TONET’S position in Cañamèl’s establishment changed completely. No longer was he a mere customer. He was the partner, the companion of the place’s proprietor, and entered the tavern whenever he pleased, defying with proud attitude the gossip of Neleta’s enemies.

If he spent entire days there, it was for the purpose of discussing business. He entered most confidently the inner rooms, and to show that he was as much at home as in his own house, he would get behind the counter and sit down at Cañamèl’s side. Many a time, if he and his wife went within, and some customer should ask for something, Tonet would leap to the bar and with comic gravity, amid the laughter of his friends, serve the various articles, imitating the voice and the mannerisms of Tio Paco.

The tavern-keeper was well content with his associate. An excellent youth, as he declared before the tavern gathering when Tonet was not present; a good friend, who, if he would only act right and stick to business, would go far, very far, seeing that he could count upon the aid of so powerful a patron as the speaker.

Tio Paloma, too, frequented the tavern more than before. The family, after stormy scenes at night in the solitude of the cabin, had divided into two factions. Tio Tòni and La Borda went off to their fields every morning to continue their battle against the lake, trying to sink
it beneath the mounds of earth they brought so painfully from far away. Tonet and his grandfather went to CañaméI's house to talk about their joint enterprise, soon to start.

In truth, the only ones who discussed the business were the tavern-keeper and Tio Paloma. CañaméI praised himself, lauding the generosity with which he had accepted the partnership. He was exposing his capital without any foreknowledge of the year's catch, and was making this sacrifice content with but half of the proceeds. He was not like the foreign money-lenders of the mainland, who gave money only on excellent security and usurious interest. And all his hatred against the intruders, the ferocious rivalry in the exploitation of one's neighbors, vibrated in his words. Who were those people who little by little were getting the country into their clutches? Frenchmen who had come to Valencian territory in torn shoes and an old corduroy suit sticking to their skin. People from some province of France whose name he couldn't recall, but who had become more or less the gallegos of their country. Even the money that they loaned out was not their own. In France, capital produced very little interest, and these gabachos got it from their own country at two or three per cent to lend it to the Valencians at fifteen to twenty, thus realizing an excellent profit. Moreover, they bought horses on the other side of the Pyrenees, perhaps smuggling them across the border, and sold them on the instalment plan to the farmers, arranging the sale in such a manner that the purchaser never acquired complete ownership of the animal. There was one poor fellow who had paid as much for a worn-out old nag as if it had been the very horse of Saint James. Robbery, Tio
Paloma; robbery unworthy of Christians! And Cañamél, speaking of these matters, would grow furious, with all the indignation and the secret envy of the usurer who is too cowardly to employ the methods of his competitors.

The boatman approved his words. That's silly he preferred to have his family devoted to fishing, and that's why he grew angry to see his son contracting debts and more debts, in his absurd insistence upon being an agriculturalist. The poor farmers were nothing but slaves; all the year long they worked themselves bare to the bone, and to whom did all the profit go? It was the foreigners who carried off all the harvests: the Frenchman who loaned them the money and the Englishman who sold them the fertilizer on credit. . . . The idea of living a life of unremitting toil in order to support foreigners! No, while there were eels in the lake, let the lands be quietly covered with reeds and bulrushes, in the certainty that he would not be the one to break them up.

While the boatman and Cañamél would converse, Tonet and Neleta, seated behind the counter, would gaze quietly at each other. The customers had become accustomed to seeing them hours and hours thus, exchanging glances as if they could devour each other; with an expression upon their countenances that did not correspond to their words, which were often of no significance. The gossipy old women who came for oil or wine remained motionless before them, with lowered glance and a silly look upon their faces, waiting till the very last drops came through the funnel into the bottle, while they cocked their ears to catch some word of the conversation; but the youth and the woman defied this espionage and continued speaking, as if they were in a deserted spot.
Tío Paloma, alarmed by such intimacy, spoke seriously to his grandson. But could it really be that there was something between them, as La Samarucu and other evil tongues of the town maintained? Beware, Tonet! In addition to being unworthy of his family, it would mean the ruin of their business! But the grandson, with the firmness of one who speaks the truth, struck his chest and protested, so that the grandfather was convinced, although he felt a certain presentiment that such a friendship would have a bad end.

