THE second Sunday in July was for Palmar the most important day in the year.

It was on this day that lots were drawn by the inhabitants of the town for the redolins, the fishing sites on lake Albufera and its canals. It was a solemn, traditional ceremony, presided over by a delegate from La Hacienda—a mysterious woman whom nobody had ever seen, but who was spoken of with superstitious awe, seeing that she was proprietress of the lake and the interminable pine-groves of the Dehesa.

At seven in the morning the church bell had sent the whole town scurrying off to mass. The festivities in honor of the Infant Jesus, after Christmas, were solemn indeed; but after all they were nothing more than pure diversions, while in the ceremony of the lot-drawing there was at stake the year’s living and even a chance to get rich if the fishing were good.

For this reason the mass on this Sunday was the one listened to with greatest devotion. The women did not have to go looking for their husbands, pushing them along to the church and forcing them to fulfil their religious duties. All the fishermen were in church, abstracted, thinking more of the lake than of the mass, and in their mind’s eye they could see the lake of Albufera and its canals, and were getting ready to select the most favorable

---

1 The Ministry of Finance.
sites if luck smiled on them with the first numbers.

The church, small, with whitewashed walls, high windows and green curtains, could not contain all the faithful on this day. The door was wide open and the public overflowed into the square, all heads uncovered in the July sun. On the altar the Infant Jesus, the town’s patron, displayed his smiling countenance and his hollow skirt; the image was no more than a palm in height, but in spite of its smallness, it was able, during stormy nights, to fill the vessels of those who had won the best places with eels, and perform other no less astounding miracles talked about by the women of Palmar.

On the walls there stood out against the white background some paintings that came from old convents: huge pictures with phalanxes of condemned souls,—all red, as if they had just been cooked,—and angels in parrot-like plumages goading them along with flaming swords.

Above the font of holy water, a little placard in Gothic characters read as follows:

Si por la ley del amor no es lícito delinquir, no se permite escupir en las casa del Señor.¹

Everybody in Palmar admired these verses,—the work according to Tío Paloma, of a certain vicar who dwelt there in the olden days when the boatman was yet a boy. All had practised reading it, deciphering the words during the endless masses of their existence as good Christians. But if they admired the poetry, they did not take the advice, and the fishermen, without any respect whatsoever

¹If by the law of love it is unjust to do wrong, spitting in the house of the Lord is condemned.
for the “law of love,” coughed and spat with their chronic amphibian hoarseness, and the ceremony would proceed amidst a continuous hawking and expectoration that dirtied the floor and drew the angry glances of the celebrant.

Never had Palmar had a vicar like pare Miquel. It was said that he had been sent thither as a punishment, but his disgrace appeared to be quite to his liking. An indefatigable huntsman, no sooner would mass be over than he would put on his esparto sandals, clap his skin cap on, and followed by his dog, he would make for the Dehesa or run his little skiff through the thick reeds to shoot coots. A fellow must help himself out in a wretched position like his, he said. The pay was five reales a day, and he would be condemned to die of hunger, like his predecessors, if it weren’t for his gun, which the forest guards tolerated, and which brought down meat for his table every day. The women admired his vigorous integrity of character, seeing that he all but regulated them with his fists. The men applauded no less the simple directness with which he went about his religious duties. He was a gun-priest. When the town magistrate had to spend the night in Valencia, he would delegate his authority to Don Miguel, and the latter, content with the change, would say to the chief of the coast-guardsmen:

“You and I are the only authorities of the town. Let’s watch well over it.”

And, with their guns slung across their shoulders, they would make their nocturnal rounds, entering the taverns to send the men off to bed, stopping at the presbytery several times to drink a glass of cane-liquor, until daybreak. Then Don Miguel, laying aside his weapon and his con-
trabandist uniform, would enter the church to say mass for the fishermen.

Sundays, while he performed the sacred rites, he would look out of the corner of his eye at the faithful, noting those who kept on spitting, the gossips who chattered about their neighbors, the youngsters pushing each other near the door; and on turning around, drawing his proud body erect for the communal blessing, he would stare so reprovingly at the guilty ones that they trembled in anticipation of pare Miquel's threats. It was he who had kicked out drunken Sagonera, having caught him the third or fourth time with the wine-bottle of the sacristy. In his house only the priest could drink. His natural violence accompanied him in all his sacred functions, and many a time, in the midst of mass, noticing that the successor to Sagonera was making mistakes in the responses or was slow in fetching the Gospel from one side to the other, he would give him a kick from behind the lace trimmings of his alb, clucking his tongue as if he were calling a dog.

