HE did not get very far. Entering the lake proper he saw several boats and heard the cries of those who were manning them; he desired to conceal himself, filled with the shame of one who finds himself naked to the gaze of strangers.

The sun seemed to wound him: the vast surface of the lake frightened him; he felt the necessity of crouching into an obscure corner, of seeing and hearing nothing; and he turned back, entering the reeds again.

He did not proceed far. The prow of the boat sank into the reeds, and the wretched fellow, dropping the pole, fell to the bottom of the boat with his head buried in his hands. For a long time the birds ceased to chirp, the sounds of nature about him were stilled, as if the life hidden among the reeds had become silent, terrified by a savage roar, a choking wail, like the sobs of a dying man.

The wretch was weeping. After his stultifying drunken spree, which had kept him completely insensitive, the crime now arose before him, as if no time had passed since its perpetration,—as if he had just committed it. At the very moment when he thought the memory of his deed was to be effaced forever, fate had brought it back to life, had flaunted it before his eyes, and in what a shape!

Remorse awoke his paternal instincts, which had been dead since that fatal night. Horror made him feel his crime with cruel intensity. That flesh and blood which
he had abandoned to the reptiles of the lake was his own flesh and blood; that mass of flesh, the abode of leeches and worms, was the fruit of his passionate impulses, of his insatiable love amid the silence of night.

The enormity of the crime overwhelmed him. There was no excuse: he need seek no pretexts, as formerly, to go on like this. He was a wretch, unworthy of living: a withered branch on the tree of the Palomas, which had been ever erect, ever vigorous, harsh and savage, but sound in the midst of its isolation. The bad branch must be lopped off.

His grandfather was right to despise him. His father, his poor father, who now looked to him as great as a saint, was right in having disowned him, as an infamous offshoot of his existence. Unhappy Borda, despite her shameful origin, was more a child of the Palomas than he.

What had he accomplished in all his life? Nothing; he had possessed will enough only to run from work. Unfortunate Sangonera had been better than he: alone in the world, without a family, needing nothing in his dire existence as a tramp, he might well live his indolent life, with the sweet nonchalance of the birds. But he, devoured as he had been by passionate appetites, egotistically shunning work, had wished to be wealthy, to live an easy life, by following crooked paths, scorning the advice of his father, who had foreseen the danger; and from this undignified laziness he had fallen into crime.

His deed horrified him. As his paternal instincts awoke, they gnawed at his conscience, but he suffered from an even deeper, more bloody wound. His masculine pride,
his ambition to be strong and dominate men by his intrepidity, tortured him now cruelly. He could behold afar the punishment of his crime,—the penitentiary,—and who could tell, perhaps the scaffold,—the apotheosis of the man-beast! He accepted all this, for after all, it had been made for men; but it should have been for something worthy of a strong man, for a quarrel, for having slain a man face to face, smeared with blood to the elbows, in the wild rage of the human being who becomes transformed into a beast. . . . But to have killed a newborn infant whose only defense was its wailing! To confess before the world that he, the bold man, the former soldier, when he finally stooped to crime had dared only to assassinate his own child!

And he wept and wept, stricken more by shame at his cowardice and scorn of his own vileness than by remorse.

In the darkness of his thought shone, like a tiny spark, a certain confidence in himself. He was not bad. He had his father's red, good blood. His crime had been egotism; weak will, which had caused him to shirk his part in the struggle for life. Neleta had been the really perverse creature, the superior power that chained him, the iron egotism that dominated his own, folding him about all its outlines like a clinging garment. Ah, if he had never known her! If, on his return from foreign parts he had not found her sea-green eyes fixed upon him and seeming to say: "Take me; I am rich now; I have realized my life's ambition; now only you are lacking!"

She had been temptation; the impulse that had cast him into darkness; the egotism and greed masked as love which had guided him to crime. In order to preserve a
few crumbs more of her fortune she had not hesitated to abandon a piece of her own flesh and blood; and he, a conscienceless slave, had completed the work by destroying his own child.

How wretched his existence appeared to him now! There came to him vaguely the old legend of Sancha, that tale of the serpent which was repeated by the generations that grew up beside the lake. He was like the shepherd of the tale: he had caressed the serpent when she was young, had fed her, imparting even the heat of his body to her; and when he had returned from the war, astonished to find her grown so big, strong and beautiful, she had wound about him with a fatal embrace, slaying him with her caresses.

His serpent was in the town, as that of the shepherd had been in the wild plains. That Sancha of Palmar, from her seat in the tavern, was the one who had slain him with the inflexible coils of crime.

He did not care to return to the world. It was impossible to live among people: he could not look them in the face; everywhere he would see that deformed swollen, monstrous little head, its hollow sockets devoured by the water worms. At the mere thought of Neleta a veil of blood would pass before his eyes, and amidst his feelings of repentance would surge a homicidal desire,—the impulse to kill her whom he now considered his implacable enemy. . . . But why a new crime?