The narrow space behind the counter was for Tonet a paradise. He would recall with Neleta their childhood days; he would tell her his adventures yonder across the seas, and when they were silent, he would feel a sweet intoxication (the same as on that night in which they had been lost in the forest, only more intense, more ardent) at the proximity of that body whose warmth seemed to caress him through the clothes.

At night, after supping with Cañamél and his wife, Tonet would take out of his cabin an accordion,—the only thing he had brought along with him from Cuba besides the straw hats,—and would entertain everybody in the tavern with the languid habaneras that he made the instrument whine. He would sing guajiras of a sweet, sentimental poesy, in which there was frequent reference to zephyrs, harps and hearts as tender as the guayaba; and the mellifluous Cuban accent in which he sang the songs made Neleta close her eyes dreamily, throwing back her body that she might relieve the pain in her bosom, trembling with restrained emotion.

On the day following these serenades Neleta, with
moistened eyes, would follow Tonet all about the tavern from group to group.

The Cubano guessed what was going on within her. She had dreamed of him, hadn’t she? The same thing had happened to Tonet in his cabin. All night long, stretching out his hands as if he were about to grasp her, he could see her in the darkness. And after this mutual confession they would remain quiet; certain of a moral possession which they could not exactly have explained; certain that at last they must of necessity belong to each other, however many obstacles might arise between them.

Within the town they could think of no other intimacy than the tavern conversations. All Palmar surrounded them during the day, and Cañamel, sick and complaining, never left the house. Sometimes, moved by a passing flash of activity, the tavern-keeper would whistle to Centella, an old dog with a huge head, famous throughout the lake region for his remarkable sense of smell, and placing him in the boat would go out to the nearest islets of sedge to shoot coots. But after a few hours he would return coughing, complaining of the dampness, with his legs swollen like those of an elephant, as he said; he would get into a corner and not stop groaning until Neleta made him sip some glasses of hot liquids, tying several kerchiefs about his head and his neck. Neleta’s eyes would glance toward the Cubano with an expression that clearly showed the scorn she felt for her husband.

The summer was coming to a close and serious thought must be given to preparations for the fishing. Before their houses the owners of the other redolins were arranging the large nets for the barring of the canals. Tio
Paloma was impatient. The contrivances that Cañamél had,—which had been left over from his previous association with other fishermen,—were not enough for La Sequióta. They needed to purchase a great deal of twine, and give employment to many women who make nets, if they were going to exploit the redoli adequately.

One night Tonet and his grandfather were having supper in the tavern and talking their business over seriously. They must buy better twine,—the kind that was made on the beach of Cabanal for the sea fishermen. Tio Paloma would go to buy it, as he was an expert, but the tavern-keeper would accompany him, as he wished to pay for the material directly, fearing that he might be cheated if he gave the money to the old boatman. Afterward, during the beatitude of digestion, Cañamél began to feel terrified at the prospect of the next day’s trip. He would have to rise at dawn, plunging from a warm bed into the cold mist; then he would have to cross the lake, go by land to Valencia, thence to Cabanal, and afterwards, make the whole journey back again. His massive body, flabby from inactivity, shuddered at thought of the trip. This man, who had spent a large part of his life wandering over the world, had taken such deep root in the mud of Palmar, that he grew excited at thought of a day’s activity.

The desire for ease made him modify his proposal. He would remain in charge of the establishment and Neleta would accompany Tio Paloma. There was nobody like the women when it came to chaffering and getting things at the right price.

On the following morning the boatman and the tavern-keeper’s wife started out on their trip. Tonet was to
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await them in the harbor of Catarroja at dusk, to take on the cargo of twine in his boat.

The sun was still quite high when the Cubano entered, with sail widespread, the canal that penetrated into the land in the direction of the town where he was to meet the other two. The large barges were coming from the threshing-floors laden with cargoes of rice, and as they passed through the canal, the water they cut with their hulls formed behind the stern a yellow wake, which invaded the banks and disturbed the crystalline clearness of the tributary channels.

