THE day of Palmar's great festival came, the fiesta of the Infant Jesus.

It was in December. Across the lake of Albufera blew an icy wind that made the hands of the fishermen numb, freezing them to the pole. The men wore woolen caps pulled down over their ears, and did not remove their yellow storm-coats, which, as they walked along, swished like silken skirts. The women rarely left the cabins: all the families sat about the hearth, tranquilly dwelling in a dense, smoky atmosphere like that of an Eskimo hut.

The lake had risen. The winter rains had swollen the waters, and fields and banks were covered by a liquid cloak, mottled here and there by the submerged plants. The lake seemed vaster. The isolated cabins, which before had been on solid ground, now seemed to float on the waters, and the boats were moored at the very doors.

From the soil of Palmar, damp and muddy, there appeared to rise a raw, unbearable cold, which kept folks in their houses. The old gossips of the town could not recall so cruel a winter. The Moorish sparrows, restless and rapacious, shrunken with the cold, fell from the straw roofs with a pitiful cry like the wail of a child. The guards of the Dehesa pretended short-sightedness before the necessities of poverty, and every morning a veritable army of gamins would scatter through the forest, seeking dry wood with which to heat their cabins.
Cañamél’s customers grouped about the fireplace and would leave their mat-weed chairs near the fire only to go to the bar for another drink.

All Palmar seemed benumbed and drowsy. There were no people in the street, no boats upon the lake. The men went out only to gather the fish that had been caught in the nets during the night, and returned as fast as they could to the town. Their feet looked huge, wrapped in bulky woolen cloths within their esparto sandals. The bottoms of the boats were strewn with rice straw to protect against the cold. Many a day, at dawn, broad sheets of ice would be seen floating in the canal, like panes of frosted glass. Everybody had succumbed to the weather. They were the children of warmth, accustomed to seeing the lake boil and the fields exhale their fetid breath under the caress of the sun. Even the eels, as Tio Paloma announced, didn’t care to lift their heads out of the mud in such awful weather. And to make matters worse every little while there was a torrential downpour of rain, darkening the lake and overflowing the smaller canals. The gray sky made the Albufera dreary. The boats that sailed along in the dense mists looked even more like coffins, their men standing motionless in the straw, bundled up to the nose in thick, ragged old clothes.

But when Christmas season came, with its fiesta of the Infant Jesus, Palmar seemed to come back to life, shaking off the winter torpor into which it had sunk.

They must have the same good time as usual, even if the lake were to freeze over hard enough to walk on, as one said happened in distant countries. More even than by the desire for amusement, they were impelled by the wish to annoy their rivals, the folk of the mainland,
those fishermen of Catarroja, who scoffed at the Infant of Palmar, scorning his diminutive size. These infidel, conscienceless enemies even went so far as to say that the people of Palmar ducked their patron saint in the waters of the canals when the fishing wasn’t good. What sacrilege! . . . That was why the Infant Jesus punished their sinful tongues, not permitting them to enjoy the privilege of the redolins.

All Palmar prepared for the celebration. The women defied the cold, crossing the lake to reach Valencia for the Christmas fair. When they returned in their husband’s boats, the impatient youngsters were already waiting for them at the canal, anxious to see their presents. The cardboard horses, the tin swords, the drums and the trumpets were received with exclamations of enthusiasm by the little ones, while the women exhibited to their friends their more important purchases.

The Christmas fiesta lasted four days. On the second, the music from Catarroja arrived, and the heaviest eel of the year’s catch was raffled off, the proceeds going to pay expenses. The third day was given to the celebration of the Infant Jesus, and on the day following occurred the feast of Christ; all this accompanied by masses and sermons and dances at night to the music of tabor and flageolet.

Neleta proposed this year to enjoy herself at the festivities as never before. Her happiness was complete. She seemed to live in a perpetual spring behind the tavern bar. When she supped, with Cañamel on one side and the Cubano on the other, all three tranquil and content, in a sacred, family peace, she considered herself the happiest of women and praised the bounty of the Lord, who
permits good people to live happily. She was the richest and prettiest woman of the town; her husband was satisfied; Tonet, submissive to her will, was falling more and more in love with her. . . . What else could she ask for? She told herself that the grand ladies she had seen from a distance on her trips to Valencia could surely not be so happy as she on that little corner of mud at the water’s edge.

Her enemies murmured; La Samaruca spied on her for the purpose of being alone without rousing suspicion, she and Tonet had been forced to invent reasons for trips to the lake towns nearby. It was Neleta who did all the scheming in this connection, with such cleverness that the Cubano could not help wondering whether there were some truth to certain rumors about her previous love-affairs, which probably explained her skill in such wiles. But the tavern-keeper’s wife was little worried by the slanderous gossip. What her enemies were saying now was the same as they had said when nothing more than indifferent words had been exchanged between her and Tonet. And with the certainty that nobody could prove her delinquency, she scorned all gossip, and before the customers in the tavern she would jest with Tonet in a manner that scandalized Tio Paloma. Neleta pretended that she was offended. Hadn’t they been brought up together? Couldn’t she like Tonet as a brother, in remembrance of all his mother had done for her?

