REEDS AND MUD

I

As on every afternoon, the mail-boat announced its arrival at Palmar with several bugle blasts.

The boatman, a wizened little fellow, with an amputated ear, went from door to door receiving orders for Valencia, and on arriving at the open spaces in the single street of the village he would blow the bugle anew to give notice of his presence to the cabins scattered along the banks of the canal. A cloud of almost naked urchins followed after the boatman with a certain admiration. They felt a deep respect for the man who crossed the lake of Àlbufera four times a day, carrying off to Valencia the best fish of the lake and bringing back a thousand things from a city that seemed mysterious and fantastic to these gamins brought up on an island of reeds and mud.

Out of Cañamel's tavern, which was the leading establishment of Palmar, a group of reapers, sacks on their shoulders, sauntered in the direction of the boat, which was to take them back to their districts. The women thronged the banks of the canal, which resembled a street in Venice, its sides covered with huts and víveros¹ where the fishermen kept eels.

On the dead water, bright as tin, the mail-boat rested

¹ Thatch-covered pondlets where eels are kept alive.
motionless: it looked like a huge coffin laden with persons and packages, its gunwales almost on a level with the stream. The triangular sail, dotted with dark patches, was topped by colorless tatters which in other years had been a Spanish flag, informing of the official character of the old hulk.

An unbearable stench rose about the vessel. Its planks had become saturated with the odor of eel-baskets and the grime of hundreds of passengers: a nauseating mixture of gelatinous skins, scales of fish bred in the mud, dirty feet and filthy clothes, which by constant friction had smoothed and polished the seats of the boat.

The passengers, for the most part reapers who came from Perelló, the extreme end of Albufera, on the edge of the sea, were shouting at the top of their lungs for the boatman to set sail as soon as possible. The vessel was already full! There was no room for any more people...

This was so; but the little fellow, turning toward them the stump of his ear, which, it seemed, had been cut off so that he should not hear them, placed leisurely about the boat the baskets and the sacks that the women handed him from the shore. Each of these consignments provoked protests: the passengers were milling about or changing places, and those from Palmar who came aboard received with evangelical comment the outpouring of insults to which they were already accustomed. A little patience! As much room as they'd find in heaven...

The boat settled alarmingly on receiving so much cargo, but the boatman showed not the slightest concern, accustomed as he was to hazardous trips. There was not a foot of room left. Two men were standing on the gunwale, grasping the rigging to hold themselves up; another
lay along the prow, like a ship’s figurehead. Nevertheless the impassive boatman blew still another blast from his bugle amid general protest. . . . Christ! Didn’t the old robber have enough yet? Were they going to spend the whole afternoon there, under the September sun, which scorched their sides and burnt their backs? . . . .

Suddenly a hush fell over the crowd and the people on board beheld approaching them, on the bank of the canal, a man supported by two women,—a white, shivering spectre with glittering eyes, wrapped in a woollen bedblanket. The waters seemed to boil with the heat of that summer afternoon; everybody on board was perspiring, doing his best to keep free of the sticky contact with his neighbor; yet this man was shivering, his teeth chattering from fever chills, as if the world had for him been plunged into eternal night. The women who were supporting him protested coarsely when they noticed that the people on the boat did not make way. They should make room for him: he was a sick man, a laborer. While reaping rice he had caught the cursed tertian fever of Albufera, and was on his way to Ruzafa to be cured in the home of some relatives. . . . Couldn’t they act like Christians? For pity’s sake! Move over!

And the quivering, fever-stricken spectre repeated the words like an echo, sobbing with his shudders:

“Per caritat! per caritat! . . . .”

