TíO PALOMA'S cabin was situated at one end of Palmar.

A great fire had divided the town, changing its aspect. Half Palmar had been devoured by the flames. The straw huts had been rapidly reduced to ashes, and their owners, desiring thereafter to live without fear of fire, built structures of brick upon the charred sites, many of them pawning their scanty belongings in order to transport the material, which proved very costly due to having to ferry it across the lake. The part of the village destroyed by the fire was soon covered with cottages, their fronts painted rose, green, or blue. The other section of Palmar retained its original character, the roofs of the cabins round at front and back, like boats placed upside down upon mud walls.

The cabins extended from the little church plaza to the far end of the town near the Dehesa, separated from one another through fear of a fire, as if scattered at random.

Tío Paloma's cabin was the oldest. His father had built it in the days when not a human being could be found in Albufera free from the tremors of fever. The thickets at that time reached to the walls of the cabins. The hens disappeared at the very door of the house, according to Tío Paloma, and when they next showed up they brought with them a brood of newly hatched chicks. In those days otters were still hunted in
the canals and the population of the lake was so small that the fishermen scarcely knew what to do with the fish that filled their nets. Valencia, to them, was the end of the world, and the only one to come from there had been the marshal Suchet, who was created, by King José, Duke of la Albuera and lord of the lake and the forest with all their wealth.

Recollection of this personage was the furthest back that Tío Paloma's memory could go. The old man imagined he could still see him, with his dishevelled hair and his flowing side-whiskers, dressed in a red frock-coat and a round hat, surrounded by men in bright uniforms who loaded his muskets for him. The marshal had gone hunting in Tío Paloma's father's boat, and the little urchin, hidden at the prow, had gazed at him with admiration. Many a time he had laughed at the gibberish in which the marshal lamented the decline of the nation or commented upon the events of a war between Spaniards and the English, only scant details of which had penetrated to the lake region.

Once he had gone with his father to Valencia to present the Duke of la Albuera with a marsh eel, notable for its size, and Suchet, attired in his grand uniform with its dazzling gold trimming, surrounded by officers who seemed satellites of his splendor, had received them smilingly.

When Tío Paloma became a man and, upon his father's death found himself the owner of the cabin and of two boats, there was no longer a duke of la Albuera, but instead, Knights commander, who governed it in the name of the king their master; excellent city folk who never came to the lake, allowing the fishers to pillage the Dehesa
and freely hunt the birds that were bred in the sedge. Those were the good old days, and when Tío Paloma, at the gatherings in Cañamél’s tavern, recalled them in his broken old voice, the younger men quivered with enthusiasm. Men then fished and hunted at the same time, without fear of guards or fines. At nightfall they came home with dozens of rabbits caught with their ferrets in the Dehesa, and in addition to this, baskets of fish and strings of birds shot in the canebrakes. Everything belonged to the king, and the king was far away. The Albufera did not, at that time, as it now did, belong to the State (whatever that gentleman might be!) nor was the hunting privilege controlled by contractors and Dehesa the property of lessees, so that the poor folk could not discharge a shot or gather a faggot without a guard rising before them with his bandoleer across his chest and his carbine aimed at them.

Tío Paloma had maintained the pre-eminence of his father. He was the foremost boatman of the lake, and no personage ever came to Albufera that he didn’t take him for a trip among the reed islets, pointing out the curiosities of land and water. He recalled Isabel II in her youth, filling the entire poop of the decorated boat with her wide skirts, her rounding, girlish breast trembling at every thrust of the boatman’s pole. His hearers would laugh at the recollection of his trip over the lake with Empress Eugenia. She sat in the prow, a svelte figure, dressed like an Amazon, with her musket in constant readiness, bringing down the birds that skilful beaters by sticks and shouts put up in flocks from the canebrakes; and at the other end, Tío Paloma, sly and crafty, with his old gun between his legs, shooting the birds that escaped the grand
dame and calling the *colovertos* to her attention, in a fantastic Spanish: "Your Majesty . . . look! There comes a *collovierde* from behind."

Everybody liked the old boatman. He was insolent with the rudeness of a son of the lake; but the cajolery that was wanting in his speech was expressed by his gun, a venerable weapon, so much repaired that it was hard to tell just how much of the original gun was left. Tío Paloma was a wonderful marksman. His fame expanded in the mouths of the region's tale-bearers, who went so far as to assert that he had brought down four coots with a single shot. Whenever he wanted to flatter a mediocre marksman he would take up his position behind him in the boat and shoot at the same time so that the shots would blend, and the huntsman, seeing the birds fall, would be filled with astonishment at his own skill, while the boatman would maliciously make faces behind his back.