His morality was a simple code: it dwelt in the stomach. When the penitent parishioners excused their faults at confession, the penance imposed was always the same. What they needed was to eat more! That's why the evil spirit could grasp them so easily, seeing how thin and yellowish they were. As he put it: "More good food and less sin." And if anyone replied to this advice by pleading poverty, the priest would wax indignant, uttering a round oath. Recordóns! Poor, and they living in the Albufera, the best corner of the world? There was he himself with his five reales per day, and he had a better time of it than any patriarch. They had banished him to
Palmar thinking to give him a wretched lot, and he would exchange his post only for a canonry in Valencia. Why had God created the wood-cocks in the Dehesa, who swarmed as plentiful as flies, the rabbits, as numerous as the blades of grass, and all those birds of the lake, which rose from the brakes in dozens as soon as the reeds were stirred? Did they expect the meat to fall already plucked and spiced, right into their pots? . . . . What they needed was more attention to work and fear of God. They shouldn’t give themselves up exclusively to fishing eels, spending hour after hour in a boat, like a woman, and eating whitish meat that reeked of mud. That’s why they were such a disgusting lot of mouldy old sinners. A man with red blood in his veins,—cordones!—ought to get his food as he himself did. . . . with the gun! . . . .

After Easter, when all Palmar emptied its sack of sins in the confessional, the sounds of shots would multiply in the Dehesa and on the lake, and the guards would dash wildly here and there, at a loss to explain this sudden hunting craze.

The mass was ended, and the people scattered over the square. The women did not return to their cabins to prepare the mid-day meal. They remained with the men, before the schoolhouse, where the drawing took place. This was the best building in Palmar,—the only one with two stories,—a little structure that had its boys’ section downstairs, and the girls’ section above it. It was in the upper room that the drawing took place, and through the open windows could be seen the alguacil,1 aided by San- gonera, arranging the table with the presidential chair for

1 Constable.
the gentleman who was to come from Valencia, and the benches from the two schoolrooms, for the fishermen who belonged to the Society.

The oldest people of the town gathered about the twisted, almost barren olive tree,—the sole decoration of the little square. This snarled, ancient tree, torn up from the mountains to languish in a muddy soil, was the rendezvous of the people,—the spot where all the acts of their civic life took place. Beneath its branches all fishing arrangements were made, boats were traded, and eels were sold to the retail dealers of the city. When anybody found in the waters of the Albufera a lost mornell, a floating pole, or any other fishing instrument, he left it at the foot of the olive tree, and the people would file past it until the owner would recognize it by the special mark that each fisherman placed upon his belongings.

They all spoke of the approaching drawing with the tremulous emotion of those who confide their future to chance. Within an hour there would be decided, for each of them, poverty or abundance for an entire year. Among the groups the talk was chiefly confined to the six first sites,—the six best redolins,—the only ones that could make a fisherman rich, and which corresponded to the first six numbers that came out of the bag. These were the sites of La Sequiota, or those near it,—the road followed by the eels during those stormy nights on which they ran to the sea, only to encounter the nets of the redolins, where they were held prisoner.

One recalled, in a mysterious tone, certain lucky fishermen who owned a site in La Sequiota, and who, on a stormy night, when the lake of Albufera rolled with waves
that revealed the muddy bed, had caught six hundred arrobas\(^1\) of fish. Six hundred arrobas, at two duros\(^2\) . . . Their eyes burned with the fire of envy, but all spoke in a whisper, repeating the figures of the catch in a mysterious fashion, fearing lest some stranger should overhear them. For since childhood each of them had learned, with a strange feeling of solidarity, the advantage of always averring that fishing was bad, so that the Ministry of Finance (that unknown, hoggish old dame) should not afflict them with new taxes.

Tio Paloma spoke of the good old days when folks didn't multiply as rapidly as rabbits in the Dehesa, and when the drawing was entered by only some sixty fishermen who alone made up the Society. How many were they now? In the drawing of the previous year more than a hundred and fifty had participated. If the population continued to grow, the fishermen would outnumber the eels and Palmar would lose the advantages of its redolin privilege, which gave it a certain superiority over all the other fishing communities of the lake.

The recollection of these "others,"—of the fishermen of Catarroja who shared with those of Palmar the use of the lake, irritated Tio Paloma. He hated them as much as he hated the farmers who robbed the water in their creation of new fields. According to what the old boatman said, those fishermen who lived far from the lake, in the suburbs of Catarroja, mingling with the farmers and working the soil when pay was big, were merely occasional fishermen, persons who came to the water impelled by hunger, for lack of more productive employment.

\(^1\) Arroba = a weight of 25 lbs., or a measure of 32 pints.
\(^2\) Dollars.
The pride of these enemies rankled in Tío Paloma’s soul, for they considered themselves the earliest settlers of la Albufera. According to them, the inhabitants of Catarroja were the oldest fishermen,—those to whom the glorious king, Don Jaime, after conquering Valencia, gave first privilege to exploit the lake, with the obligation of giving over to the crown the fifth part of the catch.

