace of mind and purity of heart. He walked forth into the future a dark, determined criminal, and his proud nobility of soul existed only in memory.

It became generally known in 1851 that an organized banditti was ranging the country; but it was not yet ascertained who was the leader. Travelers, laden with the produce of the mines, were met upon the roads by well-dressed men who politely invited them to "stand and deliver"; persons riding alone in the many wild and lonesome regions, which form a large portion of this country, were skillfully noosed with the lasso (which the Mexicans throw with great accuracy, being able thus to capture wild cattle, elk, and sometimes even grizzly bears, upon the plains), dragged from their saddles, and murdered

Joaquín Murieta

in the adjacent thickets. Horses of the finest mettle were stolen from the ranches, and, being tracked up, were found in the possession of a determined band of men, ready to retain them at all hazards and fully able to stand their ground. The scenes of murder and robbery shifted with the rapidity of lightning. At one time, the northern countries would be suffering slaughters and depredations, at another the southern, and, before one would have imagined it possible, the east and the west, and every point of the compass would be in trouble. There had never been before this, either in '49 or '50, any such as an organized banditti, and it had been a matter of surprise to every one, since the country was so well adapted to a business of this kind—the houses scattered at such distances along the roads, the plains so level and open in which to ride with speed, and the mountains so rugged with their ten thousand fastnesses in which to hide. Grass was abundant in the far-off valleys which lay hidden in the rocky gorges, cool, delicious streams made music at the feet of the towering peaks, or came leaping down in gladness from their sides—game abounded on every hand, and nine unclouded months of the year made a climate so salubrious that nothing could be sweeter than a day's rest under the tall pines or a night's repose under the open canopy of heaven. Joaquín knew his advantages. His superior intelligence and education gave him the respect of his comrades, and, appealing to the prejudice against the "Yankees," which the disastrous results of the Mexican war had not tended to lessen in their minds, he soon assembled around him a powerful band of his countrymen, who

daily increased, as he ran his career of almost magical success. Among the number was Manuel Garcia, more frequently known as "Three-Fingered Jack," from the fact of his having had one of his fingers shot off in a skirmish with an American party during the Mexican war. He was a man of unflinching bravery, but cruel and sanguinary. His form was large and rugged and his countenance so fierce that few liked to look upon it. He was different from his more youthful leader, in possessing nothing of his generous, frank, and cordial disposition, and in being utterly destitute of one merciful trait of humanity. His delight was in murder for its own diabolical sake, and he gloated over the agonies of his unoffending victims. He would sacrifice policy, the safety and interests of the band for the mere gratification of this murderous propensity, and it required all Joaquín's firmness and determination to hold him in check. The history of this monster was well known before he joined Joaquín. He was known to be the same man, who, in 1846, surrounded with his party two Americans, young men by the name of Cowie and Fowler, as they were traveling on the road between Sonoma and Bodega, stripped them entirely naked, and, binding them each to a tree, slowly tortured them to death. He began by throwing knives at their bodies, as if he were practicing at a target; he then cut out their tongues, punched out their eyes with his knife, gashed their bodies in numerous places, and, finally, flaying them alive, left them to die. A thousand cruelties like these had he been guilty of, and, long before Joaquín knew him, he was a hardened experienced, and detestable monster. When it was necessary

for the young chief to commit some peculiarly horrible and cold-blooded murder, some deed of hellish ghastliness at which his soul revolted, he deputed this man to do it. And well was it executed, with certainty and to the letter.

Another member of this band was Reyes Feliz, a youth of sixteen years of age, who had read the wild romantic lives of the chivalrous robbers of Spain and Mexico until his enthusiastic spirit had become imbued with the same sentiments which actuated them, and he could conceive of nothing grander than to throw himself back upon the strictly natural rights of man and hurl defiance at society and its laws. He also was a Sonorian, and the beautiful mistress of Joaquín was his sister. He was a devoted follower of his chief; like him, brave, impulsive, and generous.