At one side of the canal were moored hundreds of boats; the entire fleet of the fishermen of Catarroja, so wildly hated by Tio Paloma. They were black coffins, of various sizes and all of decayed wood. The tiny craft, called zapatos, reared their sharp points above the water and the large vessels, the barges, which could take on a cargo of a hundred sacks of rice, sank their broad paunches into the aquatic vegetation, forming against the horizon a forest of coarse, unplaned, flat-topped masts, fitted out with mat-weed rigging.

Between this fleet and the opposite bank there was left but a narrow space, through which sailed the boats, their prows colliding violently with the moored craft.

Tonet moored his boat before the harbor tavern and went ashore.

He saw huge heaps of rice straw, amid which the hens were scratching, making the wharf look like a poultry yard. On the bank carpenters were constructing small boats, and the echo of their hammers was lost in the calm of the afternoon. The new craft, of recently planed yel-
low wood, were placed upon benches, awaiting the coats of liquid pitch with which the calkers covered them. In the doorway of the tavern two women were sewing. Beyond rose a thatched cottage wherein was situated the scale of the Catarroja Society. A woman with a balance formed of two buckets was weighing the eels and the tenches that the fishermen were unloading, and after the weighing was finished she would throw an eel into a large basket that lay beside her. This was the voluntary contribution of the Catarroja folk. The proceeds from this tax went to pay the expenses of the feast of their patron saint, Peter. Some carts laden with rice drew off, creaking, in the direction of the large mills.

Tonet, with some time on his hands, was about to enter the tavern when he heard someone call him. From behind one of the large barns, scaring off the hens, who scattered in every direction, a hand was making signs for him to approach.

The Cubano answered the call and found there, stretched out, with his chest exposed and his arms crossed behind his head like a pillow, the vagabond Sangonera. His eyes were bleary and yellow; around his face, which was growing gradually more pale and thin from alcoholic over-indulgence, buzzed a swarm of flies, nor did he exert the slightest effort to frighten them away.

Tonet was happy at this encounter, which could entertain him during his wait. What was he doing there? . . . . Nothing; spending the time until nightfall. He was waiting for the hour at which he was to meet certain friends from Catarroja, who would not let him go supperless; he was taking it easy, and resting was the best occupation of man.
He had seen Tonet from his place and had called him, without abandoning his magnificent posture. His body had fitted perfectly into the straw, and he didn’t care to lose the impress of the position. . . . Afterwards he explained why he was there. He had eaten in the tavern with some carters,—excellent chaps,—who had given him a few crumbs, passing him the mug at each bite and laughing at his pleasantry. But no sooner had the customers left than the tavern-keeper, like all those of his class, showed him the door, knowing that he would order nothing on his own account. And there he was, killing time, which is man’s enemy. . . . Were they friends or not? Would he invite him to a drink?

Tonet’s affirmative nod overcame the tramp’s laziness, and though with a certain pain, he decided to get up on his feet. They had a drink in the tavern, and then slowly, they walked to a place on a bank that was shielded from the harbor by black boards.

Tonet had not seen Sangonera for many days, and the vagabond recounted his troubles.

There was nothing for him to do in Palmar. Neleta, Cañamél’s wife, was a haughty woman altogether too forgetful of her origin; she had sent him away from the tavern on the pretext that he dirtied the chairs and the tiles of the wainscoating with the mud from his clothes. In the other taverns things were wretched indeed: all poverty-stricken, and never a drinker came that could treat a fellow; so that he had been forced to quit Palmar, to wander about the lake towns, as his father had done of old; to go from place to place, ever in quest of generous friends.

Tonet, whose laziness had so disgusted his own family,
had the effrontery to offer advice. Why didn’t he go to work? . . .

Sangonera made a gesture of stupefaction. He, too! . . . The Cubano, too, allowed himself to repeat the same advice as the old folks of Palmar! Did he himself care so much for work? Why wasn’t he with his father, then, filling in the fields, instead of idling the day away at Cañamél’s, at Neleta’s side, sitting back at his ease like a gentleman and drinking of the best? . . .

The Cubano smiled, not knowing what to answer and he admired the logic of the drunkard in his rejection of the advice.

The tramp seemed to have been softened by the glass that Tonet had paid for. The calm of the harbor, interrupted by the hammering of the carkers and the clucking of the hens, excited his loquacity, impelling him to impart confidences.

