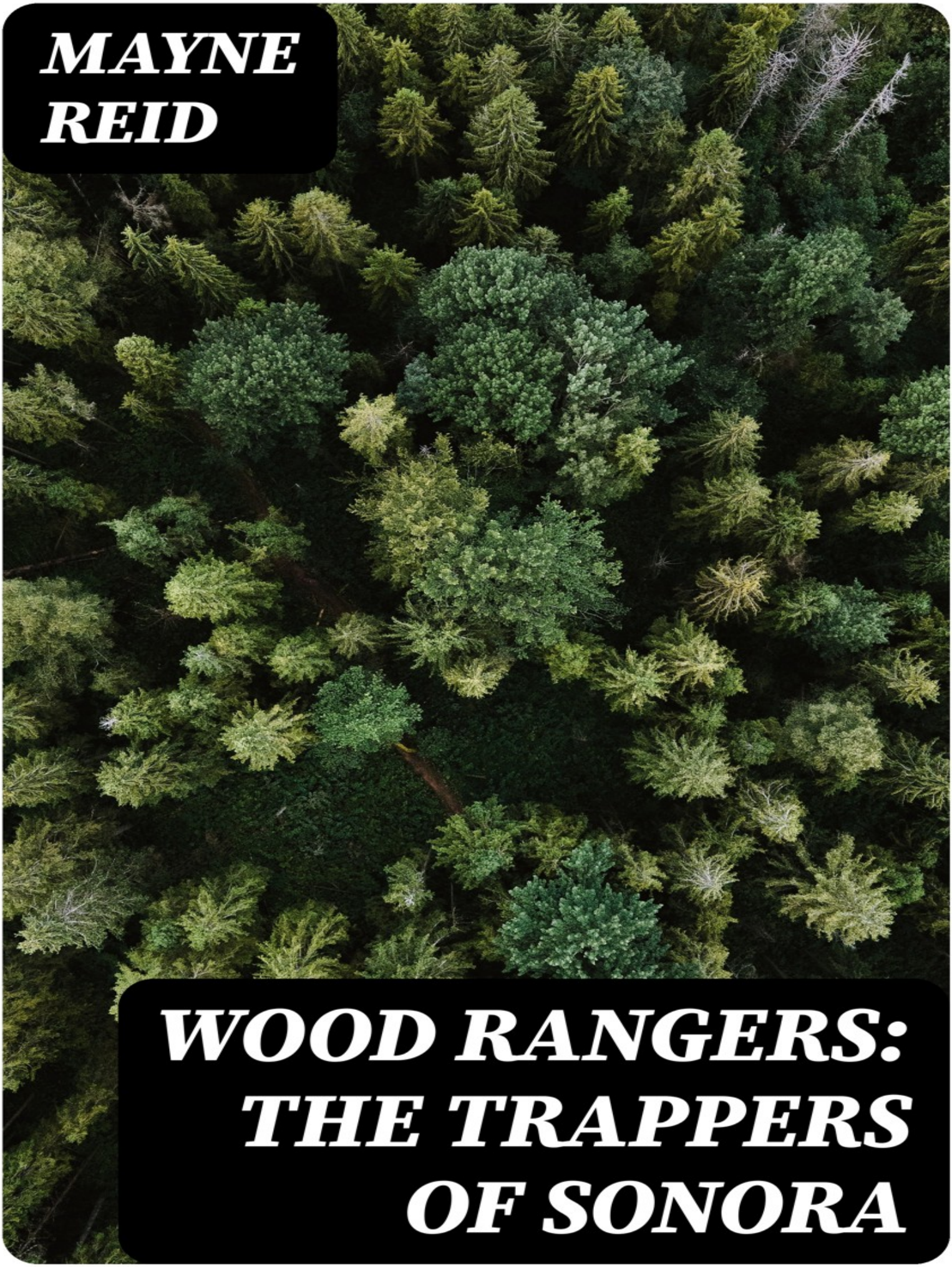
MAYNE REID



WOOD RANGERS: THE TRAPPERS OF SONORA

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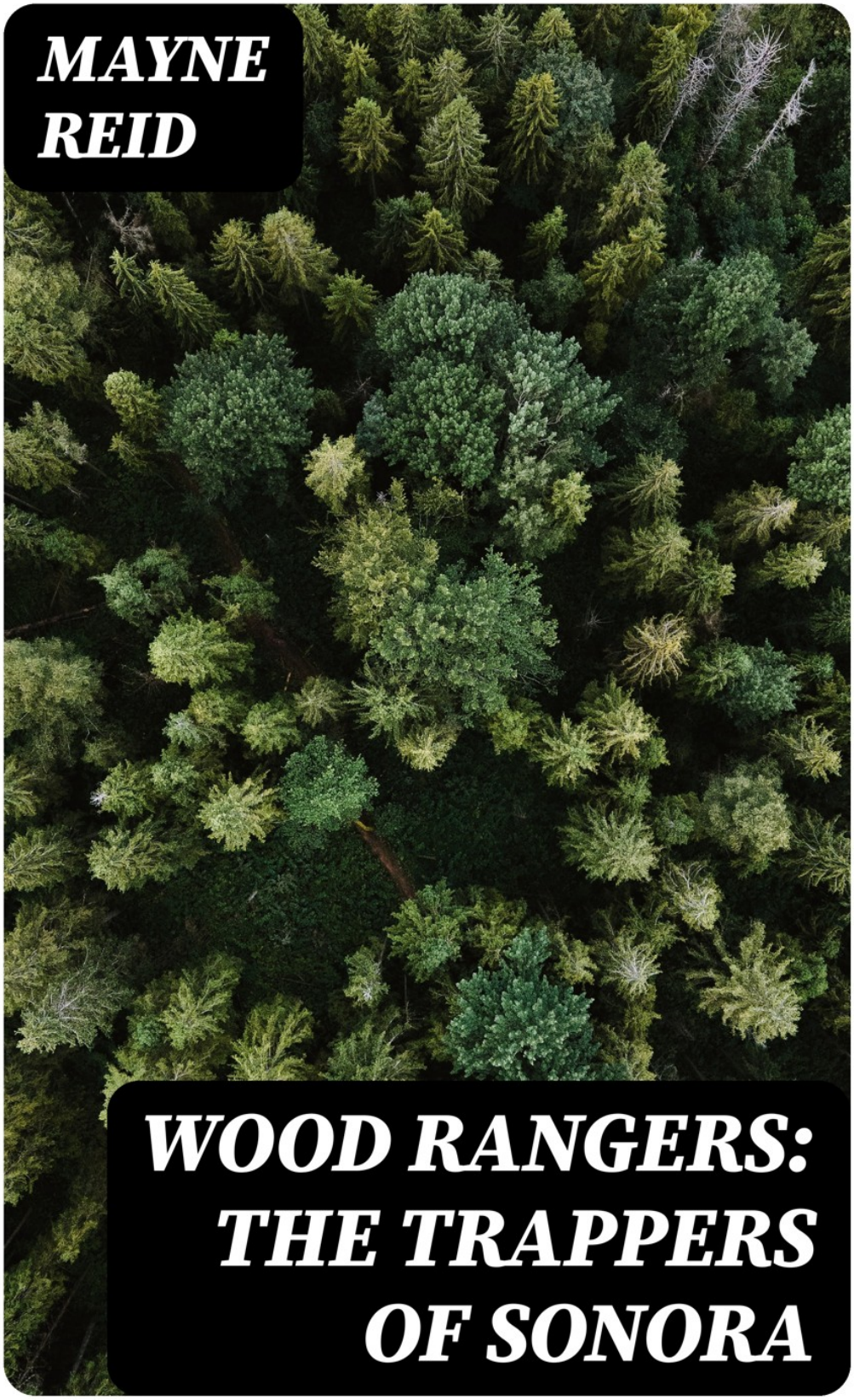

WOOD RANGERS: THE TRAPPERS OF SONORA

Mayne Reid

Wood Rangers: The Trappers of Sonora

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Pepé, The Sleeper.

No landscape on the Biscayan coast, presents a more imposing and picturesque aspect than the little village of Elanchovi. Lying within an amphitheatre of cliffs, whose crests rise above the roofs of the houses, the port is protected from the surge of the sea by a handsome little jetty of chiselled stone; while the single street of which the village is composed, commencing at the inner end of the mole, sweeps boldly up against the face of the precipice. On both sides, the houses, disposed in a sort of *echelon*, rise, terrace-like, one above the other; so that viewed from a distance, the street presents the appearance of a gigantic stairway.

In these the common dwellings, there is not much variety of architecture; since the village is almost exclusively inhabited by poor fishermen. There is one building, however, that is conspicuous—so much so as to form the principal feature of the landscape. It is an old chateau—perhaps the only building of this character in Spain—whose slate roofs and gothic turrets and vanes, rising above the highest point of the cliffs, overlook the houses of the village.

This mansion belonged to the noble family of Mediana, and formed part of the grand estates of this ancient house. For a long period, the Counts of Mediana had not inhabited the chateau of Elanchovi, and it had fallen into a state of neglect and partial decay, presenting a somewhat wild and desolate aspect. However, at the beginning of the year 1808, during the troubles of the French invasion, the Count Don Juan, then head of the family, had chosen it as a safe

residence for his young wife Doña Luisa, whom he passionately loved.

Here Don Juan passed the first months of his married life—a marriage celebrated under circumstances of sad augury. The younger brother of Don Juan, Don Antonio de Mediana, had also fervently loved the Doña Luisa; until finding her preference for his brother, he had given up his suit in anger, and quitted the country. He had gone, no one knew whither; and though after a time there came back a rumour of his death, it was neither confirmed nor contradicted.