His favorite recollection was that of General Prim. He had made the general's acquaintance on a stormy night while carrying him across the lake in his boat. Those were the days of misfortune. The guards were approaching; the general was disguised as a workingman and was fleeing from Valencia, after having made an unsuccessful attempt to rouse the garrison to mutiny. Tío Paloma took him as far as the sea, and when he next saw him, years later, he was the head of the government and the idol of the nation. Abandoning political life, he once escaped from Madrid for a hunt in the lake, and Tío Paloma, bold and exceedingly familiar with him as a result of the old adventure, scolded him as if he were a little boy whenever he missed a shot. For Tío Paloma there did not exist any human greatness: men were
divided into good hunters and bad. Whenever the hero discharged without hitting his target the boatman would get so furious that he would even use the familiar pronoun in addressing him. "General... inability! And was this the brave fellow who had accomplished such wonders yonder in Morocco?... Look, look and learn." And while the famous pupil laughed, the boatman would shoot off his gun almost without looking, and the coot would fall like a lump of lead into the water.

All these anecdotes endowed Tio Paloma with great prestige among the lake people. What that man might not have been had he simply cared to open his mouth and ask whatever he pleased of his fellow men!... But he was always taciturn and sharp-tongued; he treated high-born personages as if they were tavern cronies; he made them laugh with his insolence when he was in bad humor, and with his twisted, bilingual phrases when he meant to be affable.

He was content with life, despite the fact that it was becoming more and more difficult, because of his advancing age. A boatman, always a boatman! He despised the persons who cultivated the rice-fields. They were *labradores*¹ and to him this word signified the greatest affront.

He was proud to be a man of the water, and many a time he would follow the windings of the canals rather than shorten the distance by cutting across the banks. He never set foot willingly upon any other soil than that of the Dehesa, to send a few shots at rabbits, making off at the approach of the guards. If it were left entirely to him, he would gladly eat and sleep in his boat, which was

¹ Farmers, "landlubbers."
to him what the shell is to an aquatic animal. The instincts of the primitive lacustrian races lived again in the old man.

All he desired for complete happiness was to be rid of a family, to live like a fish of the lake or a bird of the sedge, making his nest today on an islet and tomorrow in a canebrake. But his father had insisted upon his getting married. He did not like to see that cabin, his own handiwork, forsaken; and the bohemian of the lakes found himself compelled to dwell in the society of his kind,—to sleep beneath a straw roof, to contribute his share toward the maintenance of the curate and to obey the petty magistrate of the island, always some shameless wretch,—according to his words—who, in order to avoid work sought the favor and protection of influential men in the city.

He could hardly recall what his wife had looked like. She had spent many years of her life at his side, without having left in his memory any recollection other than her skill at mending nets and the knack she had for kneading the bread for the entire week every Thursday, taking it to an oven with a round, white cupola, resembling an African ant-hill, which was situated at one of the ends of the island.

They had had many children,—many; but all except one had died "opportune." They were pale, sickly creatures, engendered with a view to having them contribute to the support of the house, by parents who came together only with a desire of transmitting heat to each other, trembling as they did with the swamp fever. The children seemed to be born bearing in their blood the shudders of the tertian fever. Some had died of consumption,
REEDS AND MUD

weakened by the insubstantial diet of fresh-water fish; others had been drowned by falling into the canals near the house; and if one survived,—the youngest,—it was to clutch tenaciously at life, with a mad desire to survive, confronting the fevers and sucking from the flaccid breasts of his mother the scant substance of an ever-lastingly sick creature.

Tio Paloma considered these misfortunes logical and indispensable. Folks should praise the Lord, who remem-bers the poor. It was repulsive to behold how families multiplied in poverty; and without the mercy of the Lord, who from time to time made a gap in this pest of children, there wouldn't be enough food in the lake for all and they'd be forced to devour one another.

When Tio Paloma's wife died he, already an old man, found himself the father of a seven-year old boy. The boatman and his son Tono remained alone in the cabin. The boy was as clever and industrious as his mother. He cooked meals, repaired the cabin, and took lessons from the neighboring housewives so that his father should not feel the absence of a woman in the household. He did all this with a serious mien, as if the terrible struggle he had made to survive had left in him ineradicable traces of sadness.