He was pushed in, without any effort on the part of the self-satisfied crowd to make way, and not finding a place, sank down among the feet of the passengers, stretching himself out amid nauseating surroundings on the deck, his face thrust against filthy hempen sandals and mud-caked boots. The people seemed accustomed to such
scenes. This boat served every purpose; it transported cargoes for meals, for the hospital, for the cemetery. Every day sick persons took passage, bound for the suburb of Ruzafa, where the denizens of Palmar, lacking facilities for treatment, hired lodgings for the cure of the tertian fever. When some wretched fellow without a boat of his own died, the coffin was placed under a seat of the mail-boat, and the vessel set sail with the same crowd of indifferent passengers, who laughed and conversed as usual, kicking the coffin, heedlessly.

After the sick man had disappeared from view, protest flamed up again. What was the careless fellow waiting for now? Was anybody missing? . . . And then almost all the passengers greeted with guffaws a couple that came out through the door of Cañamèl's tavern, hard by the canal.

"It's Tio Paco!" many of them shouted. "Tio Paco Cañamèl!"

The master of the inn, a massive, burly fellow bloated with dropsy, walked along with mincing steps, complaining like a child at every movement and leaning against his wife Neleta, a small woman with red, dishevelled hair, and warm greenish eyes that seemed to caress one with a velvety softness. Famous Cañamèl! Always sick and complaining, while his wife, who grew prettier and more amiable every day, reigned from behind her counter over all Palmar and Albufera. What he suffered from was the rich man's disease: too much money and too much high living. All you had to do was look at his paunch, his florid face, the cheeks that almost concealed his round little nose, and his eyes submerged in

1 Tio: Uncle; colloquially an indefinite term of familiarity; old man.
billows of fat. If only they all might complain of the same illness! If he had to earn his living in water up to his waist, reaping rice, he wouldn’t have time to think of being sick!

Cañamél thrust one foot into the boat, painfully, with a weak groan, without letting go of Neleta, grumbling against the folk who made fun of his poor health. He knew how he felt! Ah, good Lord! And he took up his place in a corner which was vacated for him with that obsequious solicitude which countryfolk show to the rich, while his wife beside him openly received the blandishments of those who complimented her upon her beauty and her liveliness.

She helped her husband open a broad parasol, placed beside him a basket laden with provisions for a trip that would not last three hours, and then requested the boatman to take the very best care of her Paco. He was going to spend a short while in his cottage at Ruzafa. There he would receive the attention of the best physicians: the poor man was ill. She said these words smilingly, fondling the obese giant, who shook, at the first swaying of the boat, as if he were made of jelly. She paid no attention to the malicious ogling of the surrounding men, to the ironic, crafty glances that, after resting upon her, were fixed upon the tavern-keeper, who was doubled up in his seat under the parasol, breathing with grunts of pain.

The boatman thrust his long pole against the bank, and the boat began to glide along the canal, followed by the voice of Neleta, who, still smiling enigmatically, begged all her friends to take good care of her husband.

The hens scampered along the rubbish of the bank, following the boat. The flocks of ducks fluttered around the
prow, clouding the mirror of the canal, in which were reflected upside down the village cabins, the black boats tied at the water-line to the thatched fish-ponds, decorated at their peaks with wooden crosses, as if to place the eels inside under divine protection.

Issuing from the canal the mail-boat began to glide along the rice-fields,—vast fields of liquid mud mottled with bronze stalks. The reapers, immersed in the water, advanced sickle in hand, and their tiny boats, black and narrow as gondolas, received in their bottoms the sheaves that were to be taken to the threshing floor. In the midst of this aquatic vegetation, which seemed like a prolongation of the canals, there arose at intervals, above the little islands of mud, white dwellings topped by chimneys. These were the machines that flooded and drained the fields, according to the needs of cultivation.

The high sloping banks concealed the maze of canals, the wide, broad thoroughfares through which glided the sail-boats laden with cargoes of rice. Their hulls remained out of sight and their large triangular sails floated above the green of the fields, in the silence of the afternoon, like ghosts.

The passengers surveyed the fields like expert connoisseurs, giving their opinions of the harvests and deplored the bad luck of those whose holdings had been invaded by nitre, which killed the rice.