Cañamél assented, praising his wife’s good nature. What the tavern-keeper did not look upon with quite so much approval was Tonet’s conduct as a partner. That youth had received his good fortune as if it were a lottery prize; he went about having a good time, like one
who does nobody any harm and consumes only what belongs to him, without giving a thought to fishing.

The site of La Sequiòta was giving good returns. There weren’t any of the fabulous catches of former days, but there were nights in which the catch came very close to a hundred arrobas of eels, and Cañamèl enjoyed the satisfactions of good business, haggling over prices with the city dealers, watching the scales and witnessing the loading of the large baskets. As far as that was concerned, the company was a great success, but he liked a fair deal: let each one perform his share of the work without taking advantage of the others.

He had promised his money and he had given it; the nets, the tackle and all the net-sacks, which could form a heap as large as the tavern itself, were all his. But Tonet had promised to help in the work, and it might be said that he had not caught so much as a single eel with his sinful hands.

During the first nights he had gone to the redoli, and, seated in the boat with a cigar stuck in his mouth, had watched his grandfather and the hired fishermen empty the huge net-sacks in the darkness, filling the bottom of the boat with eels and tenches. After these first few nights, he did not even do that much. He was not fond of dark, stormy nights, on which the waters are choppy and the best fishing is done; he wasn’t fond of the work necessary to pull in the heavy, laden nets; he felt a certain revulsion to the sliminess of the eels as they slid through his hands, and preferred to remain at the tavern or to go to sleep in his cabin. Cañamèl, in order to provide him with a good example and by his own actions shame the youth out of his indolence, decided to go to the redoli
several nights, coughing away and complaining of his pains; but the cursed lazybones, noticing this, seemed only the more determined to stay away, even getting so brazen as to say that Neleta would be afraid to remain alone in the tavern.

The truth was that Tío Paloma needed no assistance to carry the business forward; he had never worked with such enthusiasm as he had displayed on finding himself the owner of La Sequiota; but—what the devil!—an agreement was an agreement, and it seemed to Cañamél that the youth was robbing him of something when he beheld Tonet so content with life and so utterly detached from his business.

What luck the lubber had! Fear of losing La Sequiota was the only thing that restrained Tío Paco. In the meantime Tonet, living in the tavern as if it were his own, fattened in the delight of having all his desires satisfied for the mere trouble of stretching out his hand to receive what he wished. He ate of the best in the house, filled his glass at every cask, both large and small, and sometimes, with a mad, sudden impulse, as if the more plainly to affirm his possession, he took the liberty of caressing Neleta behind the counter, in the presence of Cañamél and only some four feet away from the customers, among whom were some who kept a close eye on the tavern-keeper’s wife and her companion.

At times he felt a wild desire to leave Palmar, to spend a day away from the Albufera, in the city or in the lake towns, and he would plant himself before Neleta with the expression of a master.

“Dónam un duro. Give me a duro.”

“A duro! And what for?” The woman’s green eyes,
proud and imperious, would be riveted upon his: she would draw herself up with the arrogance of the adulteress who does not wish to be deceived in turn; but on noting in the youth’s glance only his wish to wander about for a while, to shake himself free of his pampered existence, Neleta smiled contentedly and gave him as much money as he asked, urging him to return soon.

Cañamél grew indignant. All this might be tolerated if he only attended to business; but no; his interests were being jeopardized, and to make matters worse, the youth was eating up half the tavern, asking money on top of it all! His wife was too kind; that gratitude which she professed toward the Palomas for their kindness to her in her childhood, was ruining her. And with his miser’s insistence upon detail he would reckon up just what Tonet ate in his establishment, and the prodigality with which he invited his friends to drink, always at the proprietor’s expense. Even Sangonera, the lousy tramp that had been thrown out of the place because he soiled the seats, had now returned under the Cubano’s protection, and Tonet would make him guzzle till he got dead drunk, using for this purpose the bottled liquors,—the costliest of the stock,—all for the pleasure of listening to the drivel and nonsense that the vagabond had got into his head as a result of his sacred readings.

“On some fine day he’ll take possession even of my bed,” said the tavern-keeper once, complaining to his Neleta. And the unhappy man could not read those inscrutable eyes; he could not see a diabolical smile in the malicious glance with which she received such a supposition.

When Tonet would weary of loafing about the tavern for days at a time, seated beside Neleta, with the expres-
sion of a pet dog awaiting the moment propitious for caresses, he would take Cañamél's musket and his setter and go off to the sedge islets. Tio Paco's musket was the best in Palmar; a rich man's weapon that Tonet looked upon as his very own, and which rarely missed fire. The dog was the famous Centalla, known in the entire lake country for his remarkable scent. Not a piece of game ever escaped him, however thick the reed grass grew. He would dive into the water like an otter, and bring the wounded bird up from the depths of aquatic plants.