No, Tonet, he could not work; he would never work, even though they tried to compel him. Toil was the invention of the devil: a disobedience of God; the most serious of sins. Only corrupt souls, those who could not adapt themselves to their poverty, those who lived tormented by the desire of hoarding, even if it were poverty, thinking forever of the morrow, could give themselves up to work, converting themselves from men into beasts. He had given much thought to the matter; he knew far more than the Cubano imagined, and he didn’t wish to lose his soul by devoting himself to regular, monotonous labor in order to have a house and a family and assure himself bread for the following day. That was to doubt the mercy of God, who never abandons His creatures; and he was above all a Christian.
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Tonet laughed to hear these words, considering them the rambling chatter of intoxication, and nudged his tattered companion. If he expected another glass for all this nonsense, he was mistaken! What he thought was that the tramp hated work. The same held true of the others, but in varying degree; everybody bent his back, although it might be most unwillingly.

Sangonera let his gaze wander across the surface of the canal, which was tinted purple by the waning light of the afternoon. His thoughts seemed to wing far away: he spoke slowly, with a certain mysticism that contrasted with his alcoholic breath.

Tonet was an ignoramus, like everybody else in Palmar. This he declared, with the courage of intoxication, without any fear that his friend, who was quick-tempered, would give him such a shove that he’d go rolling into the canal. Hadn’t he just said that all bent their backs unwillingly? And what did this prove but that work is something contrary to nature and to the dignity of man? . . . He knew more than folks in Palmar gave him credit for: more than many of the vicars whom he had served like a slave. That’s why he had always wrangled with them. He possessed the truth, and he could not dwell with the blind in spirit. While Tonet had been wandering in those lands across the sea, mixed up in battles, he had been reading the priests’ books and passing the afternoons at the door of the presbytery, reflecting upon the open pages, amid the silence of a town whose populace had fled to the lake. He had committed to memory almost all the New Testament, and he seemed to tremble as he recalled reading the Sermon on the Mount for the first time. It seemed to him then that
a cloud had been rent before his very eyes. All at once
he had understood why his will rebelled before stultifying,
painful labor. It was the flesh, it was sin that made
men live in the degredation of beasts, for the satisfaction
of their earthly appetites. The soul protested against
such servitude, saying to man: “Toil not,” and the sweet
intoxication of indolence was diffused through his limbs,
like a foretaste of that felicity which awaits the good
in heaven.

“Ascolta, Tonet, ascolta. Listen, Tonet, listen to me,”
said Sangonera to his friend in solemn accents.

And he recalled in disordered fashion all his evangeli-
cal readings; the precepts that had remained imprinted
in his memory. He did not have to ask anxiously for food
and clothing, for, as Jesus had said, the birds of the air
neither sow nor reap, yet despite this, they eat; nor do
the lilies of the field need to spin for their clothes, for
they are clothed by the grace of the Lord. He was a
creature of God and entrusted himself into His hands.
He did not wish to insult the Lord by working, as if he
doubted that the divine bounty would aid him. Only
the heathens, or what amounted to the same thing, the
folk of Palmar, who hoarded all the money they made
in fishing without ever inviting a fellow to drink, were
capable of toiling away for the sole purpose of laying
aside, ever doubtful of the morrow.

He wished to be like the birds of the lake, like the
flowers that grew in the reed-grass,—free, idle, and
with no other recourse than divine Providence. In his
poverty he never doubted the morrow. “Sufficient unto
the day is the evil thereof.” The coming day would bring
its ills. For the moment he was content with the bit-
terness of the present: poverty, which gave him his intention to maintain himself pure, without the slightest stain of work or of earthly ambition in a world where everybody fought his neighbors in the struggle for existence, each one injuring and sacrificing his fellow-man in order to rob him of a little comfort.

Tonet listened laughingly to the words of the drunkard, uttered with a growing exaltation. He banteringly expressed admiration of his ideas and suggested that he leave the lake and enter a monastery, where he would not have to battle against poverty. But Sangoneri protested indignantly.