“What were the folk of Palmar in those days?” they would ironically ask the old boatman. And he grew indignant as he recalled the answer given by the people from Catarroja. Palmar bore its name because in ancient times it had been an islet covered with palmettos. In the early centuries people from Torrente and other places had come down, setting themselves to the broom business; they established themselves upon the island, and after gathering a supply of palmettos for the whole year, would return. Little by little a few families would remain. The broom-makers were converted into fishermen, since fishing was more profitable; and because, as a result of their wandering life, they were more clever and abreast of the world’s progress, they invented the redolins, receiving in return for this a special privilege from the monarchs and prejudicing the interests of the folks from Catarroja,—a simple people that had never left the Albufera...

It was a sight to behold, Tío Paloma’s indignation when he repeated the enemy’s opinions. The people of Palmar, who were the most expert fishermen of the lake, descendants of broom-makers, coming from Torrente and other places, where no eel had ever been bred! . . . Christ! For less reason than this men slew each other on some bank, with a fitora. He knew all about it, and he replied that it was all an infamous lie.
When he was a young man they had named him Warden of the Society, and he had carried off to his home the treasure of the town,—the fishermen’s archives: a box filled with big books, ordinances, privileges from monarchs, and accounts, which passed from one Warden to another at each new election, and had for centuries been knocking about from cabin to cabin, always kept underneath the mattress, as if the enemies of Palmar might try to rob it. The old boatman did not know how to read. In his day they never thought of such things, and they had more to eat. But a certain vicar, a friend of his, had during the nights deciphered for him the contents of those pen-scratchings that filled the yellowish pages, and he had easily retained them in his memory. First, the privilege of the glorious Saint Jaime, the slayer of the Moors; for the boatman, in his reverence for the conqueror king, who had given the lake to the fishermen, thought royalty a small matter and made a saint of him. Then came the concessions of Don Pedro, Doña Violante, Don Martin, Don Fernando,—all monarchs and some of them blessed servants of God who remembered the poor; this one had given them the right to cut logs in the Dehesa for the weighting of nets, the other the privilege of using the pine bark for dyeing the meshes,—all had conceded something to the fishermen. Those were other times. The monarchs, excellent persons, were content with a fifth of the annual catch: not as now, when the Ministry of Finance and other inventions of man carried off every three months a half arroba of silver for letting them live by a lake that had belonged to their forebears. And when anyone told him that the fifth was equivalent to much more than the famous half arroba of silver, Tío Paloma would scratch
his head under his cap, at a loss. Very well: agreed that it was more; but it was not paid in money and it was felt far less.

Then he would return to his mania against the other inhabitants of the lake. It was true that at the beginning there existed no other fishermen in the Albufera than those who dwelt in the shadow of Catarroja’s bell-tower. In those days it was impossible to live near the sea. The Barbary pirates were most dangerous near the shore, sweeping everything away, and honest, hard-working people were forced to take shelter in the towns lest their necks be adorned with a chain. But little by little, as times grew more safe, the true fishermen, the genuine,—those who fled the tilling of the soil as a dishonorable abdication, had moved to Palmar, thus avoiding a daily trip of two hours before casting their nets. They loved the lake and that’s why they had remained near it. There was no broom-making about it! The inhabitants of Palmar were as old as the others. He had often heard from his grandfather that the family came from Catarroja, and that there must be relatives of theirs there yet, though he did not care to know anything of them.

The proof that they were the oldest and most expert fishermen lay in the invention of the redolins: a wonderful invention that the folks of Catarroja had never been able to fathom. Those wretches fished with nets and hooks; most of the days they had to cross their stomachs, and no matter how favorable conditions were, they’d never be anything more than poor people. The folks of Palmar, with their wisdom, had studied the habits of the eels. Nothing that during the night they set out for the sea, and that during the darkness of storms they dash about
like mad, abandoning the lake and making for the canals, they had found it more to their advantage to close the canals with barriers of sunken nets, placing beside them the snares for *mornells* and *monots*, and the fish, deceived, came swimming right into the nets, without any more work for the fisherman than emptying the contrivances and lowering them anew.

And what an admirable organization was the Society of Palmar! Tío Paloma went into ecstasies over this arrangement of the old fishermen. The lake belonged to the fisherfolk. Everything belonged to everybody; not as on dry land, where men have invented such messes as division of land, placing boundaries and walls, and spouting with pride that "this is thine and this is mine," as if everything wasn’t God’s, and as if, when they died, they could own any more earth than that which filled their mouths forever.