Cañamél asserted that there wasn't enough money in the world to buy that dog from him; but with deep sadness he noticed that his Centella showed a greater fondness for Tonet, who took him off to the hunt every day, than for his former master, who was swathed in kerchiefs and cloaks close to the fire. That rascal even had taken his dog away from him! . . .

Tonet, filled with enthusiasm for Tio Paco's excellent hunting accoutrements, consumed the whole supply of cartridges kept in the tavern for hunters. Nobody in Palmar had ever hunted so much. In the narrow streams of water of the matas nearest to the town Tonet's shooting sounded continually, and Centella, warmed to the task, splashed about the reed grass. The Cubano felt a voluptuous pleasure in this exercise, which recalled to him his adventures as a guerrillero. He would lurk in ambush, awaiting the birds with the same wily savage's precautions that he had employed in hiding in the thickets on a man-hunt. Centella would bring to the boat the fôches and the collvôrts, their soft necks and their plumage stained with blood. Then would come the less common birds which Tonet so delighted to hunt: and he looked admiringly
REEDS AND MUD

upon the dead forms in the bottom of the boat: the cock of the canebrakes, with its turquoise blue plumage and its red beak; the agró, or imperial heron, with its greenish and purple hue and a panache of long, slender feathers on its head; the oroval, with its tawny body and its red crop; the piuló or Florentine drake, white and yellow; the morell or pelucón, with its black head tinged with gold, and the singlót, a beautiful wading bird with a glorious green plumage.

At night he would strut into the tavern with a conqueror's air, throwing down his heap of game, a rainbow of feathers. There! Tio Paco had a fine collection to fill his pot with! He presented it to him free of charge: after all, the gun was Paco's.

And when, from time to time, he would shoot a flamingo, called bragat by the people of Albufera, with its long legs, its big neck, its white and pink plumage and a certain mysterious air, like that of the Egyptian ibis, Tonet would insist that Cañamèl should have it stuffed in Valencia, to keep in his bedroom; an elegant decoration, since the gentlemen from the city were so eager to get one.

The tavern-keeper received these gifts with grunts that revealed his very relative satisfaction. When would the fellow let his gun have a rest? Didn't he find the reed-grass lands cold? Since he was so strong, why did he not help his grandfather nights in the work at the rodoli? But the rogue received the sickly proprietor's complaints laughingly, and would turn to the counter.

"Neleta, a glass..."

He had certainly earned it, passing the whole day among the marshes, his hands frozen to the musket, all for the sake of bringing home that heap of game. And
yet they said he fled work! . . . In an excess of joyous immodesty he caressed Neleta’s cheeks above the counter, ignoring the presence of customers and exhibiting no fear of her husband. Were they not like brother and sister, and hadn’t they played together when they were children? . . .

Tío Tòni knew nothing about his son’s doings, nor did he care to know. He got up before dawn and did not return until nightfall. In the solitude of the submerged fields he ate, with La Borda, some sardines and a piece of corn-cake. His struggle to create new land kept him in poverty, permitting him no better food than this. When, after night had fallen, they returned to the cabin, he would lay down upon his bed with aching bones, sinking into the torpor of exhaustion, but his thoughts would follow him in his sleep, and he would calculate, amidst the clouds of his dreams, how many boatloads of earth were needed for his fields, and the sum of money he would have to pay to his creditors before he could consider himself the owner of the rice fields that he had created with his own sweat, palm by palm. Tío Paloma spent most of the nights away from the cabin, fishing in La Sequiòta. Tonet did not eat with the family, and only in the small hours of the night, after Cañamel’s tavern had been closed, would he kick impatiently at the door, awakening poor La Borda, who was sleepy and all tired out, to open it for him.

Thus the time passed by, until the festival season came to Palmar.

On the eve of the fiesta of the Infant Jesus, during the afternoon, almost the entire town thronged the space between the canal bank and rear door of Cañamel’s tavern. The musicians from Catarroja were expected,—the chief
attraction of the festivities—and the people, who during the year heard no other instruments than the barber’s guitar and Tonet’s accordéon, quivered with anticipation at thoughts of the blaring brasses and the booming of the bass-drum between the rows of cabins. None felt the rigors of the weather. The women, in order to display their new clothes, had laid aside their woolen shawls and showed their bare arms, made bluish by the cold. The men wore new sashes and red or black caps which still revealed the creases of the shop. Taking advantage of their wives’ conversations, they ran off to the tavern, where the breath of the drinkers and the smoke of the cigars formed a dense atmosphere that reeked of coarse wool and dirty sandals. They spoke at the top of their voices about the music from Catarroja, asserting that it was the best in the world. The fishermen from that place were a bad set, but it must be admitted that their musicians provided better music than even the King ever heard. The poor lake dwellers must have some good qualities. And noticing that the canal bank was crowded with people whose shouts announced the approaching musicians, all the customers rushed forth in a flock and the tavern was left empty.

Above the tops of the reeds could be seen the end of a large sail. As the barge bringing the musicians appeared around a bend of the canal the crowd burst forth into a roar, as if it had been inspired by the sight of the red trousers, and of the white plumes that floated above their great helmets.