The boat sailed along through tranquil canals, whose water was of a yellowish color, with the golden glint of tete. At the bottom, the aquatic plants bent their heads beneath the touch of the keel. The silence and the smoothness of the water magnified all sounds. During the moments when there would be a lull in the conversation,
there could clearly be heard the painful respiration of the sick man stretched out beneath a bench, and the persistent groans of Cañamél as he breathed, with his beard sunk in his chest. From the distant and almost invisible boats, came the sounds magnified by the calm, of a pole falling upon a deck, the creaking of a mast, the voices of the boatmen crying to one another so as to prevent a collision in the windings of the canals.

The earless pilot dropped his pole, and, jumping over the knees of the passengers, ran from one end of the vessel to the other, arranging the sail so as to take advantage of the slight afternoon breeze.

They had now entered the lake, in that part of the Albufera which is obstructed by sedge and islands, and where a nice care must be exercised in sailing. The horizon grew broader. On one side was the dark, wavy line of the pines of the Dehesa, which separates the Albufera from the sea, the almost virgin forest which extends for leagues and leagues, where wild bulls feed and large reptiles dwell in the dark, seen by few, but talked of with terror during night conversations. On the opposite side, the immense plain of the rice-fields merges into the horizon toward Sollana and Sueca, blending with the distant mountains. In the foreground, the sedge and the islets concealed the open lake, and among them the vessel made its way, mowing down the aquatic plants with its prow, its sail scraping against the reeds that leaned out from the shores. Meshes of tangled plants, gelatinous, like vicious tentacles, rose to the surface, twining about the boatman’s pole; the eye could try in vain to plumb the bottom of this dark, foul-smelling vegetation, in the depths of which swarmed the creatures of the mud. All eyes expressed the same
thought: whoever fell into those waters would find it hard to get out.

A herd of bulls was grazing on the beach of reeds and pools that bordered the Dehesa. Some of them had swum to the nearby islands, and, sunk in mire up to their bellies, were ruminafing in the reed grass, splashing loudly about. They were huge, filthy beasts, with enormous horns and slavering snouts, their backs covered with scabs. They looked wildly at the laden vessel that was sailing by them, and as they shook their heads they scattered a cloud of mosquitos that soon returned to their curly manes.

At a short distance, on a bank that was little more than a neck of mud between two sheets of water, the passengers could make out a man hiding in a squatting posture. Those from Palmar recognized him.

"It’s Sangonera!" they shouted. "Sangonera the drunkard!"

And waving their hats to him, they yelled and asked where he had begged his drink that morning, and whether he was considering spending the night there where he was. Sangonera did not move; but, weary of the laughter and the shouting of those on board, he at last stood up, and executing a graceful pirouette, slapped himself several times upon his back as a scornful gesture, then grave-ly squatted down again.

At the sight of him when he stood up the laughter redoubled, provoked by his strange appearance. His hat was decorated with a lofty plume of flowers from the Dehesa, arid on his breast, and around his sash as well, were entwined some of the wild bell-flowers that grow among the reeds along the banks.

Everybody talked about him. Notorious Sangonera!
There wasn't his like in all the lake towns. He had firmly resolved never to work like the rest of mankind, asserting that labor was an insult to God, and he spent his days longing for someone to treat him to a drink. He would get drunk in Perelló and sleep it off in Palmar; he would guzzle in Palmar, to awake on the following day in Saler; and if there were festivities going on among the land folk, he would be found in Silla or Catarroja hunting up, among the people who cultivated fields in the Albufera, a generous soul to invite him to drink. It was a miracle that his corpse had not been found at the bottom of a canal, after so many trips on foot across the lake, dead drunk, following the boundaries of the rice-fields, which were as narrow as the edge of an ax, going through the sluice-gates with the water up to his breasts and walking over spots of sliding mud where nobody dared to venture without a boat. The Albufera was his home. His instinct as a child of the lake rescued him from danger, and many a night, as he entered Cañamèl's tavern to beg a glass, he was as viscous to the touch and smelled as much of the mire as an eel itself.