He had quarrelled with the vicar, leaving the presbytery forever, because he could not endure beholding in his former friends a spirit utterly contrary to that of the books they read. They were like the others: they lived consumed by the desire for the other fellow's peseta, thinking only of food and clothing, and complaining of the decline of piety when no money came into the house, worrying every morning, doubting the bounty of God, who does not forsake His creatures.

He had faith and lived on what he was given or what he found at hand. Never had he lacked at night a handful of straw on which to lay his head, nor had he been utterly famished. The Lord, on sending him into the lake region, had placed within his reach all the requirements of life, that he might be the model of a true believer.

Tonet mocked at Sangoneri. Since he was so pure, why then did he get drunk? Did God order him to go from tavern to tavern, afterward crawling over the banks almost on all fours, with the staggering gait of the drunk-
ard? ... But the vagabond did not lose his solemn dignity. His drunkenness did nobody any harm, and wine was a sacred thing: not for nothing did it serve in the daily sacrifice to the deity. The world was beautiful, but when seen through a glass of wine it appeared more smiling than ever, of more brilliant hue, and its powerful Creator was admired more fervently than ever.

Each one has his own amusements. He found no greater pleasure than to contemplate the beauty of the Albufera. Others worshipped money, while he sometimes wept at the beauty of a sunset, as its fires were scattered by the dampness of the air, during that hour of dusk which was, on the lake, more mysterious and beautiful than inland. The beauty of the landscape entered his very soul, and if he contemplated it through several glasses of wine, he sighed with all the tenderness of a little boy. He repeated it: each one has his own amusements. Cañamèl, for example, delighted in heaping up golden coins: he, in contemplating the lake of Albufera with such rapture that his head hummed with verses prettier far than the ones they sang in the taverns, and he was convinced that, if he were like those city gentlemen who write for the papers, he would be able to say some mighty fine things in his drunken moments.

After a long silence Sangonera, spurred on by his very loquacity, raised objections to his own arguments, only to refute them at once. It might be said to him, as a certain vicar of Palmar once had objected, that man was condemned to earn his bread in the sweat of his brow, as a result of his first sin: but it was for this very reason that Jesus had come upon earth, to redeem him from the first fault, returning mankind to its Paradisiacal life,
free of all labor. But ay! The sinners, goaded on by pride, had not heeded his words: each wished greater comfort than the others; there were poor and rich, instead of all being men: those who paid no attention to the Lord worked hard, very hard, but Humanity was unhappy, and made for itself hell upon earth. Let them try to tell him that if folks didn’t work they’d have a hard time of it! Very well; there would be less in the world, but those who remained would be happy and carefree, subsisting on the inexhaustible grace of God.

... And this was perforce so: the world would never be a place of equality. Jesus would have to come back, to redirect men upon the right path. He had often dreamt of it, and on certain occasions when he was ill with swamp fever and when the chills attacked him, stretched out on a bank or crouching in a corner of his ramshackle cabin, he could see His tunic, purple, tightly gathered, rigid, and he would stretch out his arms to touch it and be at once cured.

Sangonera revealed an abiding faith when he spoke of this return to the earth. He would not appear in the large cities that were dominated by the vice of wealth. The other time He had not come to that vast city called Rome, but had preached in little places no larger than Palmar, and his companions were men of the pole and the net, of the sort that gathered in Cañamèl’s house. That lake upon whose waters Jesus had walked, to the amazement of his apostles, certainly was no greater in extent nor any more beautiful than the lake of Albufera. There among them would the Lord come when He should return to the world to finish His work; He would seek out the simple hearts, clean of all covetousness; he, Sangonera,
would be one of the Lord's own. And the tramp, with an exaltation compounded of both drunkenness and his own strange belief, would draw himself erect and gaze at the horizon; on the edge of the canal, where the last rays of the sun were falling, he imagined he saw the slender figure of the Desired One, like a purple line, advancing without moving His legs nor brushing against the plants, with a halo of light that would shine around His gently curling golden locks.

Tonet no longer heard him. From the road to Catarroja came the loud ringing of bells, and behind the fishermen's weighing-cabin the wrinkled cover of a van came into view. It was his people arriving. With the powerful sight that characterized the children of the lake Sangonera recognized Neleta from a long distance, in the little window of the vehicle. Ever since he had been thrown out of the tavern, he would have nothing to do with Cañamél's wife. He took leave of Tonet and stretched himself out anew in the barn, entertaining himself with his fancies until the night should come.