The principal reason why the Count had chosen this wild spot as a residence for his lady was this:—He held a high command in the Spanish army, and he knew that duty would soon call him into the field. The *alcalde* of Elanchovi had been an old servant of the Mediana family, and had been raised to his present rank by their influence. Don Juan, therefore, believed he could rely upon the devotion of this functionary to the interests of his house, and that during his absence Doña Luisa would find security under the magisterial protection. Don Ramon Cohecho was the name of the chief magistrate of Elanchovi.

The Count was not permitted long to enjoy the happiness of his married life. Just as he had anticipated, he soon received orders to join his regiment; and parted from the chateau, leaving his young wife under the special care of an old and respectable domestic—the steward Juan de Dios Canelo. He parted from his home never more to return to it; for in the battle of Burgos, a French bullet suddenly terminated his existence.

It was sad tidings for the Doña Luisa; and thus to the joys of the first days of her married life succeeded the sorrows of a premature widowhood.

It was near the close of the year 1808, when the chateau was the sombre witness of Doña Luisa’s grief, that our story commences, and though its scene lies in another land—thousands of leagues from, the Biscayan coast—its history is intimately woven with that of the chateau of Elanchovi.

Under ordinary circumstances, the village of Elanchovi presents a severe and dreary aspect. The silence and solitude that reigns along the summit of the cliffs, contrasted with the continuous roaring of the breakers against their base, inspires the beholder with a sentiment of melancholy. Moreover, the villagers, as already said, being almost exclusively fishermen, and absent during the whole of the day, the place at first sight would appear as if uninhabited. Occasionally when some cloud is to be observed in the sky, the wives of the fishermen may be seen at the door, in their skirts of bright colours, and their hair in long double plaits hanging below their waists. These, after remaining a while to cast anxious glances upon the far horizon, again recross the thresholds of their cottages, leaving the street deserted as before.

At the time of which we are writing—the month of November, 1808—Elanchovi presented a still more desolate aspect than was its wont. The proximity of the French army had produced a panic among its inhabitants and many of these poor people—forgetting in their terror that they had nothing to lose—had taken to their boats, and sought safety

in places more distant from the invaders of whom they were in dread.

Isolated as this little village was on the Biscayan coasts, there was all the more reason why it should have its garrison of *coast-guards*; and such in reality it had. These at the time consisted of a company of soldiers—carabiniers, under the command of a captain Don Lucas Despierto—but the condition of these warriors was not one to be envied, for the Spanish government, although nominally keeping them in its pay, had for a long time neglected to pay them. The consequence was, that these poor fellows had absolutely nothing upon which to live. The seizure of smuggled goods—with which they might have contrived to indemnify themselves—was no longer possible. The contraband trade, under this system, was completely annihilated. The smugglers knew better than to come in contact with *coast-guards* whose performance of their duty was stimulated by such a keen necessity! From the captain himself down to the lowest official, an incessant vigilance was kept up—the result of which was that the fiscal department of the Spanish government was, perhaps, never so faithfully or economically served.

There was one of these coast-guards who affected a complete scepticism in regard to smuggling—he even went so far as to deny that it had ever existed! He was distinguished among his companions by a singular habit—that of always going to sleep upon his post; and this habit, whether feigned or real, had won for him the name of *the Sleeper*. On this account it may be supposed, that he was

never placed upon guard where the post was one of importance.

José, or as he was more familiarly styled, *Pepé*, was a young fellow of some twenty-five years—tall, thin, and muscular. His black eyes, deeply set under bushy eyebrows, had all the appearance of eyes that *could* sparkle; besides, his whole countenance possessed the configuration of one who had been born for a life of activity. On the contrary, however—whether from a malady or some other cause—the man appeared as somnolent and immobile as if both his visage and body were carved out of marble. In a word, with all the exterior marks that denote the possession of an active and ardent soul, Pepé *the Sleeper* appeared the most inactive and apathetic of men.

His chagrin was great—or appeared to be so—when, upon the evening of the day in which this narrative commences the captain of the coast-guard sent a messenger to summon him to headquarters.

On receiving the unexpected order, Pepé rose from his habitual attitude of recumbence, stretched himself at his leisure, yawned several times, and then obeyed the summons, saying as he went out: “What the devil fancy has the captain got into his head to send for *me*?”

Once, however, on the way and alone, it might have been observed that the somnolent coast-guard walked with an energetic and active step, very unlike his usual gait!

On entering the apartment where the captain awaited him, his apathetic habit returned; and, while rolling a cigarette between his fingers, he appeared to be half

asleep. The captain was buried in a profound meditation, and did not at first perceive him.

"*Bueno*! my captain," said the coast-guard, respectfully saluting his superior, and calling attention to his presence. "I am here."

"Ah! good! my fine fellow," began the captain, in a winning voice. "Well, Pepé!" added he more slowly and significantly, "the times are pretty hard with us—are they not?"

"Rather hard, captain."

"But you, *hombre*!" rejoined Don Lucas, with a laugh, "you don't appear to suffer much of the misery—you are always asleep I understand?"