Catching the drift of the conversation, the tavernkeeper would murmur amidst his groans. Sangonera! A shameless good-for-nothing! He had chased the drunkard out of his house a thousand times! . . . And the bystanders laughed as they recalled the vagabond's strange decorations, his mania for covering himself with flowers and weaving himself garlands like a savage as soon as the wine began to take effect in his famished stomach.

The vessel was penetrating into the lake. Between two masses of sedge resembling the jetties of a harbor, could be seen a large stretch of smooth, shining water of a
REEDS AND MUD

whitish blue. This was the lluent, the real Albufera, the open lake, with its thickets of reeds stretching for long distances, wherein the birds of the lake, so ruthlessly pursued by the hunters from the city, fled for refuge. The boat coasted along the borders of the Dehesa, where certain muddy bogs covered with water were slowly being converted into rice fields.

In a little lagoon enclosed by banks of mud a man of powerful muscles was dumping basketfuls of dirt from his boat. The passengers gazed at him with admiration. This was Tio Tono, the son of Tio Paloma, and the father in turn of Tonet el Cubano (the Cuban). And as they named this last fellow many glanced slyly in Caña-mél's direction; the tavern-keeper continued to grumble as if he had heard nothing.

There was not in all Albufera a more industrious fellow than Tio Tono. He had taken it into his head to become a landed proprietor, to have his rice-fields and not have to live from fishing, like Tio Paloma, who was the oldest boatman in Albufera; and all alone—since his family lent him assistance only sporadically, growing weary of the vast extent of the enterprise—he was filling in with earth the deep lagoon that had been ceded to him by a wealthy woman who did not know what to do with it.

It was a matter of years, perhaps of an entire life-time, for a lone man. Tio Paloma poked fun at him; his son helped him now and then, only to declare that he was exhausted after a few days of it, and Tio Tono, with a faith that could not be shaken, went on with the work, aided only by La Borda, a poor little waif whom his late wife had taken out of the foundling hospital,—a creature who
was exceedingly timid but as persevering in her work as he himself.

Greetings, Tío Tono, and don't give up! You'll be reaping rice from your field! And the boat sailed off without the obstinate laborer raising his head for more than a moment to reply to the ironic greetings.

A little farther on, in a tiny bark as small as a coffin, they caught sight of Tío Paloma near a row of stakes, placing his nets; he would draw them in on the following day.

On the mail-boat a discussion arose as to whether he were nearer ninety, or a hundred years old. What that man had seen, without ever leaving Albufera! The personages that he had dealt with! . . . And they repeated the tales, which had been exaggerated by popular credulity, of his insolent familiarities with General Prim, whom he had served as boatman in that worthy's hunting trips over the lake; his rudeness to the great ladies, and even to queens. The old man, as if he had divined that he was the subject of these commentaries and was quite sated with fame, remained bent over, examining the nets, showing his back, covered with a large-checked blouse, and the black ragged cap jammed down upon his thin, large ears which seemed not to belong to his head at all. As the boat sailed past him he raised his head, revealing the dark chasm of his toothless mouth and the circles of reddish wrinkles that converged around his deep eyes, which were lively with glances of ironic brightness.

The wind began to rise. The sail swelled with new shocks and the heavily-laden vessel inclined so much that the shoulders of those who were seated at the gunwale
were splashed. Around the prow the water, violently cut, rippled and gurgled more and more loudly. They were now in the real Albufera, in the immense lluent, blue and as smooth as a Venetian mirror, portraying upside down the vessels and the distant shores with their slightly serpentine outline. The clouds seemed to roll at the bottom of the lake like locks of white wool; on the beach of the Dehesa some hunters followed by dogs were mirrored in the stream, walking along with bowed heads. The large villages of the Ribera, their land concealed by the distance, seemed to float upon the lake.