The younger folk of the town, following the traditional custom, struggled to get possession of the bass-drum. The boys plunged into the waters of the icy canal, sinking
up to their waists with a daring that made the teeth of the watchers on the bank chatter.

The old women protested:

“Condenats! . . . Pillaréu una pulmonia! You’ll catch your death of cold!”

But the boys kept rushing on to the boat, clambered up over the gunwale, amid the laughter of the musicians, fighting for the enormous instrument. “Give it to me! To me! . . .” Until one of the boldest, tired of asking, seized it with such a grasp that the big drum almost fell into the water, and placing it upon his shoulder, he waded out of the canal, followed by his envious companions.

The musicians, after disembarking, formed in front of Cañamèl’s house. They took their instruments out of their cases, tuned them, while the dense crowd followed their every movement with a certain silent veneration, enjoying with deep admiration this event that was waited for the whole year round.

As they burst into a noisy march, the audience was seized with astonishment and the strangest of feelings. Their ears, accustomed to the deep silence of the lake, were fairly pained by the roar of the instruments, which made the walls of the mud houses tremble. But after recovering from this first shock that disturbed the conventual calm of the town, the people began to smile gently, titillated by the music, which came to them like a voice from a remote world, like the majesty of a mysterious life that was lived far beyond the waters of the Albufera.

The women were deeply touched, without knowing why, and felt like crying; the men, straightening out their bent, boatmen’s shoulders, marched with martial step be-
REEDS AND MUD

hind the band and the girls smiled at their sweethearts with gleaming eyes and flushed cheeks.

The music blew like a breath of new life over that slumbering crowd, rousing it from the lethargy of the still waters. They shouted without knowing why, they roared vivas to the Infant Jesus, they ran in clamorous groups ahead of the musicians, and even the older folks became as lively and playful as the little ones, who with their swords and their cardboard horses formed the escort of the drum-major, admiring all his gold braid.

Several times the band paraded up and down the only street of Palmar, prolonging the procession so that the public should feel satisfied, marching into the lanes between the cabins and issuing to the canal bank, only to retrace their steps up the street. The entire public followed these evolutions, singing at the top of their voices the liveliest passages of the march.

But this musical delirium had to end sometime, and the band paused in the square, before the church. The chief magistrate proceeded to the billeting of the bandsmen. The women disputed the honors according to the importance of the instruments, and the bass-drummer, preceded by his huge drum, walked off to the best house in the place. The musicians, content with having displayed their uniforms, huddled into cloaks, cursing the damp cold of Palmar.

The dispersion of the band did not clear the square of people. In one corner there suddenly rose the rolling of a tabor, followed shortly by a flageolet whining prolonged scales that seemed like musical capers. The crowd applauded. It was Dimòni, the famous flageolet-player of
every year; a happy-go-lucky old tramp as renowned for
his drunkenness as for his skill upon the flageolet. San-
gonera was his best friend, and whenever the flageolet-
player came to the fiesta, Sangonera would not leave his
side for a moment, knowing that at the end they would
drink up fraternally the money of the celebration commit-
tee.

The largest eel of the year was going to be raffled
off and the proceeds were going to help pay the expenses
of the celebration. This was an ancient custom, respected
by all the fishermen. The one who caught a huge eel
would keep it in his pond, and dared not sell it. If any-
body caught a larger one, the larger one was put aside,
and the owner of the previous eel could sell his. In this
way the committeemen always had the largest fish that
had been caught during the year in the lake of Albufera.

This year the honor of the largest eel fell to Tio
Paloma; not in vain did he fish in the best place. The
old fellow experienced one of the greatest satisfactions of
his career when he showed the beautiful creature to the
multitude on the square. He had caught that fellow!
... And in his trembling arms he held the long serpen-
tine figure with the green back and the white belly; it
was as thick as a person’s thigh and had a skin so slimy
that the light was reflected in it. The appetizing creature
was to be carried around the whole town to the tunes of
the flageolet, while the foremost personages of the Society
sold the raffle numbers from door to door.

"Here, work for a change," said the boatman, placing
the eel into Sangonera’s arms.

The vagabond, proud of the confidence reposed in him,
led the march with the eel in his arms, followed by the
flageolet and the tabor and surrounded by the jumping, shouting gamins. The women ran to get a close view of the huge fish, to touch it with religious admiration, as if it were a mysterious divinity of the lake, and Sangonera repelled them gravely. "Fôra, fôra! . . . Get away! Keep away!" They would spoil it with all that handling!

But when they had reached Cañamêl's tavern, he decided that he had enjoyed popular admiration long enough. His arms hurt, softened by indolent life; he made up his mind that the eel was not for him, and handing it over to the urchins about him, entered the tavern, letting the raffle continue without him, as they carried off the beautiful creature at the head of the procession, like a trophy of victory.

There were very few customers in the tavern. Behind the counter was Neleta, with her husband and the Cubano, discussing the celebration of the following day. The entertainment committee was, according to custom, composed of those who had won the best sites in the annual drawing of redolins, and the chief positions went to Tonet and his partner. They had gone to the city and had black suits made, in which to listen to mass from the first pew, and they were engrossed in going over the preparations of the festivities.