His father strode along with an air of satisfaction when he walked toward the boat followed by the little fellow, who was almost hidden beneath a heap of nets. He grew up rapidly, becoming daily stronger, and Tio Paloma would swell with pride to see with what strength he drew the mornells out of the water or sent the boat gliding across the lake.

"He's the most manly man in all Albufera," he would
say to his friends. "His body is now taking revenge for the sickness he had when he was a little one."

The women of Palmar were no less ready to sing the praises of his sound habits. He didn't get mixed up in the wild pranks of the young loafers who congregated in the tavern, nor did he gamble with certain scoundrels who, as soon as the fishing was over, would stretch out on their bellies across the reeds, behind some cabin, and spend hours shuffling a filthy deck of cards.

Always reserved and ready for work, Tono never occasioned his father the slightest displeasure. Tio Paloma, who could not fish in the company of others, since at the merest oversight he would grow furious and attack his companion, never scolded his son, and when, in a moment of ill humor he would issue an order to the boy, he would find that the child, having divined his intention, had already tackled the work.

When Tono grew to manhood, his father, fond of a nomadic existence and rebelling against all family ties, experienced the same desires that had been felt by the original Tio Paloma. What were these two men doing, isolated in the solitude of the old cabin? It was unpleasant for him to behold his son,—a broad, sinewy giant,—bending over the fireplace, in the center of the cabin, poking the fire and preparing the meal. Many a time he had felt remorse, contemplating his short, hairy hands, with their iron fingers, scrubbing pans and scraping the lake fish, removing with a knife the hard scales shining with metallic reflections.

During the winter nights they were like a couple of shipwrecked sailors who had taken refuge upon a desert
island. Not a word between them, not a laugh, not a sound of a woman’s voice to cheer them. The cabin was a gloomy place. In the center, the fire burned in a hearth on the floor,—a small square space enclosed by bricks. Opposite, the kitchen bench, with its row of poor pots and old bottles. On each side the partitions of the two rooms, made of reeds and mud, like the rest of the hut; and above the partition walls, which were only the height of a man, the interior of the black roofing, with a coat of soot, smoked from the fires of many years, with no air passage other than an opening in the straw covering, through which the stormy winds of winter entered with their shrill blasts. From the ceiling hung the waterproof garments of father and son, worn in the night fishing expeditions: stiff, heavy trousers, jackets—with a stick thrust from sleeve to sleeve—of coarse texture, yellow and shiny from the oil rubbings. The wind, entering through the gap that served as chimney, would sway these strange scarecrows, which caught in reflections on their oily surface the red light from the fireplace. It looked as if the two inhabitants of the cabin had hanged themselves from the ceiling.

Tio Paloma was bored. He liked to talk: in the tavern he could swear as much as he pleased, he maltreated the other fishermen, and dazzled them with his recollections of noted personages he had known; in his own house, however, he was at a loss for speech, and his words, eliciting no response from his silent and obedient son, were swallowed into a respectful and overpowering silence. The boatman said so himself, in the tavern, with his jovial, brutal manner. That son of his was a mighty fine
chap, but he didn’t take after his father at all; he was always so quiet and submissive. His late wife must have played some sort of trick on him.

One day he accosted Tono with the imperious expression of a father of the Latin type who allows his children no will of their own and disposes of their future and their lives without even troubling to consult them. He must marry; he wasn’t at all well off like this; the house needed a woman. And Tono received this command as if he had been told to get the large boat ready for the following day to meet a hunter from Valencia at Saler. Very well. He would try to fulfil his father’s order as soon as possible.

And while the youth looked about on his own account, the old boatman communicated his intentions to all the mothers of Palmar. His Tono wished to get married. Everything he owned would go to the boy: the cabin, the large boat with its new sail, and another old one which was even better; two smaller boats, and he could not recall how many nets, and on top of this, the virtues of the boy himself,—a hard worker, sober, with no vices and exempt from military service because he had drawn a lucky number. In short: he wasn’t a wonderful match, but his Tono wasn’t as poor as a toad in the canals. And besides, the sort of girls that there were in Palmar! . . .