The carriage stopped before the little harbor tavern and Neleta stepped out. The Cubano did not conceal his astonishment. Where was the grandfather? . . . . He had let her make the return trip alone, with the entire cargo of twine, which filled the van. The old fellow wished to return home by way of Saler, so that he might see a certain widow who sold palangres cheap. He would return to Palmar at night on one of the boats that dredged up mud from the canals.

As they glanced at each other the two were assailed by the same thought. They were going to make the trip alone: for the first time they were to be able to speak
with each other, far from all curious glances, amid the
deep solitude of the lake. And both grew pale, as if in
the presence of a danger that they had a thousand times
desired, which had all at once, unexpectedly presented
itself. Such was their emotion, that they did not hasten
their gait; as if they were dominated by a strange bash-
fulness and feared the comments of the harbor folk, who
were scarcely paying any attention to them.

The driver had finished taking all the thick bundles
of twine out of the vehicle, and, with the aid of Tonet,
was throwing them into the prow of the boat, where they
formed a yellowish heap from which came the smell of
new-spun hemp.

Neleta paid the driver. Good health and a fine trip!
And the man, snapping his whip, drove his horse off in
the direction of Catarroja.

The two remained for an appreciable while motionless
on the mud bank, without daring to embark, as if they
were awaiting someone.

The calkers called to the Cubano. He ought to set sail
very soon: the wind was going to die down, and if he
was going to Palmar, he would have to help the boat
along with the pole for a good while. Neleta, visibly
perturbed, smiled to all the folk of Catarroja, who greeted
her, having seen her in her tavern.

Tonet decided to break the silence, turning to Neleta.
Since the grandfather wasn’t going along, they had bet-
ter set sail as soon as possible. His voice was already
hoarse, as if his emotion were gripping his throat.

Neleta sat down in the center of the boat, at the foot
of the mast, using as a seat a heap of skeins that sunk
beneath her weight. Tonet tended the sail, squatting be-
fore the helm, and the boat commenced to glide along, the sail fluttering against the mast with the tremors of the soft, waning breeze.

They passed slowly through the canal, seeing, by the departing light of the afternoon, the isolated cabins of the fishermen, garlanded with the nets placed out to dry upon the yard fences, and the old water-wheels, of decayed wood, around which the bats were beginning to fly. The fishermen walked along the banks, pulling laboriously at their skiffs, towing them along with their sashes tied to the end of the ropes.

"Good-bye!" they murmured, as they passed along.

"Good-bye! . . . ."

And once again, silence, accompanied by the murmuring of the boat as it cut the waters, and the monotonous croaking of the frogs. The two kept their eyes lowered, as if they feared to realize that they were alone, and as if on raising their eyes and meeting each other’s glance, they would flee it on the instant.

The shores of the canal were now wider apart. The banks were lost in the water. On each side extended the large lagoons of the fields that were to be filled in. Over the smooth surface the reeds swayed in the twilight, like the crest of a submerged forest.

They were already in the lake of Albufera. They advanced somewhat farther with the dying gusts of the breeze; around them they could see only water.

The wind was no longer blowing. The lake, tranquil and unruffled, assumed a soft opal hue, reflecting the waning splendor of the sun behind the distant mountains. The sky was of violet, and was beginning to be pierced here and there in the direction of the sea by the gleaming
of the first stars. Near where the water met the land the drooping, motionless sails of the boats stood out like phantoms.

Tonet lowered sail and, taking the pole, began to move the boat along with the power of his arms. The silence of the twilight was broken.

Neleta, with a sonorous laugh, stood up, wishing to help her companion. She, too, could pole a boat. Tonet must recall their childhood days together, their strenuous, mischievous games, when they would loosen the skiffs of Palmar without the knowledge of the owners and scurry along the canals, often having to flee from the pursuing fishermen. When he would get tired, she would take his place.

"Estate queta... Be quiet," he replied, his breath cut short by his effort; and he kept on poling.