The wind, growing gradually stronger, changed the surface of the Albufera. The undulations grew more noticeable, the waters took on a greenish hue, like that of the sea, the bottom of the lake was hidden and on the banks of thick sand formed from shells the waves began to throw yellowish locks of spume, soapy bubbles that shone iridescent in the sunlight.

The boat glided along the Dehesa and before it there passed rapidly the sandy hills, whose crests were topped by the guards’ huts, the thick curtains of thickets, and the groups of twisted pines weird in shape like bundles of writhing limbs. The passengers, kindled by the velocity of the boat, excited by the danger to which they were exposed by the vessel’s sailing with one of its sides on a level with the water, shouted greetings to the other barks that passed in the distance, and put out their hands to feel the impact of the waves lashed by their rapid progress. The water whirled around the helm. At a short distance swam two capuzones, dark birds that plunged into the water and after long immersion thrust out their heads again, amusing the passengers with these fishing maneuvers. Farther
away, on the matas, the large islands of aquatic cane-
plantations, the coots and the colivèr's rose in flight as the 
boat approached, but slowly, as if they felt that these were 
peaceful folk. Some of the passengers grew red with emo-
tion as they beheld them. . . . What an excellent target!
Why should the law prohibit anybody from shooting them 
without permission, just as he pleased? And while the 
more bellicose waxed indignant, there came from the bot-
tom of the boat the groans of the sick man, while Cañamèl 
sobbed like a child, scorched by the rays of the setting sun 
that stole in under his hat.

The forest seemed to withdraw toward the sea, leaving 
between it and the Albufera a vast, flat plain, covered with 
wild vegetation and cleft here and there by the shining 
lamina of a tiny lagoon.

This was the plain of Sancha. A flock of goats tended 
by a boy was grazing in the underbrush, and at sight of it 
there rose in the memories of these children of Albu-
fera the tradition which had given its name to the plain.

Those from the inland who were returning to their 
homes after having earned the big pay of the harvest asked 
who was this Sancha that the women named with such 
terror, and those of the lake told the stranger nearest to 
them the simple legend that they had all learned in their 
childhood.

A little goatherd like the one who was now walking 
along the bank was formerly tending his goats on the self-
same plain. But that was many years ago,—many! . . . 
So many, that none of the oldest inhabitants of Albu-
fera had known the goatherd: not even Tío Paloma him-
self.

The boy dwelt like a savage in the solitude, and the
boatmen who went fishing in the lake would hear him on calm mornings crying from afar:

"Sancho! Sancho! . . . ."

Sancho was a small serpent, the only friend he had. The evil creature would answer to his cries, and the goatherd, milking his choicest goats, would offer her a bowl of milk. Afterwards, during the warm hours of the day, the boy would make himself a set of pipes from the reeds that he cut from the sedge, and would play gently upon them, with the reptile at his feet. The snake would draw erect part of her body and contract it as if she wished to dance to the rhythm of the sweet tones. At other times the goatherd would amuse himself by undoing Sancho's coils, stretching her out in a straight line upon the sand, delighted to behold with what a nervous impulse she would coil up again. When, tired of these games, he would take his flock to the other end of the plain, the serpent would follow him like a little dog, or, twining about his legs would reach almost to his neck, remaining there languidly and motionless, with her diamond-like eyes fixed upon those of the youth; the down of his face stood on end at the hissing from her triangular mouth.

The people of Albufera considered him a sorcerer, and more than one woman of those who stole wood in the Dehesa, on beholding him approaching with Sancho dangling from his neck, would make the sign of the cross as if the devil himself had appeared. Thus they all understood how the goatherd could sleep in the forest without fear of the great reptiles that swarmed in the thicket. Sancho, who must be the devil, protected him from all harm.

The serpent grew, and the goatherd had become a man, when the inhabitants of the Albufera lost track of him. It
was learned that he had become a soldier and had gone off to fight in the Italian wars. No other flock ever came to graze in the wild plain. The fishermen, on landing, did not care to venture among the high reeds that covered the pestiferous lagoons. Sancha, for lack of the milk that the goat herd used to give her, was forced to pursue the innumerable rabbits of the Dehesa.