On the following day there arrived on the mail-boat the musicians and choristers and a priest celebrated for his eloquence, who would preach a sermon on the Infant Jesus, incidentally lauding the simplicity and the virtues of the fishermen of Albufera.

A barge was moored off the beach of the Dehesa, taking on a cargo of myrtle with which to cover the square; and in a corner of the tavern the fire-works maker had
several baskets full of *masclets*—little iron petards that went off like cannon.

On the next morning the lake quivered with the discharge of the *masclets*, as if a battle were being fought in Palmar. Then the canal was thronged with people, who ate their breakfasts between slices of bread. They were waiting for the musicians who were coming from Valencia, and there was much comment on the liberality of the persons in charge. Tío Paloma’s grandson certainly knew how to do things! No wonder,—with all of Canaimèl’s money within reach!

The mail-boat arrived, and the first to land was the preacher,—a stout priest with imposing forehead, carrying a large bag of red damask, which contained his vestments. Sangonera, out of old habit acquired during his service as sacristan, hastened to take charge of the luggage, throwing it over his shoulder. Then followed the members of the choir, who jumped to the ground from the boat: the choristers with their gluttonous faces and their curly hair, the musicians carrying their violins and flutes wrapped in green cloth under their arms, and the solo singers, yellowish youths with sunken eyes and expressions of precocious malice. They were all speaking of the famous *all y pebre* made in Palmar, as if they had made the trip for the sole purpose of eating.

The crowd let them enter the town without stirring from the bank. They wished to see at close range those mysterious instruments that were deposited near the mast, and which some porters were beginning to carry away. The kettle-drums, as they were brought ashore, caused astonishment, and there arose a general discussion as to
the purpose served by these huge pots, which looked so much like the ones they used for cooking fish. The bass-violists were greeted with an ovation, and the people ran to the church, following the men who were carrying these “giant guitars.”

Mass began at ten. The square and the church were perfumed by sweet-smelling shrubs from the Dehesa. The mud had disappeared under a thick layer of leaves. The church was filled with blossoms and wax candles, and from the door it looked like a dark sky dotted with infinite stars.

Tonet had prepared everything in the best of style, seeing even to the music that would be sung at the celebration. None of your celebrated masses that put people to sleep. That was all very well for the city people, who were used to operas. In Palmar they wanted the mass by Mercadante, as in all the Valencian towns.

During the celebration the women were deeply touched by the voices of the tenors who sang Neapolitan barcarolles in honor of the Infant Jesus, while the men’s heads swayed to the rhythm of the orchestra, which was as voluptuous as that of a waltz. This livened their spirits; as Neleta said, it was far better than a theatrical performance, and it inspired the soul. And in the meantime, outside on the square the long rows of masclets were being shot off, frequently drowning out the songs of the artists and the words of the preacher.

When it was over, the crowd loitered in the square until dinner time. The band at one end of the plaza, somewhat forgotten after the splendors of the mass, started up a tune. The people felt content amid that environment
of sweet-smelling greenery and the smoke of powder, and thought of the pot waiting for them at home with the best birds of Albufera.

The wretchedness of their previous life seemed now to belong to some distant world to which they would never return.

All Palmar believed that it had entered forever into happiness and abundance, and they discussed the grandiloquent phrases that the preacher had dedicated to the fisherfolk; the half-ounce that they gave him for the sermon, and the basket of money that the musicians surely must cost, the powder, the gold-fringed curtains stained with wax that adorned the portal of the church, and the band that deafened them with its martial blasts.

The groups congratulated the Cubano, who stood stiffly in his black suit, and Tio Paloma, who that day considered himself the owner of Palmar. Neleta strutted about among the women, with her costly mantilla coming down to her eyes, displaying the mother-of-pearl rosary and ivory-bound prayer-book that she had received at her wedding. Nobody gave a thought to Cañamél, despite his pompous appearance and the thick gold chain that weighed against his paunch. It seemed that it was not his money that was paying the cost of the festivities: all the congratulations went to Tonet, as proprietor of La Sequiñeta. As for these people, anyone who did not belong to the Society of Fishermen was unworthy of notice. And the tavern-keeper could feel growing within him his hatred for the Cubano, who little by little was assuming possession of all he owned.

This ill humor was with him all day long. His wife, guessing how he felt, forced herself to appear amiable
during the banquet which they gave in the upper story, to the preacher and the musicians. She spoke of poor Paco’s illness, which put him into a devilish mood at times, and begged all to pardon him his ugliness. In the middle of the afternoon, after the mail-boat had taken the visitors off to Valencia, the irritated Cañamèl, alone at last with his wife, poured out all his bile.