The Albufera for all the sons of Palmar, without any class distinction; the same for the tramps that spent their day in Cañamel’s tavern as for the chief magistrate, who sent eels far, far off, and was almost as wealthy as the tavern-keeper. But since, if the lake were to be apportioned among them, some places were better than others, they had established the annual drawing, and the good morsels passed from hand to hand. He who today was poverty-stricken might tomorrow be a rich man: thus did the Lord ordain, through the luck of the various participants. He who was destined to be poor, would be poor, but with a window open to let Fortune in if she felt the whim. There was he, who was the oldest inhabitant of Palmar, and expected to round out his century if the devii didn’t interfere. He had taken part in more than eighty
drawings; once he drew fifth place, once the fourth; he had never drawn first, but he had no complaint to offer, for he had lived without suffering hunger and without wracking his brains for some way to cheat his neighbor, like the folks who came from the inland towns. Besides, when winter was over, and when the large catches in the *redolins* were finished, the Warden ordered an *arrastrá*, in which all the fishermen of the Society participated, pooling their nets, their boats and their arms. And this community enterprise, involving an entire town, swept the bottom of the lake with its gigantic mesh of nets, and the product of the huge catch was divided among all the men equally. That was the way men should live, like brothers, lest they be transformed into beasts. And Tio Paloma would finish by saying that it was not without significance that the Lord, when he came upon the earth, preached in lakes that were, more or less, like the Albufera, and did not surround himself with land cultivators, but rather with tench and eel fisheries.

The crowd in the square grew greater and greater. The chief magistrate, with his assistants and the *alguacil*, was in the canal awaiting the vessel that was to bring the representative of the Ministry of Finance from Valencia. The folks from the surrounding country arrived to sanctify the drawing with their presence. The crowd made way for the lieutenant of the carabiners, who came from his solitude at Torre Nueva, between the Dehesa and the sea, on his galloping horse, bespattered with the mud of the canals. He presented himself to the Warden, followed by a sinewy youth who carried on his back the box of the Society’s archives. *Pare Miquel*, the bellicose vicar, with his cassock on his shoulder and his cap askew,
was going from group to group assuring everybody that luck would turn its back upon the fishermen.

Cañamél, who was not a native of the town, and therefore had no right to take part in the drawing, was nevertheless as deeply interested as the fishermen. He never missed that ceremony. It was there, indeed, that he found his business for the whole year, which compensated for the decline of his smuggling interests. Almost always he who won the first choice was a poor fellow, with no other property than a skiff and a few nets. In order to exploit La Sequiota considerable equipment was required, as well as several boats and hired sailors; and when the humble chap, overwhelmed by his good fortune, was at a loss how to go about things, Cañamél would approach him like a good angel. He had the necessary means; he offered his boats, the thousand pesetas' worth of new twine for the large barrier nets that were needed to close the canal, and the money necessary for advancing pay. All as assistance to a friend, on account of the affection that the man inspired in him. But as friendship is one thing and business another, he would be content with half of the profits from the catch in return for his aid. In this manner the drawings usually worked to Cañamél's benefit; he awaited the outcome anxiously, praying that the best choices should not fall to those of Palmar who had money.

Neleta, too, had come to the square, attracted by the proceedings, which furnished one of the liveliest of the town holidays. She came in her best clothes, and looked like a lady from Valencia; La Samaruca, her terrible enemy, stood in the middle of a group, poking fun at her high chignon, her rose-colored suit, her belt with its silver buckle, and her general impression of a "bad woman,"
which scandalized all Palmar, turning the men's heads. Ever since she had become wealthy the attractive blonde had perfumed herself in most violent fashion, as if she were intent upon liberating herself from the stench of mire that enwrapped the lake. She washed her face very seldom, like all the women of the island; her skin was not clean, but it never lacked a layer of powder, and at every step her clothes scattered an overpowering odor of musk, which sent whiffs of voluptuous blessedness through the dilating nostrils of the tavern customers.

There was a great stir amid the crowd. He was already there! . . . The ceremony was about to begin. And before the multitude passed the alcalde with his black-tasseled cane, all his assistants and the delegate from the Ministry of Finance,—a poor employé who was stared at in admiration by all the fishermen (who in confused fashion attributed to him such a power over the Albufera) and at the same time with intense hatred. That was the dandy who swallowed up the half arroba of silver!

All slowly climbed the narrow little school staircase, whose width could accommodate but a single person at a time. A couple of carabineers, gun in hand, stood guard at the door so as to prevent the entrance of the women and children, who disturbed the deliberations of the meeting. From time to time the curiosity of the youngsters would make them try to fool the guards, but the carabineers would bring the butt-ends of their guns into play and threaten to thrash the entire gang, which with its hulla-baloo was interfering with the solemnity of the drawing.