Eight or ten years passed by, and one day the inhabitants of Saler saw traveling along the road from Valencia, leaning against a staff, and with a knapsack on his shoulder, a soldier,—a meagre, yellowish-complexioned grenadier, with black leggings that reached above his knees, a white jacket and balloon trousers of red cloth, with a military cap mitre-shaped stuck on his carefully curled and plaited hair. His flowing mustache did not prevent his being recognized. It was the goat herder, who had come back, longing to see again the land of his childhood. Skirting the lake he took the road to the forest and reached the swampy plain where once upon a time he used to tend his flock. Nobody. The dragon-flies fluttered their wings with a soft buzzing above the tall reeds, and in the pools hidden beneath the underbrush the frogs splashed about, frightened by the approach of the grenadier.

"Sancha! Sancha!" cried the former goat herder softly.

Absolute silence. There came to him the somnolent chant of an invisible boatman who was fishing in the middle of the lake.

"Sancha! Sancha!" he cried again, this time at the top of his voice.

And after he had repeated his call many times, he noticed a disturbance in the tall grass and heard the crackle of bent reeds, as if a heavy body were crawling along.
Amid the cane there shone two eyes on a level with his own, and there advanced a flat head, moving a forked fang and uttering a sinister snort that fairly froze his blood and petrified him on the spot. It was Sancha, but a Sancha grown huge, arrogant, rising to the height of a man, dragging her tail among the thickets till it was lost to view, with a multi-colored skin and a body as thick as the trunk of a pine.

“Sancha!” exclaimed the soldier, recoiling with fright. “How you have grown! . . . . How big you are!”

And he tried to flee. But his old friend, after her first astonishment had passed, seemed to recognize him and wound herself around his shoulders, hugging him with a coil of her wrinkled skin, shaken by nervous tremors. The soldier struggled to get free.

“Let go, Sancha, let go! Don’t hug me. You’re too big for that sort of game.”

Another coil wound tightly about his arms, gripping them like a vise. The reptile’s mouth caressed him as in bygone days; her breath blew through his mustache, causing him an anguished shudder, and in the meantime the coils contracted, tightened about him, until the soldier, stifled, his bones cracking, fell to the ground, bound in the coil of variegated rings.

A few days later some fishermen came upon his corpse: a shapeless mass, with the bones broken and the flesh livid from Sancha’s overpowering embrace.

The strangers on board laughed to hear the tale, while the women moved their feet with a certain restlessness, imagining that the creature stirring and groaning near their skirts was Sancha, hiding in the bottom of the boat.

They had reached the end of the lake. Once again the
vessel entered a labyrinth of canals, and in the distance, far off, above the immense rice-field, could be made out the houses of Saler, the little town of the Albufera which is nearest Valencia. Its harbor was filled with countless tiny craft and large boats that cut the horizon with their rough, unshaped masts, like pines with the bark peeled off.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. The vessel glided along less rapidly over the still waters of the canal. The shadow of the sail passed like a cloud over the rice-fields that were reddened by the setting sun, and on the sloping banks, against a background of orange hue, the silhouettes of the passengers stood out.

There was a continuous file of persons returning from their fields, standing in their tiny black craft, gunwales almost on a level with the water. These skiffs were the horses of Albufera. From early childhood, all who were born into this lake-dwelling tribe learned to manage them. They were indispensable for working in the fields, for visiting a neighbor’s house, for earning one’s living. Along the canal came a child, a woman, or an old man, plying the pole dexterously, digging it into the muddy bed so as to send the shoe that served them as a vessel gliding over the still waters.

In the small canals near by, other little boats, hidden behind the low banks, were gliding along; above the sedge one could see the boatmen, their bodies erect and rigid, propelling themselves along by quick jabs of their fists.