A third member was Claudio, a man about thirty-five years of age, of lean but vigorous constitution, a dark complexion, and possessing a somewhat savage but lively and expressive countenance. He was indisputably brave, but exceedingly cautious and cunning, springing upon his prey at an unexpected moment and executing his purposes with the greatest possible secrecy as well as precision. He was a deep calculator, a wily schemer, and could wear the appearance of an honest man with the same grace and ease that he would show in throwing around his commanding figure the magnificent cloak in which he prided. In disposition, he was revengeful, tenacious in his memory of a wrong, sly and secret in his windings as a serpent, and, with less nobility than the rattlesnake, he gave no

The Life and Adventures of

warning before he struck. Yet, as I have said before, he was brave when occasion called it forth, and, although ever ready to take an advantage, he never flinched in the presence of danger. This extreme caution, united with a strong will and the courage to do, made him an exceedingly formidable man.

A fourth member was Joaquín Valenzuela, who has been frequently confounded with Joaquín Murieta, from the fact that the latter threw upon him much responsibility in the government of the band and entrusted him with important expeditions, requiring in their execution a great amount of skill and experience. Valenzuela was a much older man than his leader, and had acted for many years in Mexico as a bandit under the famous guerilla chief, Padre Jurata.

Another distinguished member was Pedro Gonzalez, less brave than many others, but a skillful spy and expert horse-thief, and as such, an invaluable adjunct to a company of mounted men, who required a continual supply of fresh horses as well as a thorough knowledge of the state of affairs around them.

There were many others belonging to this organization whom it is not necessary to describe. It is sufficient to say that they composed as formidable a force of outlaws as ever gladdened the eye of an acknowledged leader. Their number, at this early period, is not accurately known, but a fair estimate would not place it at a lower figure than fifty, with the advantage of a continual and steady increase.

Such was the unsettled condition of things, so distant

Joaquín Murieta

and isolated were the different mining regions, so lonely and uninhabited the sections through which the roads and trails were cut, and so numerous the friends and acquaintances of the bandits themselves that these lawless men carried on their operations with almost absolute impunity. It was a rule with them to injure no man who ever extended them a favor, and, whilst they plundered every one else and spread devastation in every other quarter, they invariably left those ranches and houses unharmed whose owners and inmates had afforded them shelter or assistance. Many persons, who were otherwise honestly inclined, bought the safety of their lives and property by remaining scrupulously silent in regard to Joaquín and neutral in every attempt to do him an injury. Further than this, there were many large rancheros who were secretly connected with the banditti, and stood ready to harbor them in times of danger and to furnish them with the best animals that fed on their extensive pastures. The names of several of these wealthy and highly respectable individuals are well known, and will transpire in the course of this history.

At the head of this most powerful combination of men, Joaquín ravaged the State in various quarters during the year 1851, without at that time being generally known as the leader; his subordinates, Claudio, Valenzuela, and Pedro Gonzalez being alternately mistaken for the actual chief. Except to few persons, even his name was unknown, and many were personally acquainted with him and frequently saw him in the different towns and villages, without having the remotest idea that he stood

The Life and Adventures of

connected with the bloody events which were then filling the country with terror and dismay. He resided for weeks at a time in different localities, ostensibly engaged in gambling, or employed as a vaquero, a packer, or in some other apparently honest avocation, spending much of his time in the society of that sweetest of all companions the woman that he loved.

While living in a secluded part of the town of San José, sometime in the summer of '51, he one night became violently engaged in a row at a fandango, was arrested for a breach of the peace, brought up before a magistrate, and fined twelve dollars. He was in the charge of Mr. Clark, the deputy sheriff of Santa Clara County, who had made himself particularly obnoxious to the banditti by his rigorous scrutiny into their conduct and his determined attempts to arrest some of their number. Joaquín had the complete advantage of him, inasmuch as the deputy was totally ignorant of the true character of the man with whom he had to deal. With the utmost frankness in his manner, Joaquín requested him to walk down to his residence in the skirts of the town, and he would pay him the money. They proceeded together, engaged in a pleasant conversation, until they reached the edge of a thicket when the young bandit suddenly drew a knife and informed Clark that he had brought him there to kill him, at the same instant stabbing him to the heart before he could draw his revolver. Though many persons knew the author of this most cool and bloody deed by sight, yet it was a long time before it was ascertained that

Joaquín Murieta

the escaped murderer was no less a personage than the leader of the daring cut-throats who were then infesting the country.