"When I sleep, captain, I am not hungry," replied the coast-guard, endeavouring to stifle a yawn; "then I dream that the government has paid me."

"Well—at all events you are not its creditor for many hours of the day, since you sleep most of them. But, my fine fellow, it is not about this I desire to talk to you. I wish to give you a proof of my confidence."

"Ah!" muttered Pepé.

"And a proof of my regard for you," continued the officer. "The government has its eye open upon all of us; your reputation for apathy begins to be talked about, and you might be discharged one of these days as a useless official. It would be a sad affair if you were to lose your place?"

"Frightful! captain," replied Pepé, with perfect simplicity of manner; "for if I can scarce keep from dying of hunger in my place, what would be the result were I deprived of it? Frightful!"

“To prevent this misfortune, then,” continued the captain, “I have resolved to furnish to those who calumniate you, a proof of the confidence which may be placed in you, by giving you the post of *Ensenada*—and this very night.”

Pepé involuntarily opened his eyes to their fullest extent.

“That surprises you?” said Don Lucas.

“No,” laconically replied the coast-guard.

The captain was unable to conceal from his inferior a slight confusion, and his voice trembled as he pronounced the interrogation:—

“What! It does not surprise you?”

“No,” repeated Pepé, and then added in a tone of flattery: “The captain Despierto is so well-known for his vigilance and energy, that he may confide the most important post to the very poorest of his sentinels. That is why I am not astonished at the confidence he is good enough to place in me: and now I await the instructions your Honour may be pleased to give.”

Don Lucas, without further parley, proceeded to instruct his sentinel in his duty for the night. The orders were somewhat diffuse—so much so that Pepé had a difficulty in comprehending them—but they were wound up by the captain saying to the coast-guard, as he dismissed him from his presence—

“And above all, my fine fellow, *don’t go to sleep upon your post*!”

“I shall *try* not to do so, captain,” replied Pepé, at the same time saluting his superior, and taking his leave.

“This fellow is worth his weight in gold,” muttered Don Lucas, rubbing his hands together with an air of satisfaction;

“he could not have suited my purpose better, if he had been expressly made for it!”

Chapter Two.

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The Sentinel of La Ensenada.

The little bay of Ensenada, thus confided to the vigilance of Pepé the sleeper, was mysteriously shut in among the cliffs, as if nature had designed it expressly for smugglers—especially those Spanish *contrabandistas* who carry on the trade with a cutlass in one hand and a carbine in the other.

On account of its isolation, the post was not without danger, especially on a foggy November night, when the thick vapour suspended in the air not only rendered the sight useless, but hindered the voice that might call for assistance from being heard to any distance.

In the soldier who arrived upon this post, advancing with head erect and light elastic tread, no one could have recognised Pepé the sleeper—Pepé, habitually plunged in a profound state of somnolence—Pepé, of downcast mien and slow dragging gait—and yet it was he. His eyes, habitually half shut, were now sparkling in their sockets, as if even the slightest object could not escape him even in the darkness.

After having carefully examined the ground around his post, and convinced himself that he was entirely alone, he placed his lantern in such a position that its light was thrown along the road leading to the village. Then advancing some ten or twelve paces in the direction of the water, he spread

his cloak upon the ground, and lay down upon it—in such an attitude that he could command a view both of the road and the bay.

“Ah, my captain!” soliloquised the coast-guard, as he arranged his cloak around him to the best advantage, “you are a very cunning man, but you have too much faith in people who are always asleep; and devil take me! if I don’t believe that you are interested in my sleeping most soundly on this particular night. Well, *quien sabe*? we shall see.”

For about the period of half an hour Pepé remained alone—delivering himself up to his reflections, and in turns interrogating with his glance the road and the bay. At the end of that time a footstep was heard in the loose sand; and looking along the pathway, the sentinel perceived a dark form approaching the spot. In another moment the form came under the light of the lantern, and was easily recognised as that of Don Lucas, the captain of the coast-guard.

The officer appeared to be searching for something, but presently perceiving the recumbent sentinel, he paused in his steps.

“Pepé!” cried he, in a low mincing voice.

No reply came from Pepé.

“Pepé!” repeated the captain, in a tone a little more elevated.

Still no reply from the sentinel, who remained obstinately silent.

The captain, appearing to be satisfied, ceased calling the name, and shortly after retraced his steps towards the village. In a few seconds his form was lost in the distance.

“Good!” said Pepé, as his superior officer passed out of sight; “just as I expected. A moment ago I was fool enough to doubt it. Now I am sure of it. Some smuggler is going to risk it to-night. Well, I shall manage badly if I don’t come in for a windfall—though it be at the expense of my captain.”

Saying this, the sentinel with one bound rose erect upon his feet.

“Here I am no more Pepé the Sleeper,” continued he stretching himself to his full height.