He would not endure this Cubano any longer. He could get along easily with the grandfather, for that fellow was an industrious worker, and he kept his word; but this Tonet was a lazy good-for-nothing who scoffed at his partner, living the life of a prince on his money, and merely because he had drawn a lucky number in the Society drawing. He even deprived his partner of the little satisfaction that he might derive from spending so much money on the festivities. They all expressed their thanks to the other fellow; as if Cañamèl were nobody, as if all the money for the exploitation of the redolí didn’t come out of his pocket, and all the results of the fishing weren’t due to him. The end would be that he’d throw that tramp out of the house, even if it meant the loss of the business.

Frightened by the threat Neleta intervened. She counselled calm; he must remember that it was he who had sought out Tonet. Besides, she regarded the Palomas as part of the family; they had protected her in her wretched days.

But Cañamèl, with childish obstinacy, repeated his threats. As for Tío Paloma, well and good: he would go any distance with him. But either Tonet mended his ways, or he would break with him. Everyone in his place: he didn’t care to share his profits any longer with that
idler who knew only how to exploit him and his poor grandfather. It cost him plenty to make money, and he would stand for no abuse.

The discussion between man and wife became so heated that Neleta wept, and that night she would not go to the square, where the dance was regularly held.

Large wax candles that were used in church for burials illuminated the square. Dimòni played on his flageolet all the ancient Valencian contra-dances, the cháquera vella, or the dance in the style of Torrente, and the girls of Palmar danced ceremoniously, hand in hand, changing couples, as if they were courtly ladies who had disguised themselves as fisherwomen to dance a pavana in the torchlight. Then came the ú y el dos, a more spirited dance, enlivened by verses, and the pairs hopped about briskly, while a tempest of shouts and cat-calls would arise whenever some girl, whirling around like a top, showed her stockings beneath the flowing wheel of her skirts.

Before midnight the cold broke up the festivities. The families went off to their cabins, but the younger element remained in the square,—the merry and gallant people of the town, who spent the three days of the celebration in continuous drunkenness. They carried their guns on their shoulders, as if in order to amuse themselves in a small town they needed to have their weapons at hand.

The albaes were organized. They were to spend the night, according to the traditional custom, in going from door to door, singing in honor of all the young and old women of Palmar, and to warm themselves for this task the singers carried along a wine-skin of wine and several bottles of brandy. Some of the musicians from Catarroja, a good-natured set, agreed to accompany Dimòni’s
flageolet with their brass instruments, and the serenade of les albaes began its rounds on the dark, cold night, lighted by one of the torches from the dance.

All of Palmar’s young men, with their antique weapons on their shoulders, marched in a compact group behind the flageolet-player and the musicians, who held their instruments by their cloaks, fearing the cold contact of the metal. Sangonera brought up the rear, carrying the wine-skin. Frequently he thought that the moment had come to place his burden upon the ground and he would prepare his glass for a nip.

One of the choristers would begin a stanza, singing the first couplet to the rhythmic beating of the little drum, and another would reply, completing the quatrain. Generally the two final lines were the most malicious and while the flageolet and the brasses greeted the end of the stanza with a roisterous refrain, the young men would explode into shouts and shrill neighings and fill the air with shots from their guns.

Much sleep there was in Palmar that night! The women, from their beds, followed mentally the procession of the serenaders, trembling at the noise and the shooting, and guessing the progress from door to door by the scandalous allusions with which each neighbor was greeted.

On this expedition Sangonera’s wine-skin was not left undisturbed for long. The glasses circulated freely from group to group, giving them warmth in that freezing night, and their eyes sparkled brighter and brighter as their voices grew every moment more hoarse.

On one corner two youths had come to blows over the question of precedence in the matter of drinking, and
after exchanging a few blows they withdrew a few paces, aiming their guns at each other. Their companions all intervened and took their weapons away forcibly. Off to sleep! The wine had done them harm; they must go to bed! And the party of serenaders continued on their way with their songs and their cat-calls. Such incidents were part of the fun; they happened every year.

After three hours of slow trudging about the town they were all dead drunk. Dimòni, unable to hold his head up and with his eyes shut, seemed to sneeze into the flageolet, and the instrument whined as indecisively and as hesitantly as the legs of the player. Sangonera, seeing that the wine-skin was almost empty, was moved to song, and accompanied by an unending chorus of "Fòra, fòra!" amid whistles and cat-calls, he improvised incoherent verses against the "rich people" of the town.

There was no wine left, but they all counted on reaching Cañamèl’s house by the middle of their rounds, and here they would replenish their supply.

Near the dark, closed tavern the wandering serenaders found Tonet wrapped up to his eyes in his cloak, with the mouth of his fowling-piece showing from underneath. The Cubano feared the indiscretion of these fellows; he recalled what he had heard on similar nights, and he believed that his presence would restrain them.

The crew, dazed by drunkenness and fatigue, seemed to be filled with new life before Cañamèl’s house, as if from behind the grating of the door all could smell the perfume of the casks.

One of them sang a respectful song to señor don Paco, flattering him to make him open the place, calling him the "flower of friends," and promising the good-will of all if
he would fill their wine-skin. But the house remained silent; not a window stirred; not the slightest sound came from inside.