The old fellow, with his scorn of woman! and, spat upon beholding the maidens from among whom his future daughter-in-law was to be chosen. No. These virgins of the lake weren’t much to look at with their clothes that were washed in the filthy water of the canals, smelling of mud, and hands saturated with a viscidous substance that seemed to penetrate to their very bones. Their hair
colored by the sun, whitish and scant, was scarcely enough
to shade their thin, reddish faces, in which the eyes shone
with the glow of a fever that was ever renewed by drink-
ing from the waters of the lake. Their angular profiles,
the slippery meagerness of their bodies, and the nauseating
odor from their skirts, imparted to them a certain resem-
blance to the eel, as if a monotonous and unvaried diet of
many generations had resulted in stamping upon these
people the traits of the creature that served them as sus-
tenance.

Tono chose one of these,—any one at all—the one
who interposed the fewest obstacles to his shyness. The
wedding took place and the old man had another person
in the cabin to speak with and to scold. He felt a certain
intense pleasure on seeing that his words did not fall into
a vacuum and that his daughter-in-law raised her voice
in protest against his ill-humored exactions.

Together with this source of satisfaction came a disap-
pointment. His son appeared to have forgotten the
family traditions. He scorned the lake, and went off to
seek his living in the fields, and in September, when the
rice was harvested and wages were high, he abandoned
his boat and became a reaper, like many another who
roused Tio Paloma’s indignation. This labor of working
in the mud, of scarring the fields, was all well enough for
strangers, for those who dwelt far from Albufera. The
children of the lake should be free of such slavery. Not
for nothing had God placed them near that water, which
was a blessing. In its depths was their food, and it was
an absurdity, a disgrace, to work all day in mud up to
your waist, your legs gnawed by leeches and your back
scorched by the sun, just to reap a few ears that weren’t
your own. Was his son going to become a *labrador*?

... And as he asked this question the old man invested his words with all the stupefaction, all the unbounded amazement aroused by an unheard-of atrocity, as if someone had just told him that one fine day the whole lake of Albufera would dry up.

Tono, for the first time in his life, dared to oppose his father's wishes. He would fish, as usual, during the rest of the year. But now he was married, the needs of the house were greater, and it would be imprudent to scorn the excellent wages of the harvest. He was paid more than the others, because of his strength and his application to the work. Times should be taken as they come; rice was being more and more cultivated on the shores of the lake, the old pools were being filled in with earth, the poor were becoming rich, and he wasn't such a fool that he was going to lose his share in the new life.

The boatman grumblingly accepted this transformation in the customs of his house. The common-sense and the seriousness of his son compelled a certain respect, but as he leaned against his oar on the banks of the canal, conversing with other boatmen of the good old days, he protested vehemently. They were going to transform the Albufera! Within a few years nobody would know the place. In the direction of Sueca they were installing iron machinery in houses with huge chimneys and ... the smoke rose from them in clouds! The old *torias*, so peaceful and agreeable, with their wheels of decayed wood and their black buckets, were to be replaced with infernal machines that churned the waters with the noise of a thousand devils. It would be a miracle if all the fish didn't take to the sea, disgusted by such innovations!
They were going to cultivate everywhere; they were shovelling dirt and more dirt into the lake. As few years as yet remained to him, he would live to see the last eel, having no room in which to move, wriggle her tail in the direction of the mouth of the Perelló and disappear into the sea. And Tono mixed up in this piratical work! To think that a son of his, a Paloma, should have become a labrador! ... And the old man laughed as if he had imagined an utter impossibility.

Time passed and his daughter-in-law presented him with a grandson, Tonet, whom the grandfather on many an afternoon carried in his arms to the banks of the canal, twisting his pipe to one side of his toothless mouth so that the smoke should not trouble the little fellow. A devil of a kid, and how fetching he was! That ugly, lanky creature of a daughter-in-law was like all the other women of his family: they gave birth to offspring that didn't resemble their parents at all. The grandfather, fondling the little boy, thought of the future. He showed him to the comrades of his youth, who were becoming scarcer and scarcer with time, and prophesied the days to come.

"This little fellow will be one of us: his only house will be the boat. Before he's cut all his teeth he'll know how to handle an oar."

But before the infant cut his teeth, Tío Paloma met with the most unexpected event in all his life. He was told at the tavern that Tono had rented certain rice lands near Saler, the property of a woman in Valencia; and when that night he confronted his son, he was amazed to see that the man did not deny the crime.

When had anybody ever seen a Paloma with a master? The family had always lived free, as every son of God
must live who has any self-respect, seeking their sustenance in the air or in the water, hunting and fishing. His masters had been the king and that blunt warrior who was a Captain General in Valencia; masters who dwelt far off, who did not oppress, and who could be tolerated because of their greatness. But a son of his, renting land from one of those idle, stylish city women, and every year bringing her in cash a part of his labor! What an idea! He was ready to go to talk to that woman and undo the contract! The Palomas would serve nobody as long as there was anything left to eat in the lake: even if it was only frogs.