There, in the silence and solitude, far from every glance, he felt better, and there he wished to remain.

Besides, an all-absorbing fear was rising in him with all the power of egotism,—the one passion of his life. Perhaps at this very moment the news of the horrible
event was circulating through Palmar. His grandfather would keep his mouth closed, but that stranger from the city had no reason to keep silence. They would hunt out and investigate, the guards with the polished three-cornered hats would come from the suburb of Ruzafa; he was not brave enough to bear their glances, he would not be able to lie; he would confess his crime, and his father, that saintly toiler, would die of shame. . . . And even if he succeeded in sticking to his lie and saving his neck, what would he gain by it? Return to Neleta's arms,—be stifled again in the reptile's coils? . . . No; all was over. He was the rotten branch; he must fall; he must not persist, dead and sapless as he was, in remaining on the tree, paralyzing its life.

He was no longer crying. With a supreme effort of his will he shook himself loose of his melancholy introspection.

Cañamél's gun had fallen in the prow of the boat. Tonet looked at it with an ironic expression. How the tavern-keeper would laugh if he could see him now! For the first time, the parasite that had battened at his expense was going to employ in a good deed something which he had taken from him.

With automatic tranquillity he removed one of his sandals, kicking it far away. He raised the two locks of the musket, and opening his blouse and his shirt, bent over the weapon until his naked breast leaned against the double mouth.

The bare foot rose slowly along the butt, seeking the triggers, and all at once a double detonation shook the reeds with such force that from every direction the birds whirled about in the flight of fear.
Tío Paloma did not return to Palmar until early evening.
He had left his hunter in Saler, for the latter had wished to get out of the lake as soon as possible and reach the city, vowing that he would never return to that vicinity. Two trips and two misfortunes! The Albufera alone held such terrible surprises in store for him. This last one was going to send him to bed sick. The peaceful citizen, father of a numerous progeny, could not erase from his memory the horrible bundle that had passed before his gaze. Surely as soon as he reached his house he would have to take to bed, pretending some pain or other. The surprise had shaken him to the depths.

The hunter himself counselled Tío Paloma to keep absolutely silent. Let not a word of this escape him! They had seen nothing. He must tell his poor grandson to keep quiet, too; he had fled, no doubt, as a result of the terrible surprise. The lake had again swallowed its secret, and it would be stupid of them to speak, knowing how justice overtakes the innocent when they commit the folly of going in search of it. Honest men should avoid all contact with the law. . . . And the poor gentleman, after landing, refused to enter the carry-all until the boatman, more and more pensive each moment, swore several times that he would be mute.

When, that night, Tío Paloma arrived at Palmar, he moored before the tavern the two boats in which they had left that morning.

Neleta, standing behind the counter, sought Tonet in vain.

The old man guessed whom she was looking for.
“Don’t expect him,” he said in a grim voice. “He’ll never return.”

And with an insinuating tone of voice he asked whether she were feeling better, mentioning her pallor with an innuendo that caused her to tremble.

The woman guessed at once that Tio Paloma knew her secret.

“But what about Tonet?” she asked again, with ananguished voice.

The old man averted his eyes as he spoke, as if not caring to look at her, so that he might preserve his forced calm. Tonet would never return. He had fled far, very far: to a land whence none ever returns. It was the best thing he could have done. ... In that way everything was plunged forever in mystery and settled for good.

“But you? ... What about you?” groaned Neleta in anguish, fearing that the old man should tell what he knew.

Tio Paloma would keep his mouth shut. This he affirmed by striking his chest. He despised his grandson, but it was to his interest that nothing should be learned. The name of the Palomas, after centuries of high prestige, was not going to be dragged in the mud by a lazy good-for-nothing and his slut.

“Weep, girl, weep!” said the boatman irritatedly.

She might well weep for the rest of her life, now that she had ruined an entire family. Let her keep her money! She needn’t be afraid that he would come asking her for some in exchange for his silence. ... And if she wished to know where her lover was, and her son likewise, all she had to do was look into the lake. La Albufera, the
mother of them all, would keep the secret as faithfully as he.

Neleta was terrified by this revelation; but even in her great surprise she looked at the old man uneasily, fearing to see it entrusted to Tío Paloma's silence.

Once more the old man beat his breast. She could live happy and enjoy her riches. He would be silent forever.

It was a gloomy night that they passed in the cabin of the Palomas. By the dying light of a lamp the grandfather and the father, seated facing each other, talked for a long time, with the gravity of persons who are separated by traits of character, and whom only misfortune can bring together.