But Neleta would not be quiet. As if she were oppressed by that dangerous silence, in which their glances shunned each other as though fearing to reveal their thoughts, the young woman continued to talk vivaciously.

Far off in the distance, like a fantastic shore that they were never to reach, stood out the notched line of the Dehesa. Neleta, with incessant laughter in which there was something forced, reminded her friend of the night they had spent in the forest, and of all their fears and later their tranquil sleep; that adventure seemed to have taken place only the day before; so fresh was it in her memory.

But her companion's silence, his gaze fixed at the bottom of the boat with an anxious expression, called her attention. Then she noticed that Tonet was devouring with his eyes her small, elegant, russet shoes, which stood out against the hemp like two bright stains, and some-
thing more that the movements of the boat had brought to view. She hastened to lower her skirt and remained silent, her mouth compressed by a hard look, her eyes almost closed, while a painful wrinkle could be noted between her eyebrows. Neleta seemed to be making every effort to master herself.

They advanced slowly. It was a difficult task to cross the lake of Albufera in a loaded boat moved only by might of strength. Other little empty skiffs, containing only the man at the pole, shot by as swiftly as a shuttle, being soon lost in the growing shadows.

For almost an hour Tonet had been working the heavy pole which sometimes slipped on the compact bed of shells and at others was caught in the vegetation of the bottom, which the fishermen called the hair of the Albufera. It could easily be seen that he was not accustomed to such work. If he had been alone in the boat he would have stretched himself out in the bottom, waiting for the wind to return or for some other craft to tow him in. But Neleta’s presence awoke in him a certain sense of pride, and he did not care to stop until he should fall exhausted with fatigue. He was breathing heavily as he leaned against the pole to propel the boat. Without letting go of it, he would from time to time bring his arm to his forehead and wipe off the sweat.

Neleta called to him in a soft, tender voice, in which there was something maternal.

Only her shadow could be seen upon the heap of skeins that filled the prow. She wished him to take a rest: he ought to stop for a moment; it made no difference if they should come a half hour sooner or later.

And she made him sit down beside her, suggesting that
it would be far more comfortable on the heap of hemp than at the stern.

The boat came to a stop. Tonet, recovering his strength, felt the sweet proximity of the woman, just as when he would sit beside her behind the tavern bar.

Night had fallen. There was no other light than the scattered glow of the stars, which trembled in the dark waters. The deep silence was interrupted by the mysterious noises of the stream, which was aquiver with the darting of invisible creatures. The lubinas, coming from the direction of the sea, were pursuing the small fishes, and the black surface shuddered with a continuous chap-chap of disordered flight. In a nearby mata the coots uttered their plaints, as if they were being slain, while the buxquerôts sang their endless scales.

Tonet, amid this silence peopled with noises and songs, imagined that time had not passed at all,—that he was still a youngster and was in one of the forest glades, at the side of his childhood chum. Now he felt no fear: the one thing that intimidated him was the mysterious warmth of his companion, the intoxicating perfume that seemed to emanate from her body, rising to his head like a strong liquor.

With bowed head, not daring to raise his eyes, he thrust forth an arm, placing it about Neleta’s waist. Almost at the same moment he felt a soft caress, a velvety touch, a hand that glided from his head along his forehead and dried the perspiration that still bedewed it.

He lifted his glance and beheld, at a short distance, in the obscurity, a pair of eyes that shone fixedly upon him, reflecting the light of a distant star. Upon his temples he felt the titillating contact of the blond, silken tresses
that surrounded Neleta’s head like a nimbus. Those pungent perfumes with which the tavern-keeper’s wife saturated herself, seemed all at once to enter the innermost recesses of his being.

“Tonet, Tonet!” she murmured in a weak voice, like a tender cry.

The same as in the Dehesa! . . . . But now they were no longer children; that innocence which had made them cling to each other and thus seek to gather new courage had disappeared.

The boat remained motionless in the center of the lake, as if it were an abandoned hulk, and not the slightest sign of a silhouette stood out against its gunwales.

From nearby came the languorous song of some boatmen. They were poling their boats over the water that was peopled with murmurs without any suspicion that, only a short distance away, amid the night’s calm, lulled by the birds of the lake, Love, the sovereign of the world, was enthroned on a few mean planks.