Above, the assembly was so dense that the fishermen, not being able to find a seat upon the benches, crowded about the balconies. Some, the oldest of them, wore the
red cap of the inhabitants of the Albufera; others covered their heads with the wide-bordered handkerchiefs of the farmer folk, or with palm hats. All were dressed in bright colors, with esparto sandals or barefoot altogether, and from this sweating, packed assembly rose the eternal, viscous, cold stench of amphibians brought up in mud.

On the teacher’s platform was the presidential desk. In the center was the envoy from Valencia, dictating to his secretary the opening phrases of the record of proceedings, and at his side the priest, the chief magistrate, the Warden, the lieutenant and other invited guests, among whom figured the physician of Palmar, a poor pariah of the profession, who for five reales came sailing three times weekly to cure en masse the wretched sufferers from the tertian fever.

The Warden rose from his seat. Before him lay the account books of the Society,—marvellous hieroglyphics, in which not a single word was written, since the payments were recorded by all manner of symbols. Thus had the ancient Wardens done, who had not known how to write, and thus was the accounting continued. Each page contained the account of a fisherman. There was no inscription of his name at the top, but only the mark that each one placed upon his skiff and his nets, for purposes of identification. One was a cross, the other a pair of shears, the next a coot’s bill, Tio Paloma a crescent, and the Warden understood them all, having only to glance at the hieroglyphics to say: “This is So-and-so’s account.” And on the rest of the page, lines and more lines, each stroke signifying the payment of a month’s dues.

The old boatman praised this system of accounting. In this manner everyone could look over his own accounts,
and there were no tricks such as filled those huge tomes of figures and fine handwriting, which were understood only by educated gentlemen.

The Warden, a lively youth with a shaven head and insolent eyes, coughed and spat out several times before speaking. The invited guests, who occupied the platform, leaned back and began to converse among themselves. First the Society affairs were to be discussed, and they could take no part. Those were matters that must be settled among fishermen. The Warden began his speech: "Caballers! . . . ."

And he passed his imperious glance over the crowd, imposing silence. Below, in the square, the children were yelling like the damned, and the conversation of the women rose to the hall with a bothersome humming. The chief magistrate sent the alguacil out among the folk to quiet them, so that the Warden might continue his speech.

Gentlemen,—plain talk. He had been elected Warden to collect from each one his dues and send every three months to the Treasury about one thousand five hundred pesetas, the much-talked of half arroba of silver. Very well; things could not go on as they were going. Many were in arrears, and the fishermen best off had to supply that deficit. In order to avoid all this disorder in the future, he proposed that all who were not paid up on the books should be excluded from the drawing.

Part of the public received this suggestion with murmurs of approval. These were the ones who had paid up, and if many of their companions should be excluded from the drawing, their own chances of drawing an early choice would rise. But the majority of the members,—those
who looked most wretched,—protested at the top of their lungs, jumping to their feet in their excitement. It was several minutes before the Warden could make himself heard.

When silence was re-established there arose a sickly man, with a pale face and an unhealthy glint in his eyes. He spoke slowly, in a feeble voice; his words were every now and then cut short by feverish shivering. He was of those who had not paid: perhaps nobody was so much behind as he. In the drawing of the year before he had got one of the last places and he hadn’t caught enough to feed his family. In one year he had sailed twice toward Valencia, bearing in the bottom of the boat two white caskets adorned with gold fringe, two trips that had forced him to borrow money. But—ay!—what less can a father do but dress his little ones in the best when they go off on their last journey! Two little children had died on his hands from not eating enough,—eating ill, as pare Miquel, there present, put it, and afterward he had caught the tertian fever while at work, and this had put him months and months behind. He had not paid because he simply could not. And were they, for this reason, to deprive him of his chance to win a fortune? Did he not belong to the Society of Fishermen, as his father and grandfather before him had done?

There was a painful silence, amid which could be heard the sobbing of the unhappy fellow, who had fallen exhausted into his seat, his head in his hands, as if ashamed of his confession.

“No, redem, no! No, by God, no!” shouted a trembling voice with a passionate energy that stirred everybody.

It was Tio Paloma who, having jumped to his feet, his
cap shoved tightly down over his head, his eyes flaming with indignation, began to speak post haste, mingling with every other word all the oaths and the curses that were stored in his memory. His old companions pulled his sash to remind him that he must show some respect for the gentlemen on the platform; but he replied with a thrust of his elbow and continued. Much he cared about those puppets,—he, a man who had dealt with heroes and monarchs!.... He spoke because he could speak. Christ! He was the oldest boatmen of the Albufera, and his words should be taken like gospel. The fathers and grandfathers of all present spoke through his mouth. La Albufera belonged to all,—didn't it?—and it was an outrage to deprive a man of his bread just because he had or hadn't paid the Treasury. Did that lady need the miserable pesetas of a poor fisherman to buy her supper with?....