In the fall of the same year, Joaquín moved up in the more northern part of the State and settled himself down with his mistress at the Sonorian Camp, a cluster of tents and cloth houses situated about three miles from the city of Marysville, in Yuba County. It was not long before the entire country rung with the accounts of frequent, startling, and diabolical murders. *The Marysville Herald* of November 13, 1851, speaking of the horrible state of affairs, has the following remarkable paragraph:

“Seven men have been murdered within three or four days in a region of country not more than twelve miles in extent.”

Shortly after the murders thus mentioned, two men who were traveling on the road that leads up Feather River, near to the Honcut Creek, which puts into that stream, discovered just ahead of them four Mexicans, one of whom was dragging at his saddlebow by a lariat an American whom they had just lassoed around the neck. The two travelers did not think it prudent to interfere, and so hurried on to a place of safety, and reported what they had seen. Legal search being made upon this information, six other men were found murdered near the same place, bearing upon their throats the fatal mark of the lariat.

Close upon these outrages, reports came that several individuals had been killed and robbed at Bidwel's Bar,

some ten or fifteen miles up the river. Consternation spread like fire—fear thrilled through the hearts of hundreds, and all dreaded to travel the public roads.

Suspicion was directed to the Sonorian Camp, it being occupied exclusively by Mexicans, many of whom had no ostensible employment, and yet rode fine horses and spent money freely. This suspicion was confirmed by a partial confession obtained from a Mexican thief who had fallen into the hands of the "Vigilance Committee" of Marysville and had been run up with a rope several times to the limb of a tree, by order of that formidable body. The sheriff of Yuba county, R. B. Buchanan, went out on a moonlight night with his *posse* (which, to say the truth, consisted of one man only, widely and familiarly known as Ike Bowen) to examine the premises and to arrest three suspicious characters, who were known to be lurking in that neighborhood. While getting through the bars of a fence, they were attacked from behind by three Mexicans who had been hid, and the sheriff was severely wounded with a pistol-ball, which struck him near the spine, and passing through his body, came out in the front near the navel. The Mexicans escaped, and Buchanan was finally taken back to Marysville, where he lay a long time in a very dangerous situation but eventually recovered much to the gratification of the community, who admired the devotion and courage with which he had well-nigh sacrificed his life in the discharge of his duties. He, in common with every one else, was, for a long time afterward, in ignorance that he had received his wound in a personal encounter with the redoubtable Joaquín himself.

The bandits did not remain long in the vicinity of Marysville after this occurrence but rode off into the coast range of mountains to the west of Mount Shasta, a conspicuous land-mark in the northern portion of the State, which rears its white shaft at all seasons of the year high above every other peak, and serves at a distance of two hundred miles to direct the course of the mountain-traveler, being to him as the polar star to the mariner. Gazing at it from the Sacramento Valley at a distance of one hundred and fifty miles, it rises in its garments of snow like some mighty archangel, filling the heaven with his solemn presence.

MOUNT SHASTA, SEEN FROM A DISTANCE*

*Behold the dread Mount Shasta, where it stands,
Imperial midst the lesser hight, and like
Some mighty, unimpassioned mind, companionless
And cold. The storms of Heaven may beat in wrath
Against it, but it stands in unpoluted
Grandeur still; and from the rolling mists up-heaves
Its tower of pride e'en purer than before.
Each wintry shower, and white-winged tempest leave
Their frozen tributes on its brow, and it
Doth make of them an everlasting crown.
Thus doth it day by day, and age by age,
Defy each stroke of time—still rising higher
Into Heaven!*

* Written by "YELLOW BIRD," in 1852.