In the second stanza they began to address poor Cañamél in most familiar fashion, and the voice of the singers quivered with a certain irritation, which held promise of a torrent of insolence.

Tonet became nervous.

"Che! .... No feu el pòr! See there! .... Don't get nasty!" he said to his friends in a paternal manner.

But a fine condition these fellows were in for listening to advice! The third stanza was dedicated to Neleta, "the most charming woman in Palmar," pitying her for being married to the miser Cañamél, "who was good for nothing...." After this stanza the serenade degenerated into a venomous downpour of scandalous allusions. The crowd was having a wonderful time. They found the verses more to their taste than the wine, and they laughed with the malevolent delight that rustics take in ridiculing matrimonial troubles. They would all be seized with fury and unite in common cause if a fishermen were robbed of a mornell that was worth a few reales, yet they laughed like madmen when anyone was robbed of a wife.

Tonet trembled with anxiety and anger. At certain moments he wished to flee, foreseeing that his friends would go too far, but he was held back by pride, and the false hope that his presence would act as a check.

"Che! Mireu lo que feu! Hey there! Look out what you're doing!" he growled in tones of veiled threat.

But the singers considered themselves the huskiest fellows of the town; they were the bullies that had grown up while he was wandering about the lands across the sea.
They were eager to show him that the Cubano inspired them with no fear whatsoever, and they laughed at his warnings, improvising verses on the spot, which they cast like projectiles against the tavern walls.

One stripling, the nephew of La Samaruca, roused Tonet's anger to such a pitch that he lost control of himself. He sang a stanza upon the partnership of Cañamèl and the Cubano, saying that not only did they exploit La Sequiòta together, but Neleta likewise, and he concluded with the remark that soon the tavern-keeper's wife would have the heir that she had asked of her husband in vain.

With a bound the Cubano leaped into the midst of the group, and by the light of the torch he was seen to raise the butt-end of his gun, striking the singer's face. As the latter came to and reached for his musket, Tonet jumped back, firing his carbine almost without aiming.

...And then what a tumult arose!... The bullet went astray, but Sangonera thought he heard it whistle close to his nose, and he threw himself down on the ground uttering horrifying yells.

"They've killed me! Murderer!..."

The windows of the surrounding houses were noisily opened; white faces loomed forth, some of which thrust their gun-barrels across the sill.

Tonet was disarmed in an instant, and pushed by many hands against the wall. He twisted and turned like a madman, struggling to pull out the knife that he kept in his sash.

"Solteume! Let me go!" he shouted, foaming with rage. "Solteume! Let me go! I'll kill that scoundrel!"

The magistrate and his patrol, who, foreseeing some-
thing of this sort, had been following the serenaders at a short distance, now interfered. *Pare Miquel*, with his skin cap and carbine, began to deal blows with the butt of it right and left, with the satisfaction he always derived from striking people with impunity, in full exercise of his authority.

The sergeant of the guard took Tonet off to the lad’s cabin, threatening him with his Mauser, and La Samarucaca’s nephew was taken into a house to have his wound dressed.

Sangonera caused even more trouble. He continued to roll about in the dirt, howling that he had been killed. They gave him the last drops of wine from the wine-skin to revive him, and the vagabond, content with the remedy, swore that he was shot through and through and could not rise, until the vicar, seeing through his tricks, gave him two salutary kicks which brought him to his feet at once.

The magistrate ordered the serenaders to continue on their way. They had sung enough to Cañamél. The functionary felt for the tavern-keeper that respect which in towns is always inspired by the man of wealth, and was desirous of sparing him further vulgarities.

The group withdrew dispiritedly: in vain did Dimoni’s flageolet whine its capering scales; the singers, finding the wine-skin dry, felt obstructions in their throats.

The windows closed, the street remained deserted, but the last of the curious watchers thought that they heard, on the top story of the tavern, the sound of voices, the scraping of furniture, and feebly the weeping of a woman interrupted by the muffled exclamations of a furious voice.

The next day the only topic of discussion in Palmar
was the brawl that had taken place before Cañamél's house.

Tonet did not dare to appear in the tavern. He feared to face the painful situation in which he had been placed by the imprudence of his friends. During the morning he wandered about the square, seeing from afar the tavern-door thronged with people. It was the final day of the spree and the town holiday. They were to celebrate, the feast of Christ, and in the afternoon the musicians would sail for Catarroja, leaving Palmar sunk in its conventual tranquillity for all of the next year.

Tonet ate with his father and La Borda, who, during the three days of the festivities, in order to avoid the gossip of the neighbors, had unwillingly suspended their hard struggle against the waters. Tío Tono was probably ignorant of what had happened the previous night. His grave look, which was nevertheless the same as usual, seemed to indicate this. Besides, he had spent the holidays repairing the damage that winter had done to his cabin, for the hard toiler could not be at rest for a moment.

La Borda, however, must know something about the fray: it could be read in her pure eyes, which seemed to illuminate her ugliness; in the compassionate, tender glance she fixed upon Tonet, shuddering at thought of the danger he had been in the night before. During one of the moments in which they were left alone she complained bitterly. Lord! If his father only knew what had happened! . . . It would kill the poor old man! . . .