From this time his eyes were bent continually upon the ocean; but another half hour passed without anything strange showing itself upon the bosom of the water—nothing to break the white line of the horizon where sea and sky appeared to be almost confounded together. Some dark clouds were floating in the heavens, now veiling and now suddenly uncovering the moon, that had just risen. The effect was fine; the horizon was one moment shining like silver, and the next dark as funeral crape; but through all these changes no object appeared upon the water, to denote the presence of a human being.

For a long while the coast-guard looked so intently through the darkness, that he began to see the sparks flying before his eyes. Fatigued with this sustained attention, he at length shut his eyes altogether, and concentrated all his powers upon the organs of hearing. Just then a sound came sweeping over the water—so slight that it scarce reached him—but the next moment the land-breeze carried it away, and it was heard no more.

Fancying it had only been an illusion, he once more opened his eyes, but in the obscurity he could see nothing.

Again he shut them closely and listened as before. This time he listened with more success. A sound regularly cadenced was heard. It was such as would be made by a pair of oars cautiously dipped, and was accompanied by a dull knocking as of the oars working in their thole-pins.

“At last we shall see!” muttered Pepé, with a gasp of satisfaction.

A small black point, almost imperceptible, appeared upon the horizon. Rapidly it increased in size, until it assumed the form and dimensions of a boat with rowers in it, followed by a bright strip of foam.

Pepé threw himself suddenly *à plat ventre*, in fear that he might be seen by those on the water; but from the elevated position which he occupied, he was able to keep his eye upon the boat without losing sight of it for a single instant.

Just then the noises ceased, and the oars were held out of water, motionless, like some sea-bird, with wings extended, choosing a spot upon which to alight. In the next instant the rowing was resumed, and the boat headed directly for the shore of the bay.

“Don’t be afraid!” muttered the coast-guard, affecting to apostrophise the rowers. “Don’t be afraid, my good fellows —come along at your pleasure!”

The rowers, in truth did not appear to be at all apprehensive of danger; and the next moment the keel of the boat was heard grinding upon the sand of the beach.

“*Por Dios*!” muttered the sentinel in a low voice; “not a bale of goods! It is possible after all, they are not smugglers!”

Three men were in the boat, who did not appear to take those precautions which smugglers would have done. They made no particular noise, but, on the other hand, they did not observe any exact silence. Moreover their costume was not that ordinarily worn by the regular *contrabandista*.

“Who the devil can they be?” asked Pepé of himself.

The coast-guard lay concealed behind some tufts of withered grass that formed a border along the crest of the slope. Through these he could observe the movements of the three men in the boat.

At an order from the one who sat in the stern sheets, the other two leaped ashore, as if with the design of reconnoitring the ground. He who issued the order, and who appeared to be the chief of the party, remained seated in the boat.

Pepé was for a moment undecided whether he should permit the two to pass him on the road; but the view of the boat, left in charge of a single man, soon fixed his resolution.

He kept his place, therefore, motionless as ever, scarce allowing himself to breathe, until the two men arrived below him, and only a few feet from the spot where he was lying.

Each was armed with a long Catalonian knife, and Pepé could see that the costume which both wore was that of the Spanish privateers of the time—a sort of mixture of the uniform of the royal navy of Spain, and that of the merchant service; but he could not see their faces, hid as they were under the slouched Basque bonnet.

All at once the two men halted. A piece of rock, detached by the knees of the coast-guard, had glided down the slope

and fallen near their feet.

“Did you hear anything?” hastily asked one.

“No; did you?”

“I thought I heard something falling from above there,” replied the first speaker; pointing upward to the spot where Pepé was concealed.

“Bah! it was some mouse running into its hole.”

“If this slope wasn’t so infernally steep, I’d climb up and see,” said the first.

“I tell you we have nothing to fear,” rejoined the second; “the night is as black as a pot of pitch, and besides—the *other*, hasn’t he assured us that he will answer for the man on guard, *who sleeps all day long*?”

“Just for that reason he may not sleep at night. Remain here, I’ll go round and climb up. *Carramba*! if I find this sleepy-head,” he added, holding out his long knife, the blade of which glittered through the darkness, “so much the worse—or, perhaps, so much the better for him—for I shall send him where he may sleep forever.”

“*Mil diablos*!” thought Pepé, “this fellow is a philosopher! By the holy virgin I am long enough here.”

And at this thought, he crept out of the folds of his cloak like a snake out of his skin, and leaving the garment where it lay, crawled rapidly away from the spot.

Until he had got to a considerable distance, he was so cautious not to make any noise, that, to use a Spanish expression, *the very ground itself did not know he was passing over it*.

In this way he advanced, carbine in hand, until he was opposite the point where the boat rested against the beach.

There he stopped to recover his breath,—at the same time fixing his eye upon the individual that was alone.

The latter appeared to be buried in a sombre reverie, motionless as a statue, and wrapped in an ample cloak, which served both to conceal his person and protect him from the humidity of the atmosphere. His eyes were turned toward the sea; and for this reason he did not perceive the dark form of the carabinier approaching in the opposite direction.

The latter advanced with stealthy tread—measuring the distance with his eye—until at length he stood within a few paces of the boat.