But the old man’s surprise grew greater than ever before Tono’s unexpected show of resistance. He had thought the matter over well and was not disposed to retreat. He was thinking of his wife, of that little boy whom she carried in her arms, and it filled him with ambition. Who were they? Lake beggars, living like savages in the cabin, with no other food than the creatures of the canals, and compelled to flee like criminals before the guards whenever they shot a bird to put in the pot. Nothing but parasites of the hunters, eating meat only when the strangers allowed them to take a share of their provisions. And this poverty continued from fathers to sons, as if they were to live forever moored to the mud of the Albufera, with no more life or ambition than that of a toad, which thinks itself happy in the reeds because its finds insects on the surface of the water.

No; he was rebelling, he wished to lift the family out of its wretched prostration; to work not only for the purpose of getting enough to eat, but to lay something aside. The advantages of rice cultivation must be appreciated:
little work and great profit. It was a veritable blessing from heaven: nothing in the world offered more. You plant in June and harvest in September; a little fertilizer and a little work,—in all, three months: you reap the harvest, then the waters of the lake, swollen by the winter rains, cover the fields and, then, all done until the next year! You save what you earn, and during the rest of the months you fish in the sunlight and hunt on the sly to keep your family provided for. What more could be desired? ... His grandfather had been a poor man, and after a dog’s life had accomplished only the building of this cabin, where they all dwelt in everlasting smoke. His father, whom he respected so much, had not been able to lay aside even a crumb for his old age. Let them permit him to work as he saw fit, and his son, his little Tonet, would be a rich man, he would cultivate fields whose vast extent would be lost to the view, and upon the site of the cabin perhaps in time there would arise the finest house in all Palmar. His father was wrong to get angry because his descendants cultivated the earth. It was better to be a farmer than to lead a wandering life about the lake, often suffering hunger and exposing oneself to a bullet from one of the guards of the Dehesa.

Tio Paloma, white with rage at his son’s talk, stared fixedly at a pole lying close to the wall, and his hands moved toward it as if to seize it and crack his son’s head with a stout blow. Had such a rebellion occurred in earlier days he surely would have broken his son’s head for it, for in his old-fashioned conception of a father’s authority he considered that he had the right to do so.

But he looked at his daughter-in-law with his grandson, in her arms, and these two beings seemed to increase his
son's stature, bringing him up to his own level. He was a father, one of his equals. For the first time he realized that Tono was no longer the boy who had made supper in the olden days, lowering his head in terror at a single glance. And quivering with rage because he could not strike him as he used to when he committed some error in the boat, he vented his protest in loud snorts. Very well: everybody to his own taste; the one to the lake and the other to his labor of flattening the soil. They would live together, since there was no other way out of it. His years did not permit him to sleep out on the middle of the lake, for he had got rheumatism in his old age; but aside from this, it would be as if they did not know each other. Ay, if the original Paloma,—the,boatman of Su-chet,—could lift his head and see the family disgrace!...

The first year was one of unending torment for the old man. Entering the cabin at night he would encounter farming implements side by side with fishing apparatus. One day he stumbled across a plow that Tono had brought from the land to repair during the evening, and it produced upon him the effect of a monstrous dragon stretched out in the center of the cabin. All these blades of iron made him shiver with rage. It was enough merely to see a sickle lying a few paces away from one of his nets, for him to imagine directly that the curved blade would rise of its own volition and cut all his property; he would scold his daughter-in-law for her carelessness; ordering her at the top of his lungs to keep those farmer's implements away—way away from his own. On all sides were objects that suggested the cultivation of the land. And this, in the Paloma's cabin, where no steel had been known other than that of the knives used to clean fish!...
Good Lord, it was enough to make a man burst with rage!

During the sowing season, when the lands were dry enough to plow, Tono would come home perspiring, after driving the hired horses all day long. His father would walk around him, sniffing with malignant delight, and afterwards would dash to the tavern, where his comrades of the good old days would be dozing, glass in hand. Gentlemen, a great piece of news! . . . . His son smelled horsey. Hee, hee! A horse on the island of Palmar! Now the world had truly gone topsy-turvy.