The indignation of the old man was communicated to the public. Many were laughing loudly, forgetting the painful impression of the moment previous.

Tio Paloma recalled that he, too, had been Warden. It was all very well to be harsh toward those wretches who flee from hard work; but as for the poor fellows who do their duty and who can't pay because they are the victims of poverty,—one should open his hands to them. Cordones! Were the fishermen of Palmar a band of Moors? No; they were all brothers, and the lake belonged to all. This division of rich and poor was good enough for dry land, for the labradores, among whom there are masters and serfs. In the Albufera all were equal: he who did not pay now would pay later; and let those who had more supply the deficit of those who had nothing, for it
had always been that way. . . . Let everybody participate in the drawing!

Tonet gave the signal for the thunderous applause that acclaimed his grandfather. Tio Tòni did not seem to be in full accord with his father's notions, but all the poor fishermen rushed upon the old man, demonstrating their enthusiasm by pulling at his smock and giving him such vehement, hearty, affectionate slaps across the back that they fell upon his wrinkled neck like a shower of blows.

The Warden closed the books with an expression of discouragement. It was the same story every year. With these old folk, who seemed ever young, it was impossible to put the Society's affairs in order. And with a bored air he listened to the excuses offered for not having paid the dues or for having delayed the payment. There were sick persons in the family; they had drawn a bad site; the cursed fever had rendered them unfit to work,—the cursed fever which seemed at night to spy upon them from behind the canebrakes that it might fasten its claws into the flesh of the poor; and all the misery, the sad existence of the unhealthful lagoon went filing by like an endless lamentation.

In order to cut short this infinite exposition of sorrows it was agreed upon to exclude none from the drawing, and the Warden deposited upon the table the skin sack and the labels.

"Demane la paraula! I want to speak!" shouted a voice near the entrance.

Who was it wished to begin the speaking all over again, and all the boresome claims? The groups opened and an outburst of laughter greeted the appearance of Sangonera,
who advanced gravely, rubbing his rheumy, drunkard's eyes and making every effort to look dignified enough to take part in the meeting. Having found all the taverns of Palmar deserted, he had made his way into the schoolhouse and thought it necessary to ask for the floor before the drawing began.

"Que vòls tu? What do you wish?" asked the Warden ill-humoredly, vexed by this intrusion of the tramp, which, coming on the heels of the debtors' recital of excuses, utterly exhausted his patience.

What did he wish? . . . He wished to know why his name did not figure in the annual drawings? He had as much right as any other to enjoy a redoli in the Albufera. He was the poorest of them all; but had he not been born in Palmar? Hadn't he been baptized in the parish of San Valero, in Ruzaña? Was he not a descendant of fishermen? Then he ought to participate in the drawing.

And the claims of this loafer, who had never cared to touch a net and preferred swimming across the canals to touching a pole with his hand seemed so unheard-of, so grotesque to the fishermen, that they all burst into guffaws.

The Warden answered in a provoked manner. Out of the place, maltrabaja! What did the Society care whether his forbears had been honest fishermen, when his father had abandoned the boatman's pole in order to give himself up entirely to idleness, and when the only boatman qualities he could show was that of his having been born in Palmar? Besides, his father had never paid his dues, nor had he; the mark which in former days was used by the Sangoneras on their fishing instruments had many years ago been scratched off the books of the Society.
But the drunkard insisted, alleging his rights amid the rising laughter of the public, until Tío Paloma intervened with his questions. . . . And suppose he were admitted to the drawing, and he got one of the best sites, what would he do with it? How would he work it, if he were not a fisherman and knew nothing about the calling?

The vagabond smiled maliciously. The important thing was to draw the site; the rest he would see to. He would arrange matters so that others should do the work for him, giving him the greater part of the profits. And in his cynical smile vibrated the malignant expression of the first man who deceived his fellow being, making him work so that he himself might live a life of idleness.

Sangonera’s frank confession incensed the fishermen. He had really done no more than formulate aloud the silent thought of many, but this simple folk felt itself insulted by the vagabond’s cynicism, and thought it saw in him the personification of all those who oppress their poverty. Out with him! Out! Shoved and pinched, he was shown the door, while the young fishermen stamped on the floor and amid general laughter imitated a cat-and-dog fight.

The vicar, Don Miguel, arose in indignation, thrusting forward his gladiator’s body, his face congested with anger. What was this? What insolence did they permit themselves before these grave, important personages who presided on the platform? . . . . He’d jump right down from the platform and break some fellow’s head! . . . .

As silence at once responded to his threat, the priest sat down, content with his power, and whispered to the lieutenant:

“Do you see? Nobody understands this herd better
than I. You've got to show them the stick from time to time."