Just then the stranger made a movement as if to turn his face towards the shore, when Pepé, like a tiger hounding upon its prey, launched himself forward to the side of the boat.

“It is I!” he exclaimed, bringing the muzzle of his carbine on a level with the man’s breast. “Don’t move or you are a dead man!”

“You, who?” asked the astonished stranger, his eyes sparkling with rage, and not even lowering their glance before the threatening attitude of his enemy.

“Why me! Pepé—you know well enough? Pepé, the Sleeper?”

“Curses upon him, if he has betrayed me?” muttered, the stranger, as if speaking to himself.

“If you are speaking of Don Lucas Despierto,” interrupted the carabinier, “I can assure you he is incapable of such a thing; and if I *am here* it is because that he has been only too discreet, señor smuggler.”

“Smuggler!” exclaimed the unknown, in a tone of proud disdain.

“When I say smuggler,” replied Pepé, chuckling at his own perspicuity, “it is only meant as a compliment, for you haven’t an ounce of merchandise in your boat, unless indeed,” continued he, pointing with his foot to a rope ladder, rolled up, and lying in the bottom, “unless that may be a sample! *Santa Virgen*! a strange sample that!”

Face to face with the unknown, the coast-guard could now examine him at his leisure.

He was a young man of about Pepé’s own age, twenty-five. His complexion had the hale tint of one who followed the sea for a profession. Thick dark eyebrows were strongly delineated against a forehead bony and broad, and from a pair of large black eyes shone a sombre fire that denoted a man of implacable passions. His arched mouth was expressive of high disdain; and the wrinkles upon his cheeks, strongly marked notwithstanding his youth, at the slightest movement, gave to his countenance an expression of arrogance and scorn. In his eyes—in his whole bearing—you could read that ambition or vengeance were the ruling passions of his soul. His fine black curling hair alone tempered the expression of severity that distinguished his physiognomy. With regard to his costume, it was simply that of an officer of the Spanish navy.

A look that would have frightened most men told the impatience with which he endured the examination of the coast-guard.

“An end to this pleasantry!” he cried out, at length. “What do you want, fellow? Speak!”

“Ah! talk of our affairs,” answered Pepé, “that is just what I desire. Well, in the first place, when those two fellows of yours return with my cloak and lantern—which they are cunning enough to make a seizure of—you will give them your commands to keep at a distance. In this way we can talk without being interrupted. Otherwise, with a single shot of this carbine, which will stretch you out dead, I shall also give the alarm. What say you? Nothing? Be it so. That answer will do for want of a better. I go on. You have given to my captain forty *onzas*?” continued the carabinier, with a bold guess, making sure that he named enough.

“Twenty,” replied the stranger, without reflecting.

“I would rather it had been forty,” said Pepé. “Well, one does not pay so high for the mere pleasure of a sentimental promenade along the shore of the Ensenada. My intervention need be no obstruction to it—provided you pay for my neutrality.”

“How?” asked the unknown, evidently desirous of putting an end to the scene.

“Oh, a mere bagatelle—you have given the captain forty *onzas*.”

“Twenty, I tell you.”

“I would rather it had been forty,” coolly repeated the carabinier, “but say twenty, then. Now I don’t wish to be indiscreet—he is a captain, I am nothing more than a poor private. I think it reasonable therefore, that I should have *double* what he has received.”

At this extortionate demand the stranger allowed a bitter oath to escape him, but made no answer.

“I know well,” continued Pepé, “that I am asking too little. If my captain has three times my pay, of course he has three times less need of money than I, and therefore I have the right to *triple* the sum he has received; but as the times are hard, I hold to my original demand—forty *onzas*.”

A terrible struggle betwixt pride and apprehension appeared to be going on in the bosom of the stranger. Despite the coldness of the night the perspiration streamed over his brow and down his cheeks. Some imperious necessity it was that had led him into this place—some strange mystery there must be—since the necessity he was now under tamed down a spirit that appeared untamable. The tone of jeering intrepidity which Pepé held toward him caused him to feel the urgency of a compromise; and at length plunging his hand into his pocket he drew forth a purse, and presented it to the carabinier.

“Take it and go!” he cried, with impatience.

Pepé took the purse, and for a moment held it in his hand as if he would first count its contents.

“Bah!” he exclaimed, after a pause, “I’ll risk it. I accept it for forty *onzas*. And now, señor stranger, I am deaf, dumb, and blind.”

“I count upon it,” coldly rejoined the unknown.

“By the life of my mother!” replied Pepé, “since it’s not an affair of smuggling I don’t mind to lend you a hand—for as a coast-guard, you see, I could not take part in anything contraband—no, never!”

“Very well, then,” rejoined the stranger, with a bitter smile, “you may set your conscience at rest on that score. Guard this boat till my return. I go to join my men. Only

whatever happens—whatever you may see—whatever you may hear—be, as you have promised, deaf, dumb, and blind.”

As he uttered these words the stranger sprang out of the boat, and took the road leading to the village. A turning in the path soon bid him from the sight of the coast-guard.