From time to time the passengers on the mail-boat noticed a wide gap in the banks, through which the waters of the canal scattered with neither noise nor agitation, slumbering beneath a layer of slimy, floating verdure. These openings were barred by the eel nets stretched from
stales. As the boat approached, huge rats bounded from the rice lands, disappearing into the mud of the canals. Those who before had been filled with the hunter’s enthusiasm at sight of the lake game, felt their passion rise anew on seeing the canal rats. What a fine shot! An excellent supper! . . . .

The inland folk spat with disgust, amid the laughter and the protests of Albuferan people. A delicious morsel! How could they venture an opinion if they had never tried it? The rats of the marshes fed only upon rice; they were a dish fit for a prince. All you had to do was see them by the dozens in the Sueca market, skinned, hanging by their tails over the butchers’ blocks. The rich folk bought them; the aristocracy of the Ribera towns ate nothing else. And Cañamèl, as if he felt it incumbent upon him as a rich man to say something, stopped groaning long enough to make the grave assertion that he knew but two animals in all the world without a gall: the dove and the rat. That settled it.

The conversation grew livelier. The strangers’ demonstration of disgust inflamed the Albufera folk. The physical degeneration of the lake people, the poverty of a people deprived of meat, knowing no other animals than those it saw running about through the Dehesa, living all its life condemned to feed upon eels and the fish that lived in the mud, was revealed in the form of bragging, with the visible desire of astonishing the strangers by boasting of the strength of their stomachs. The women enumerated the excellencies of the rat as an ingredient of the paella; many had eaten it without realizing it, amazed at the sweet taste of an unknown meat. Others recalled the dishes made of serpents, praising highly the round, white sweet slices,
which tasted far better than eels, and the earless boatman broke the silence he had maintained during the entire voyage to recall a certain newly born kitten that he had eaten with some friends in Cañamel’s tavern, cooked by a certain sailor who, as a result of having sailed all around the globe, had golden hands for such dishes.

It began to grow dark. The fields held deep shadows. The canal took on the whiteness of tin in the tenuous light of dusk. At the bottom of the water the first stars shone, trembling with the passage of the boat.

They were near Saler. Above the roofs of the cabins rose, between two pilasters, the bell of the house of the Demandà, where huntsmen and boatmen assembled on the eve of the lot-drawing for fishing and hunting grounds. Near the house could be seen a large diligence, which was to convey the mail-boat’s passengers to the city.

The breeze died down, the sail fell lifeless against the mast, and the fellow with the amputated ear grasped his pole, thrusting it against the embankment to move his vessel.

A small boat laden with earth passed by, bound for the lake. A girl was plying the pole industriously at the prow, and at the other end she was being helped by a young man with a broad-brimmed hat of finely woven straw.

Everybody knew them. They were the children of Tio Tòni, carrying earth for his field: La Borda, that tireless foundling who was worth more than a man, and Tonet el Cubano, Tio Paloma’s grandson, the handsomest young man in all Albufera—a chap who had seen the world and had plenty to tell.

"Good-bye, Bigòt!" they shouted to him familiarly.
They had given him this nickname because of the mustache that accented his strong swarthy face—a decoration little known in the Albufera, where all men shaved their faces clean. Others asked him with ironical astonishment since when had he taken to work.

The skiff sailed on without any indication from Tonet, who had cast a rapid glance at the passengers, that he had heard the gibe.

Many looked with a certain insolence at Cañamé, permitting themselves the same brutal jests that they uttered in his tavern. . . . Look out, Tio Paco! You are going to Valencia, while Tonet will spend the night in Palmar! . . .

The inn-keeper at first pretended not to hear, until, not being able to bear it any longer, he straightened up with a nervous start, a flash of anger gleaming in his eyes. But the flabby bulk of his body seemed to weigh upon his will, and he sank back into his seat as if overwhelmed by the effort, once again groaning painfully and murmuring between plaints:

"Liars! Filthy liars!"