Apart from these outbursts, Tio Paloma maintained a cold, aloof attitude amid his son’s family. He would come in at night with his monót on his arm, a basket made of net and wooden hoops, containing some eels, and would shove his daughter-in-law aside with his foot, to make room for himself before the hearth. He prepared his own supper. Sometimes he would roll the eels around a stick and make them al ast (on the spit) broiling them on all sides patiently over the flames. At others he would hunt up his old pot in the boat, containing reserve provisions, and would cook en such an enormous tench, or fastidiously make a sebollá, mixing onions with eels, and using such large quantities that it seemed as though he were preparing a meal for the entire town.

The voracity of this old, wizened fellow was that of all of Albufera’s old sons. He ate his heavy meal at night, when he returned to the cabin; seated on the floor, in a corner, with his pot between his knees, he would spend hours at a time, in silence, moving his old goat-like mouth from side to side, swallowing enormous quantities of food,—so much that it seemed impossible for the human stomach to contain it.
He ate his own food,—that which he had captured during the day,—and paid no attention to what his son's family ate, offering them nothing from his pot. Let everyone fatten upon his own labors! His eyes would glitter with malicious satisfaction when he would see upon the family table, as their only food, a pan of rice, while he picked the bones of some bird that he had shot in the sedge while the guards were far away.

Tono let his father do as he liked. Using compulsion on the old man was not to be thought of, so the isolation between him and the family continued. Little Tonet was the sole bond of union. Many times the grandson would approach Tio Paloma, as if attracted by the savory odor of his pot.

"Tin, pobret, tin," the old man would say, compassionately, as if he beheld the child in the greatest misery. "Take this, my poor child. Here."

And he would present him with a succulent, meaty thigh of a coot, smiling to see how the tot devoured it.

Whenever he cooked some all y pebre (fish stew) with his boon companions at the tavern, he would take along his grandson without saying a word to the parents.

At other times there would be a bigger feast. On a morning Tio Paloma, feeling the itch for adventure, would have embarked with some companion as old as himself for the thickets of the Dehesa. A long wait, stretched out upon their bellies, spying upon the guards, who were unaware of their presence. As soon as the rabbits appeared leaping through the stalks of the underbrush, fire!—two of them in the bag, and run for the boat, afterwards laughing, from the middle of the lake, at the guards dashing about here and there along the shore.
hunting in vain for the poachers. These bold stunts rejuvenated Tio Paloma. It was a treat to hear him, at night, while the game was being eaten in the tavern by comrades who had paid for the wine with which to wash it down, boasting about his great exploit. Not a youth of the present day was able to do as much! And when the more prudent spoke to him of the law and its penalties, the boatman's chest swelled proudly, though it was sunken with the years and the constant poling. The guards were nothing but tramps, who took that sort of a job because they didn't care to do real work; and the men who leased the hunting were a band of robbers, who wanted everything for themselves. . . . The Albufera belonged to him and to all the rest of the fisher-folk. If they had been born in a palace, they would have been monarchs. If the Lord had caused them to be born there, it was for some purpose. All the rest was a heap of lies invented by men.

And after devouring his supper, when there was scarcely any wine left in the jugs, Tio Paloma would contemplate his grandson asleep on his knees, and would show him to his friends. This little fellow would some day grow into a real son of the Albufera. His grandfather would see to his education, so he wouldn't follow in the evil footsteps of his father. He would use the musket with astounding skill, he would know the bed of the lake like an eel, and when his grandfather should die, all who came to hunt would find in the boat another Paloma, but one in the strength of youth, such as he himself was in the days when even the queen came to sit down in his boat, laughing at his jokes.

Apart from these moments of tenderness, the boat-
man continued his smoldering animosity against his son. He did not care to see the cursed lands that he cultivated, but he had them ever present in his mind’s eye, and would laugh with diabolic joy on learning that Tono’s affairs were going badly. The first year his fields were spoiled by nitre, just when the rice was beginning to mature, and the harvest came near being lost. Tio Paloma repeated the story of this misfortune to everybody, with the greatest delight; but when he noted how sad the family was, and saw how they had to skimp because of the large expenditures that had gone to waste, he felt a certain compassion and even broke the silence to counsel his son. Had he not yet been convinced that he was a man of the water, and not a farmer? He should leave the fields to the inland folk, who were of old used to tilling them. He was the son of a fisherman, and must return to the nets.