More even than pare Miguél's threats, what had established calm was the sight of the Warden handing over to the president the list of the fishermen of the Society, so as to ascertain that all were present.

As many men of Palmar as followed the fishing trade were there. It was enough to be an adult, although one still lived with his father, to figure in the drawing of the redolins.

The president read off the names of the fishermen, each of whom answered: "Ave María Purísima" with a certainunction, because of the vicar's presence. Some, the enemies of Father Miguel, answered "Avanti!" (Here!) enjoying the wry face that the vicar made.

The Warden emptied a sack of grimy leather, almost as old as the Society itself, and the balls rolled upon the tables, —a collection of hollow wooden balls, into which was introduced a piece of paper with the name of the participant.

One after the other the fishermen were called to the desk to receive their ball and a strip of paper on which the name of the man had been written, in case he himself could not write.

It was a sight to behold the precautions which a suspicious cunning forced these poor folks to adopt. The most ignorant of the fishermen went to those who knew how to read to see if it were really their name that was written upon the strip of paper, and only after numerous consultations were they convinced. Moreover, the custom of always being designated by their nicknames caused them to experience a certain hesitancy. Their true names
were employed only on a day such as this, and they waivered, as if uncertain as to whether the names were really theirs.

Then came the greatest precautions of all. Each one hid himself by turning his face to the wall, and as he introduced the slip bearing his name into the hollow ball, he wrapped about it a wisp of straw, placed with it a match,—something that should serve as a means of identification so that his ball should not be changed. Their suspicion accompanied them until the moment in which they deposited the ball into the sack. That fellow who came from Valencia awoke in them the mistrust which a public official always inspires in rural folk.

The drawing was about to begin. The vicar, Don Miguel arose, removed his hat, and all followed his action. They were to pray a salve,1 according to the old tradition; this brought good luck. And for a long time the fishermen, with their caps in their hands and their heads bowed, mumbled the prayer softly.

Absolute silence. The president stirred the leather bag to mix the balls well, and as they struck against each other in the silence, they sounded like a distant hailstorm. A little boy came up the room, passed from one to another over the fishermen's heads, and placed his hand into the sack. The anxiety was intense; all eyes were fixed upon the wooden ball, out of which was painfully being unfolded the slip of paper.

The president read the name, and a certain indecision was to be noted in the assembly, which was accustomed to nicknames and slow to recognize regular names, which were rarely used. Who had won the first

1 A salutation or prayer to the Virgin.
choice? But Tonet had risen from his seat with a bound, shouting: "Present! . . . ." It was Tío Paloma's grandson! What luck the boy had! . . . . He had won first place in the very first drawing in which he had taken part!

His nearest neighbors congratulated him enviously, but he, with the anxiety of one who does not yet believe in his good fortune, looked only at the president. . . . Might he now name his choice of a fishing site? No sooner had he been answered with an affirmative nod than he named his request: he desired La Sequiota. And when he saw the clerk write down his choice, he dashed forth like a lightning flash from the place, thrusting everybody aside and pushing away the friendly hands that were stretched out to felicitate him.

Down on the square the crowd was waiting in as intense a silence as that which reigned upstairs. It was the custom for the first winners to jump down at once and spread news of their good luck, waving their hats aloft as a sign of joy. Wherefore, as soon as they caught sight of Tonet come almost rolling down the stairs, they greeted him with loud acclamation.

"It's the Cuban! . . . . It's Tonet with the mustache! Te el ú! Te el ú! . . . ."

The women threw themselves upon him with vehemence of emotion, embracing him, weeping, as if they might catch some of his good luck, and recalling his mother. How glad the poor woman would be if she could only see him now! And Tonet, enwrapped in all these skirts, impelled and emboldened by the caressing ovation, instinctively embraced Neleta, who smiled, while her green eyes glittered with contentment.

The Cubano wished to celebrate his triumph. He sent
to Cañamel’s for cases of lemonade and beer for all these women. Let the men drink all they pleased. He was footing the bill! In an instant the square was converted into an encampment. Sangonera, whose activity always stirred at the mention of drink, had seconded the desires of his generous friend, fetching all the old, hard pastry that had long been stored behind the glass show-cases; and he passed from group to group, filling glasses and frequently pausing in his distribution to attend to his own wants.

The winners of the next best locations were now coming down, throwing their hats into the air and shouting *Vitoli! Vitoli!* But only their family and their friends grouped about them. All the attention was for Tonet, for number one, who had given the people such a liberal spread.

The fishermen left the schoolhouse. Already some thirty balls had been drawn; there remained now only the bad redolins,—those which gave hardly enough to eat, and the spectators left the place, no longer feeling any interest in the drawing.