Tío Paloma did not appear at the cabin: doubtless he ate with Cañamél. In the afternoon he encountered Tonet on the square. His wrinkled countenance reflected no
impression, but he spoke to his grandson dryly, advising him to go to the tavern. Tio Paco had something to say to him.

Tonet delayed the visit a while. He passed the time in the square watching the band form to play for the last time what they called the *pasacalle de las anguilas,*—the eel’s march. The musicians considered themselves slighted if, on returning from Palmar, they brought no fish to their families. Every year, before they left, they marched around the town, playing the final march, while before the bass-drum ran some urchins with baskets in their hands, gathering whatever each neighbor cared to donate: eels, tenches and other fish, not counting the *llobaro* (the much-sought lubina) which the celebration committee reserved for the bandmaster.

The music began to play, while the musicians walked along leisurely, so that the fisherfolk might contribute their offerings. It was then that Tonet decided to enter Cañamel’s house.

—“Hello, everybody!” he shouted merrily, to give himself courage.

Neleta, behind the counter, cast an indefinable glance in his direction, and lowered her head so that she should not catch sight of her deeply sunken eyes and the eyelids that were red from weeping.

Cañamel answered him from the rear of the establishment, pointing majestically to the door that led to the interior.

“Come in, come in; we’ve got something to talk over.”

The two men entered a room adjoining the kitchen; this *estudi* sometimes served as a bedchamber for the hunters that came from Valencia.
Cañamél allowed his partner no time to be seated. He was livid; his eyes glittered, sunken more than ever in puffs of fat, and his short, round nose trembled with a nervous tic. Tio Paco came straight to the point. *That* would have to come to an end: they could not continue in partnership nor be friends any longer. And as Tonet tried to protest, the obese tavern-keeper, who was stimulated by a passing moment of energy, perhaps the last in his life, stopped him with a gesture. No more talk: it was useless. He was determined to cut off all relations; even Tio Paloma agreed that he was right. They had gone into this business with the understanding that he was to furnish the money and the Cubano the work. His money had not been lacking: what nobody saw was his partner’s effort. The *señor* was going around living a high old life, while his poor grandfather was killing himself, working away for him! And if that were only all! He had come into this house as if it belonged to him. He seemed to be the owner of the tavern. He ate and drank of the best; he was as free with the money-box as if it had no proprietor; he permitted himself liberties that had better not be recalled; he had taken away his dog, his gun, and, according to what the people were saying now . . . even his wife.

“That’s a lie! . . . A lie!” shouted Tonet with the anxiety of the guilty.

Cañamél looked at him in such a way that he guarded himself, with a certain fear.

Yes; surely it was a lie. He, too, was convinced of that. Luckily for Neleta and Tonet, for if he should ever suspect even remotely that there was any truth to the vile things the rabble had sung on the previous night, he was
the man to wring her neck for her, and send a bullet between her lover's eyebrows. What did he think? Tio Paco was a very kind fellow, but despite his illness, he was as much a man as any other when his property was assailed.

And the tavern-keeper, quivering with restrained fury, paced back and forth like the old, broken horse of strong breed, who can rise on his haunches to the last moment. Tonet looked admiringly at the old adventurer, who, in his sickly indolence, heavy-paunched and panting as he was, could still summon the energy of his warrior days, when he had been free of all scruple.

Amid the silence of the room sounded the distant echo of the brass band that was making the rounds of the town.

Cañamél spoke anew, and his voice was accompanied by the music, which was now coming gradually nearer.

Yes; it was all a lie. But he wasn't there to furnish a butt for the people's laughter. Moreover, he didn't care to see Tonet forever in the tavern, taking those brotherly liberties with Neleta. He would stand no longer for this fictitious fraternal affection in his house. It was all over. He agreed with Tio Paloma. Henceforth the two of them would continue to work La Sequiòta alone, and the grandfather would arrange with the grandson about the relative shares. Tonet had no more business with Cañamél. If he had anything to say against this, let him speak. He was the owner of La Sequiòta because he had drawn it, but Tio Paco would withdraw his nets and his capital, Tonet would disgust his grandfather, and then, we'd see how he managed it alone!

Tonet did not protest; neither did he resist. Whatever his grandfather agreed to was best.
The music had by now reached the front of the tavern. The players halted, and their harmonious blasts made the walls tremble.

Cañamèl raised his voice to be heard. Now that the matter of the partnership was settled, they must speak as man to man. And he, with his authority as a husband who was not going to be laughed at and as a man who could throw out a troublesome customer, ordered Tonet never to come near the tavern again. Did he understand? Their friendship was at an end! That was the best way to stop gossip and lies. . . . Henceforth the door of that house must be for the Cubano as high . . . as high as the Miguelete in Valencia.

And while the trombones blared deafeningly before the door of the house, Cañamèl drew his almost spherical figure erect and raised his arm roofward, to express the dizzy, immeasurable height that must thenceforward separate the Cubano from the tavern-keeper and his wife.