Tono, however, replied with ill-humored grunts, indicating his determination to go ahead, and the old man subsided into his silent hatred. Ah, the obstinate fellow! From then on, he called down all sorts of calamities upon his son’s lands, as a means of conquering his proud resistance. He made no inquiries at home, but as his little skiff passed the large vessels coming from the direction of Saler, he would inquire as to the progress of the harvest and would feel a certain satisfaction when he was told that it would be a bad year. His obstinate son would die of hunger. He would even have to come to him on his knees and beg for the key to the old eel-pond with the roof of broken straw that he had near Palmar.

The storms at the end of summer filled him with delight. He longed to have the cataracts of heaven burst
open; to have that stream of Torrente that poured into the lake of Albufera, supplying it with water, overflow the place from shore to shore; to have the lake, as sometimes occurred, flood over and submerge the ears that were ripe for harvest. The farmers would die of hunger; but there would be plenty of fish in the lake just the same, and he would have the satisfaction of beholding his son starving, begging his aid.

Fortunately for Tono, the wishes of the malevolent old fisherman were not fulfilled. The years immediately following were favorable; a certain comfort reigned in the cabin, and the ardent toiler foresaw, almost in the light of a happiness impossible of realization, a time when he might be tilling lands that were his own, and which would not carry with them the obligation to surrender to another almost the entire product.

A shadow clouded the family life. Tonet was growing up and his mother was sad. The boy would go to the lake with his grandfather; after, when he was older, he would accompany his father to the fields, and the poor woman would have to spend the day all alone in the cabin.

She was thinking of the future, and the coming loneliness filled her with fear. Ah, if she only had other children! . . . It was a daughter for which she prayed so fervently to God. But the daughter did not come; she could not come, according to Tío Paloma. His daughter-in-law was unwell; women's trouble. She had been delivered of her child by women neighbors of Palmar, leaving her in such a condition, according to the old man, that she could never bear again. This was why she always seemed so ill, as white as paper, unable to be on her feet
for very long at a time, and on some days dragging herself along, with groans that she swallowed with her tears so as not to bother the men.

Tono was eager to fulfill his wife’s desires. He had no objections to a girl in the house; she could help the sick woman. And together they made a trip to the city, bringing back with them a little girl of six years,—a timid, wild, ugly creature whom they had taken from the orphan asylum. Her name was Visanteta; but everybody, so that she should not forget her origin, and with that unconscious cruelty of coarse, unrefined spirits, called her La Borda.

The boatman grumbled with indignation. Another mouth to feed! . . . Little Tonet, who was now ten, found this little girl quite to his taste, inflicting upon her all his whims and exactions of a pampered, only son.

La Borda found in the cabin no other affection than that of the sickly woman, who grew daily weaker and more wracked with pain. The unhappy woman deluded herself into believing that she had a daughter, and in the afternoon, seating the girl in the doorway of the cabin, face to the sun, she would comb her red hair, well anointed with oil.

The girl was like a frisky, obedient puppy that enlivened the cabin with its scampering here and there, resigned to all fatigue, submissive to all of Tonet’s mischievous pranks. With a supreme effort of her arms she would drag along a pitcher as tall as herself, filled with water from the Dehesa, from the canal to the house. She would run all over the town at all hours on errands for her new mother, and at table she ate with lowered eyes, not daring to raise her spoon until the rest were half-way
through the meal. Tio Paloma, with his silence and his ferocious glances, terrified her. At night, as the two rooms were occupied respectively by husband and wife, and by Tonet and his grandfather, she would sleep beside the hearth, in the middle of the cabin, upon the mud that oozed through the canvas that served as her bed, covering herself with the nets to keep off the draughts that blew down the chimney and through the cracked door gnawed full of holes by rats.

Her only pleasant hours came during those afternoons when all was calm and the men were either on the lake or in the fields; then she would sit down with her mother to sew sails or weave nets before the cabin door. The two conversed with the neighbors, amid the deep silence of the solitary, crooked grass-covered street, over which the hens strutted and the ducks waddled, cackling and flapping their damp white wings in the sunlight.

Tonet no longer attended the town school,—a damp cottage supported by the city council, where boys and girls, in an ill-smelling gathering, spent the day whining the alphabet or chanting prayers.

He was every inch a man, as his grandfather said, when he felt his muscles to see how hard they were and thumped the child’s chest with his fist. At his age Tio Paloma had already been able to live on what he had himself caught, and had shot at every species of bird that flies in the Albufera.

The boy gladly followed his grandfather on his expeditions over land and water. He learned how to handle the pole and sped like lightning in one of Tio Paloma’s little boats; when hunters came from Valencia, he would crouch in the prow of the boat and help his grandfather
manage the sail, leaping to the bank at difficult moments to grasp the rope and drag the vessel in tow.