Once left to himself, Pepé, under the light of the moon, counted out the glittering contents of the purse which he had extorted from the stranger.

“If this jewel is not false,” muttered he to himself, “then I don’t care if the government never pays me. Meanwhile, I must begin to-morrow to cry like a poor devil about the back pay. That will have a good effect.”

Chapter Three.

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The Alcalde and his Clerk.

It is not known how long Pepé remained at his post to await the return of the stranger: when the cock was heard to crow, and the aurora appeared in the eastern horizon, the little bay of Ensenada was completely deserted.

Then life began to appear in the village. The dark shadows of the fishermen were seen upon the stair-like street, descending to the mole; and the first beams of the morning lit up their departure. In a few minutes the little flotilla was out of sight; and at the doors of the cottages the women and children only could be seen, appearing and disappearing at intervals.

Among these wretched hovels of the village, there was one dwelling of greater pretensions than the rest. It was that of the alcalde, Don Ramon Cohecho of whom we have already spoken. It alone still kept its doors and windows closed against the morning light.

It was full day, when a young man, wearing a high-crowned beaver hat,—old, greasy and shining, like leather—walked up to the door of the alcalde's mansion. The limbs of this individual were scantily covered with a pair of pantaloons, so tightly fitting as to appear like a second skin to his legs, so short as scarce to touch his ankles, and of such thin stuff as to ill protect the wearer from the sharp air of a November morning. The upper half of this individual was not visible. A little cloak, of coarse shaggy cloth, known as an *esclavina*, covered him up to the very eyes. In the manner in which he so carefully guarded the upper part of his person with this pinched mantle, at the expense of his thighs and legs, an observer might have supposed that he was perfectly content with his pantaloons. Appearances, however, are often deceptive; for in truth the ambition of this youth; whose unsteady glance, miserable aspect, and a certain smell of old papers about him, proclaimed to be *un escribano*—his everyday dream was to have a pair of pantaloons entirely different from his own—in other words, a pair with long ample legs, of good wide waist, and made out of fine broadcloth. Such a pair would render him the most satisfied man in the world.

This young man was the *right hand* of the alcalde—his name Gregorio Cagatinta.

On reaching the door, he gave a modest knock with his horn ink-bottle, which he carried hanging to his button. The door was opened by an old housekeeper.

“Ah! it is you, *Don* Gregorio?” cried the housekeeper, with that superb courtesy so peculiar to the Spaniards—that even two shoeblacks on meeting lavish upon each other the epithet *Don*, as if each were a grand noble.

“Yes, it is I, Doña Nicolasa,” replied Gregorio.

“*Santisima Virgen*!—since it is you, then I must be late, and my master will be waiting for his pantaloons that are not yet aired. Take a seat, Don Gregorio: he will soon be down.”

The chamber into which the notary’s clerk had been introduced would have been a large one, had it not been for the singular conglomeration of objects with which it was more than half filled. Nets of all sizes, masts, yards, and rudders of boats, oars, sails of every kind—both square and lateen—woollen shirts worn by sailors or fishermen, and a variety of other marine objects, were placed pellmell in every corner of the room. Notwithstanding, there was space enough left to hold three or four chairs around a large oaken table, upon which last stood a large cork ink-stand, with several goose-quill pens; with some sheets of half dirty paper placed ostentatiously around it to awe the visitors, who might have business with the alcalde.

The presence of this odd assortment of objects, it would have been difficult for a stranger to explain—though there was no mystery about it. The fact is, that besides his official character as first magistrate, the alcalde had another *rôle* which he played, of rather an unofficial character. He was

the *pawnbroker* of the place—that is, he lent out money in small sums, charging a *real* for every dollar by the week—in other words, a simple interest of twenty per cent, by the month, or two hundred and fifty per cent, per annum! His clients being all fishermen, will account for the nautical character of the "pledges" that filled the chamber of audience.

Cagatinta scarce deigned to cast a look at this miscellaneous collection of objects. Had there been a pair of pantaloons among them, it might have been different; for to say the truth, the probity of Don Gregorio was scarce firm enough to have resisted so strong a temptation as this would have been. The notary's clerk was not exactly of that stuff of which honest men are composed. Nature, even in its crimes, does not leap to grand villainies at once; it proceeds from less to greater; and Cagatinta, though still but young, was yet capable of a little bit of "cribbing."

Don Ramon was not long in coming out of his sleeping-room. In a little while he showed his jovial face at the door of the audience chamber.

He was a person of portly and robust figure; and it was easily seen that one leg of his ample pantaloons would have been sufficient to have made a pair for the thin limbs and meagre body of the escribano.

"*Por Dios*! Señor alcalde," said the clerk, after having exchanged with his superior a profusion of matinal salutations, "what a splendid pair of pantaloons you have on!"

From the alcalde's answer, it was evident that this was not the first time that Cagatinta had made the remark.