Tio Paloma was going from group to group receiving congratulations. For the first time he exhibited satisfaction with his grandson. Hee, hee!... Luck always favors rascals; his father had said so before him. There was he with his participation in eighty drawings, and he had never drawn first place, while his grandson, just returned from wandering in distant lands, took part for the first time and drew the grand prize. But after all... it was all in the family. And he glowed with the realization

---

1 Hurrah!
that for the coming year he would be the first fisherman in Albufera.

Rendered more affectionate than usual by the good luck, he approached his son, who was as solemn and engrossed as ever. Tono! Good fortune had entered the cabin and it must be taken advantage of! He would help out the young fellow, who didn't know much about fishing, and they'd do an enormous business.

But the aged grandfather was stupefied at the coldness with which his son answered him. Yes; that first place was a bit of good luck, all right, if a man had the tools necessary for its exploitation. They needed more than a thousand pesetas for the nets alone. Did they have that much money? ...

Tío Paloma smiled. They'd easily find some one to lend it to them. But Tòni, hearing the mention of loans, made a wry face. They owed enough as it was. He suffered not a little from certain Frenchmen established in Catarroja, who sold horses on the instalment plan and advanced money to farmers. He had been forced to seek their aid, first during the years of bad harvests, and now to advance the filling-in of his lake somewhat; even in his dreams he could see those men, garbed in corduroy, jabbering threats and every moment pulling out their terrible account-book, in which they wrote down the debts with their complicated net of interest. He had enough already. When a man finds himself sunk in one bad piece of business, he should save himself as best he could, without seeking another. He had enough with his agricultural debts, and didn't care to involve himself in debts for fishing purposes. His sole desire was to bring his lands to the
level of the water, without becoming further involved.

The boatman turned his shoulder upon his son. And was that creature of his flesh and blood? . . . . He preferred Tonet, with all his indolence. He would get together with his grandson and they would both manage somehow or other to solve the difficulty. The owner of La Sequiôta never lacked finances.

Tonet, surrounded by friends, acclaimed by the women, filled with pride because of the passionate glance that Neleta fixed upon him, felt somebody touch him upon the shoulder.

It was Cañamêl, who seemed to envelop him with his affectionate eyes. They must talk something over; not for nothing had they always been such good friends, and the tavern been practically Tonet's second home. There was no need of leaving this for later; business between friends was easily arranged. And they withdrew a few paces, followed by the curious glances of the crowd.

The tavern-keeper went straight to the point. Tonet would not have enough money with which to exploit the site he had won in the drawing. Wasn't that so? . . . . Well, then, here was he, a true friend, ready to help him out, to go into partnership with him. He would give him all he needed.

And as Tonet was silent, not knowing what to reply, the tavern-keeper, interpreting his silence as a refusal, attacked the proposition once more. Were they, or were they not, comrades? Was he thinking of doing as his father had done,—going to those foreigners at Catarroja who sucked the very blood of the poor? He was a friend; he even considered himself in a way a relative, for—what the deuce!—he could not forget that his wife, his
Neleta, had been brought up in the Palomas’ cabin,—that many a time they had given her food there, and that she was as fond of Tonet as of a brother.

The greedy tavern-keeper used these recollections with the greatest cunning, insisting upon the fraternal affection that his wife felt for the young man.

Then he had recourse to more heroic methods. If he had any doubts about him, if he did not wish him as an associate in the business, he would call Neleta to convince him. Surely she would succeed in setting him upon the right road. What did he say? . . . Should he call her?

Tonet, seduced by these proposals, hesitated before accepting. He feared the gossip of the people, and recalled his father’s severe advice. He looked about him, as if he might receive an inspiration from the looks of the people, and saw his grandfather, who from a distance was nodding affirmatively to him.

The boatman had guessed what Cañamél was saying. And he had hit precisely upon the wealthy tavern-keeper as an aid. He encouraged his grandson with renewed gestures. He must not refuse: that was the man they needed.

Tonet reached a decision, and Neleta’s husband, guessing his decision from the light in his eyes, hastened to formulate the conditions. He would provide all the necessary investment, and Tonet and his grandfather would do the work. Agreed? . . .

Agreed. The two men shook hands, and followed by Neleta and Tío Paloma walked toward the tavern to solemnize the contract at a joint meal.

At once the news went circulating about the square.
The Cubano and Cañamèl had joined forces to exploit La Secuîòta!

La Samaruca had to be removed from the square by order of the magistrate. Escorted by several women she went off in the direction of her cabin, roaring like one possessed, calling at the top of her lungs to her sister, who had died years before, shouting vociferously that Cañamèl was a shameless wretch, and that for the sake of driving a good bargain he had not hesitated to introduce into his house his own wife’s lover.