Then came the development of his skill in hunting. His grandfather’s musket, a veritable arquebuse, which was easily to be distinguished from all other guns in Albufera by its report, he learned to handle with relative facility. Tío Paloma loaded heavily, and the first shots made the boy stagger; he all but fell head over heels into the bottom of the boat. Little by little he tamed the old beast and soon was bringing down coots, to the great delight of his grandfather.

That was the kind of education boys should receive. If the old man had his way, Tonet would eat nothing that he had not shot or fished with his own hands.

But after a year of training Tonet in this rude fashion, Tío Paloma noted a great slackening of interest on the part of his pupil. Tonet was fond of discharging shots and liked fishing. What he did not seem to be so fond of was getting up before daybreak and spending all day long with his arms stretched out moving the pole and pulling like a horse at the rope.

The boatman saw clearly that what his grandson detested, with instinctive repulsion that awoke his most spirited resistance, was work. In vain Tío Paloma spoke to him of the great fishing they’d do the following day at el Recatl, el Rincón de la olla, or some other point of Albufera. No sooner did the boatman turn his head than his grandson had disappeared. He preferred to scamper over the Dehesa with the good-for-nothings of the neighborhood, to stretch himself out beneath a pine and spend the hours listening to the chirping of the sparrows in the
tufted crests or watching the white butterflies and the bronze bumble-bees flit about in the wild flowers.

The grandfather threatened, but to no avail. He tried to, spank the boy, but Tonet, like a wild animal, would escape from him and look on the ground for rocks with which to defend himself. The old fellow became resigned to making his trips on the lake alone, as before.

He had spent his whole life working; his son Tono, although led astray by his agricultural enthusiasm, was stronger even than he for hard tasks. Then whom could that little terror have taken after? Lord! Where had he come from, with his endurance that was proof against all fatigue, with his fondness for lying about idle, basking for hours in the sun like a toad on the canal bank? . . .

Everything in that world beyond which the old man had never set foot was undergoing a transformation. The Albufera was being entirely altered by the men with their cultivating, and families were being disfigured, as if the traditions of the lake were being lost forever. The sons of the boatmen were becoming serfs of the land; the grandsons went armed with rocks to throw at their grandfathers; on the lake could be seen great barges laden with coal, while the rice fields extending in every direction, were invading the lake, devouring the water, and were already gnawing at the forest, cutting wide swaths in it. Ay, Lord! To behold all this, to witness the destruction of a world that he had looked upon as eternal! It would be better to die!

Isolated from his own, with no love other than the deep affection he felt for his mother, the Albufera, he would inspect it, review it daily, as if in his eyes, the
keen, astute eyes of an old man, he was storing up all the water of the lake and the countless trees of the Dehesa.

They did not hew down a pine in the forest without his noting it at once from a great distance, from the center of the lake. Another one! ... The gap that the fallen tree left in the foliage of the trees near-by filled him with anguish, as if he were gazing into the hollow of a grave. He cursed the lessees of the Albufera,—insatiable thieves. The people of Palmar stole wood from the forest, it was true; in their hearths burned only twigs and branches of the Dehesa, they were satisfied with the dead wood, with the withered and fallen trunks; but these invisible gentlemen, who appeared only by proxy, in the guards' carabines and the tricks of the law, struck down with the greatest nonchalance the veterans of the forest,—giants that had gazed down upon him when as a youngster he crawled about the boats, and which were already huge trees when his father, the first Paloma, dwelt in a savage Albufera, killing with cane-stalks the snakes that swarmed on the river-bank,—more agreeable creatures than the men of nowadays.

In his sadness before the downfall of ancient customs and views, he sought the wildest spots of the lake,—those to which the anxieties of exploitation had not yet come.

The sight of an old water-wheel would send a shudder up his spine, and with deep emotion he contemplated the black, decayed wheel, the chipped buckets, filled with straw, out of which some rats jumped as he approached. These were the ruins of the dead Albufera; they were the souvenirs, as he himself was, of a better time.

When he wished to rest he landed on the plain of
Sancha, with its lagoons of jelly-like water and its high beds of rushes; here he would contemplate the green, somber landscape, in which there still seemed to quiver the sounds of the legendary monster's tightening coils, and he rejoiced to think that there yet existed something that was free from the voracity of modern men,—among whom he could count, ay! his son.