Tío Paloma related the tale without circumlocution. He had seen the suicide son, his breast rent by two discharges of bird shot, sunk in the mud of the mata with his feet sticking out of the water, near the abandoned boat. Tío Tòni scarcely blinked. Only his lips pressed convulsively together, and his rigid finger scratched his knees.

A harsh, prolonged lament rose from a dark corner of the cabin where the kitchen was situated, as if someone were being flayed in the gloom. It was La Borda moaning, terrified by the news.

"Silence, girl!" cried the old man imperiously.

"Hush, hush!" said the father.

And the unhappy girl stifled her sobs, oppressed in her grief by the firmness of these two iron-willed men, who, stabbed by misfortune, remained externally impassive, betraying not the slightest emotion in their eyes.

Tío Paloma told the story in rapid outline. The appearance of the dog with its horrible prey, Tonet's flight:
then, the return to Saler, his careful exploration of the mata, with the presentiment of a misfortune, and his discovery of the corpse. He had foreseen everything. He had recalled Tonet’s disappearance on the day of the celebration; Neleta’s pallor and weakness; her wan, sickly face after that night, and with his old man’s wiliness he filled in the missing scenes,—the agonizing birth during the silence of the night, with the terror of being heard by the neighbors, and then the infanticide, a crime that caused him to despise Tonet more as a coward than as a criminal.

The old man, after revealing his secret, felt relieved. His sadness was now followed by indignation. The wretches! That Neleta was a hot-blooded woman who had ruined the boy, impelling him to crime so that her money might be saved; but Tonet was doubly a coward, and he despised him not only for the crime, but even more for his committing suicide, crazed with fear, rather than taking his punishment. The señor had sent two shots into himself rather than face the music: he found it easier to disappear than to pay for his crime with the proper sentence. Always fleeing his obligations, seeking the easiest way out sooner than put up a fight. What times, Christ! What sort of youth was today’s generation? ... His son scarcely heard him. He sat motionless, overwhelmed by the misfortune, and bowed his head, as if his father’s words were a blow that struck him down forever.

La Borda began to groan again.

“Silence, I said! Silence!” cried Tío Tòni in a grim voice.

Amidst his deep grief, silent and repressed as it was, it
provoked him that others should find relief in tears, while he, because of his powerful masculine character, could not melt his sorrow in weeping.

At last Tio Tòni spoke. His voice did not quiver, but it was veiled with the feeble hoarseness of emotion.

The shameful death of that unhappy fellow was an end worthy of his conduct. He had warned him that he would meet a bad end. When you are born poor, idleness is a crime. That’s how God arranged matters, and one must conform. . . . But ay! It was his son. . . . his son! . . . His own flesh and blood! His iron-willed rectitude as an honest man was insensible to the catastrophe; but there, inside his bosom, he felt a certain oppression, as if part of his very heart had been torn out and was now serving as food for the eels of the Albufera.

He wished to see him for the last time,—did his father understand? . . . He wished to hold him in his arms, as he had done when the lad was an infant, when he had lulled him to sleep singing him a song about how his father would work to make him a wealthy farmer, the owner of many fields.

“Father. . . . Father!” he cried in an anguished voice to Tio Paloma. “Where is he?”

The old man replied with indignation. They ought to leave matters as accident had arranged them. It was sheer madness to alter their course. Let there be no scandals, no unveiling of the mystery. Things were all right as they were: everything hidden.

People, when they no longer saw Tonet, would believe that he had gone off in search of adventures and a gay life, as he had done when he left for America. The lake would guard its secret well: years would go by before.
anybody would pass the spot where the suicide was. The vegetation of the Albufera covers everything. Besides, if they were to speak, news of the death would be spread broadcast, everybody would want to know more about it, justice would intervene, the truth would be discovered, and instead of only a Paloma who had disappeared, his shame known to them alone, they would have a Paloma in dishonor, who had slain himself to escape prison and perhaps the scaffold. No; Tono; he said this with all his paternal authority. For the few months left him let them respect him, not embitter his final days with dishonor. He wished to drink peacefully with the other boatmen, and be able to look them in the face. Everything was well: silence, then. . . . Besides, if they were to discover the body, they could not inter it in holy ground. His crime and his suicide deprived him of the right to share the same ground as the others. It was better that he should lie in the water there, sunk in the mud, surrounded by reeds, as the last accursed scion of a famous dynasty of fishermen.

Excited by La Borda's weeping, the old man threatened her. She must keep quiet. Did she wish to ruin them? The night seemed endless and tragically silent. The lugubrious atmosphere of the cabin seemed gloomier than ever, as if the black wings of misfortune were beating about it.