“Ah! Gregorio, *amigo*!” replied he, in a tone of good-humour, “you are growing tiresome with your repetitions. Patience, patience, señor escribano! you know that for the services you are to render me—I say nothing of those already rendered—I have promised you my liver-coloured breeches, which have been only a very little used: you have only to gain them.”

“But what services are to gain them, señor alcalde?” inquired the clerk, in a despairing tone.

“Eh—Dios!—who knows what—patience, *amigo*! Something may turn up all at once, that will give you that advantage over me. But come! let us to business—make out the deed of appropriation of the boat of that bad pay, Vicente Perez, who under pretence that he has six brats to feed, can’t reimburse me the twenty dollars I have advanced him.”

Cagatinta drew out from his little portfolio a sheet of stamped paper, and sitting down by the table proceeded to execute the order of the magistrate. He was interrupted by a hurried knocking at the outer door—which had been closed to prevent intrusion.

“Who dare knock in that fashion?” sharply inquired the alcalde.

“*Ave Maria purisima*!” cried a voice from without.

“*Sin pecado concebida*!” replied at the same time the two acolytes within.

And upon this formula, Gregorio hastened to the door, and opened it.

“What on earth can have brought you here at this hour, Don Juan de Dios Canelo?” inquired the alcalde in a tone of

surprise, as the old steward of the Countess de Mediana appeared in the doorway, his bald forehead clouded with some profound chagrin.

“Ah, señor alcalde,” replied the old man, “a terrible misfortune has happened last night—a great crime has been committed—the Countess has disappeared, and the young Count along with her!”

“Are you sure of this?” shouted the alcalde.

“Alas—you will only have to go up into the balcony that overlooks the sea, and there you will see in what state the assassins have left the Countess’s chamber.”

“Justice! justice! Señor alcalde! Send out your alguazils over the whole country; find the villains—hang them!”

This voice came from a woman still outside in the street. It was the *femme de chambre* of the Countess, who, to show a devotion which she very little felt, judged it apropos to make a great outcry as she precipitated herself into the chamber of audience.

“Ta-ta-ta, woman! how you go on!” interrupted the alcalde. “Do you think I have a crowd of alguazils? You know very well that in this virtuous village there are only two; and as these would starve if they didn’t follow some trade beside their official one, they are both gone fishing hours ago.”

“Ah, me!” cried the *femme de chambre*, with a hypocritical whine, “my poor mistress!—who then is to help her?”

“Patience, woman, patience!” said the alcalde. “Don’t fear but that justice will be done.”

The chamber-maid did not appear to draw much hope from the assurance, but only redoubled her cries, her excited behaviour strongly contrasting with the quiet manner in which the faithful old steward exhibited the sincerity of his grief.

Meanwhile a crowd of women, old men, and children, had gathered around the alcalde's door, and by little and little, were invading the sanctuary of the audience chamber itself.

Don Ramon advanced towards Cagatinta, who was rubbing his hands under his *esclavina*, charmed at the idea of the quantity of stamped paper he would now have an opportunity to blacken.

"Now, friend Gregorio," said the alcalde, in a low voice, "the time has come, when, if you are sharp, you may gain the liver-coloured breeches."

He said no more; but it was evident that the *escribano* understood him, at least, to a certain extent. The latter turned pale with joy, and kept his eye fixed upon every movement of his patron, determined to seize the first opportunity that presented itself of winning the breeches.

The alcalde reseated himself in his great leathern chair; and commanding silence with a wave of his hand, addressed his auditory in a long and pompous speech, with that profuse grandiloquence of which the Spanish language is so capable.

The substance of his speech was as follows:

"My children! We have just heard from this respectable individual, Don Juan de Dios Canelo, that a great crime has last night been committed; the full knowledge of this villainy cannot fail to arrive at the ears of justice, from which

nothing can be kept hid. Not the less are we to thank Don Juan for his official communication; it only remains for him to complete the accusation by giving the names of the guilty persons."

"But, señor alcalde," interrupted the steward, "I do not know them, although, as you say, my communication may be official—I can only say that I will do all in my power to assist in finding them."

"You understand, my children," continued the alcalde, without taking notice of what the steward had said, "the worthy Canelo by his official communication asks for the punishment of the guilty persons. Justice will not be deaf to his appeal. I may now be permitted, however, to speak to you of my own little affairs, before abandoning myself to the great grief which the disappearance of the Countess and the young Count has caused me."

Here the alcalde made a sign to Cagatinta, whose whole faculties were keenly bent to discover what service was expected from him, by which he was to gain the object of his ambition—the liver-coloured breeches.

The alcalde continued:—

"You all know, my children, of my attachment to the family of Mediana. You can judge, then, of the grief which this news has given me—news the more incomprehensible, since one neither knows by whom, or for what reason such a crime should be committed. Alas, my children! I lose a powerful protector in the Countess de Mediana; and in me the heart of the old and faithful servant is pierced with anguish, while as a man of business I am equally a sufferer. Yes, my children! In the deceitful security, which I felt no