Tío Paloma, with the insensitivity of the harsh, egotistic old curmudgeon who desires to prolong his life, dozed in the mat-weed chair. His son spent the hours in rigid immobility, his eyes dilated, fixed upon the wavering shadows that the trembling light of the lamp traced upon the wall. La Borda, seated by the hearth, was sobbing weakly, hidden in the darkness.
There was a moment in which Tio Tòni shuddered, as if awakening. He arose, went to the cabin door, and opening it, gazed at the starry sky. It must be about three. The calm of the night seemed to penetrate him, strengthening the resolution which he had just formed.

He approached the old man and shoved him till he woke him.

"Father... Father!" he said in a supplicating voice.

"Where is he?"

Tio Paloma, half asleep, protested furiously. Let them not disturb him. There was no remedy for this. He wished to sleep, and would to God he would never wake up!...

But Tio Tòni continued to beg him. He must remember that it was his grandson; he, who was the boy's father, could not rest easy until he looked upon him for the last time. He would be imagining him at all hours at the bottom of the lake, rotted by the waters, devoured by the aquatic creatures, without being buried in the earth the same as the most wretched of persons,—even that Sangonera, who had lived without a father. Ay! To labor all one's life long in order to make sure of bread for his only son, and then leave him to his fate, without even knowing where he was buried, like the dead dogs that are thrown into the lake. It could not be, father! It was too cruel! He would never be brave enough to sail the lake imagining that perhaps his boat would be passing over his son's corpse.

"Father... Father!" he implored, shaking the old man out of his sleep.

Tio Paloma jumped up as if he were about to strike his son. Was he going to let him in peace?... Look for.
that coward again? . . . Let them permit him to sleep! He didn't care to go digging in the mud with the danger of making their family dishonor public.

"But... where is he?" asked the father, anxiously.

He would go alone; but, by God! he must tell him the place. If the grandfather refused to speak, he felt that he would spend the rest of his life dragging the lake, even if he made the secret public.

"In the mata of the Bolodró," said the old man at last. "And you'll have a job to find him."

He closed his eyes and sunk his head to resume the sleep from which he did not care to wake.

Tío Tòni made a sign to La Borda. They took their spades, their poles, the sharp spears that served for spearing large fishes, lighted a lantern at the lamp, and amidst the silence of the night crossed the town to reach the canal and set sail.

The dark boat, with the lantern at the prow, spent the entire night winding in and out of the clumps of sedge. It looked like a red star wandering amid the reeds.

Near dawn the light was extinguished. The corpse had been found, after two hours of anxious search, just as the grandfather had seen it. The head was sunk in the mud, the feet thrust out of the water, and the bosom a bleeding mass, torn by the discharge of the bird shot.

They pulled him out of the water with their spears. The father, as he thrust the fitora into that soft mass, raising it into the boat with a superhuman effort, felt as if he were sinking it into his own bosom.

There followed a slow, agonizing progress, as they looked in every direction, like criminals fearing detection.

La Borda, still sobbing, managed the pole at the prow:
the father helped her at the other end, and between these two rigid figures, whose black silhouette stood out against the vague light of the starry night, lay stretched the body of the suicide.

They reached Tío Tòni's fields, that artificial soil which had been formed pailful by pailful, by ceaseless toil, with mad persistence.

The father and La Borda, taking the body, lowered it carefully to earth, as if it were a sick person whom they feared to waken. Then with their industrious spades they commenced to dig a grave.

Only a week before they had been bringing earth from every corner of the lake. Now they were taking it out to conceal the family dishonor.

It was already daybreak when they lowered the body into the bottom of the grave, which oozed water from all sides. A cold, bluish light was shed over the Albufera, imparting to its surface the hard glint of steel. Through the gray space there passed in triangular formation the first flock of birds.

Tío Tòni took a last look at his son. Then he turned aside, as if he were ashamed of the first tears that finally melted the hardness of his eyes.

His life was over. So many years of battling against the lake, believing that he was accumulating a fortune, and without knowing it, all the time, preparing his son's grave! ...

He stamped upon that earth which now contained the essence of his life. First he had dedicated to it his sweat, his strength, his illusions: now, when he had been on the point of fertilizing it, he gave to it his own flesh and
blood, his son, his successor, his hope,—and this was the end of his work.

The earth would fulfill its mission: the harvest would grow like a sea of copper-colored ears above Tonet’s corpse. But as for him... what was there left for him to do upon earth?

The father wept as he contemplated the void of his existence; the solitude that waited for him till death, as monotonous, endless and unruffled as the lake which gleamed before his eyes, without a boat to cleave its smooth surface.

And while Tío Tòni’s lamentations rent the silence of the dawn like a howl of despair, La Borda, seeing that her father had turned his back, bent over the edge of the grave and kissed the livid head with an ardent kiss,—a kiss of immense passion, of hopeless love, daring, before the mystery of death, to reveal for the first time the secret of her life.

THE END