AFTER spending two days away from the tavern, Tonet realized how much he loved Neleta.

Perhaps his despair was influenced by the loss of the merry comfort he had formerly enjoyed,—of that abundance into which he had sunk as into a wave of happiness. In addition to this, he missed the fascination of the secret love that had been guessed by the whole town; the morbid joy of caressing his beloved in the face of danger, almost in the presence of the husband and the customers, exposed to momentary detection.

Forbidden to enter Cañamél’s house, he did not know where to go. He tried to make friends in the other taverns of Palmar,—wretched hovels, with a tiny cask as their entire stock, where only now and then there would come in those whose long-standing debts restrained them from patronizing Cañamél. Tonet fled these places like some potentate who by mistake had blundered into a cheap dramshop.

He spent days wandering about the outskirts of the town. When he would weary of this, he would go to Saler, to Perelló, to the harbor of Catarroja, anywhere at all, just to kill time. He, who was naturally so lazy, would spend hours poling his boat around, just to see a friend and merely smoke a cigar with him.

The situation compelled him to live in his father’s cabin, and he would scrutinize Tío Tòni with a certain
disquietude, for the man, by the fixity of his glance, seemed to reveal his acquaintance with what had happened. Tonet, because of the heaviness with which time hung on his hands, changed his way of living. Rather than wander from one side of the lake to the other, like a caged animal, he would help out his poor father. And from that day on, with the transient fever of activity which characterizes the indolent when they decide to work, he went, as of old, to help dredge up mud from the channels.

Tío Tòni revealed his gratitude for this return of the prodigal, unwrinkling his brow and speaking a few words to his son.

He knew everything. Things had come about just as he had predicted. Tonet had not acted like a Paloma, and the father had suffered a great deal when he had heard the story. It wounded him deeply to see his son living at the expense of the tavern-keeper and in addition, robbing him of his wife.

"It's a lie! ... A lie!" replied the Cubano with the anxiety of the guilty. "It's all vile slander! ..."

All the better, then: Tío Tòni was happy that such was the case. The chief point was that he had avoided the danger. Now to work, to be an honest man, to help his father in the task of filling in those pools. When these should be converted into fields and the people of Palmar should see the Palomas gathering many sacks of rice from them, then Tonet would find a mate. He could choose from among all the maidens of the surrounding towns. Nobody says No to a rich man.

And Tonet, enthused by his father's words, gave himself up to the work with a veritable frenzy. Poor La
Borda worked harder with him than even with Tío Tòni. She could not seem to work hard enough to satisfy him; he was exacting and brutal with the unhappy girl; he loaded her as if she were a beast, but he set himself as criterion for fatigue. Poor La Borda, gasping under the weight of the basketful of earth and the continuous poling, would smile to him happily, and at night, when, with aching bones she prepared the supper, she would glance gratefully at Tonet, that prodigal son who had caused his father so much suffering, but who now, with his good conduct, had brought to the countenance of the powerful toiler an air of serenity and confidence.

But the wind of the Cubano’s will never blew long in the same direction. He was stirred by furious squalls of activity, and then the doldrums of an absolute, dominating indolence would get the best of him again.

After a month of this unremitting toil Tonet grew weary, as before. A large part of the fields was already covered, but there remained deep holes, which filled him with despair; they were bottomless pits, it seemed, through which the routed waters ever kept returning, slowly wearing away the land that had been accumulated at the cost of so much effort. The Cubano was afraid and discouraged before the magnitude of the undertaking. Accustomed to the bounty of Cañamell’s house, he rebelled all the more at the thought of the coarse dishes cooked by La Borda, the scant, insipid wine, the hard corn-cake and the musty sardines, his father’s only food.

His grandfather’s serenity made him indignant. He continued to visit Cañamell’s house as if nothing had happened. There he ate and drank, in perfect accord with the tavern-keeper, who seemed satisfied with the old man’s
industrious exploitation of La Sequiòta. As for the grandson, let a thunderbolt strike him! He didn’t speak a word to him when he saw him at night in the cabin, as if he didn’t exist,—as if he were not the real owner of La Sequiòta!...

His grandfather and Cañamèl had conspired to cheat him out of his just dues, but they would find they had to do with the wrong party. Perhaps all this indignation of the tavern-keeper had had no other purpose than to get him out of the way, so that the profit of the two others should be greater. And with that rural greed which is so fierce and pitiless that it recognizes neither affections nor family ties in matters of money, Tonet one night accosted Tio Paloma just as the grandfather was about to set out for the redoli. He was the owner of La Sequiòta,—the real owner, and he hadn’t seen a cèntimo for a long time. He knew, of course, that fishing was not as splendid as in other years, but they were doing a good business just the same, and grandfather and Tio Paco must be storing away a goodly number of duros in their sashes. He knew that from the eel dealers. Let’s see, then! ... He asked for plain figures: let them give him what was coming to him, or else he would take back the redoli and go looking for less rapacious partners.

Tio Paloma, with the despotic authority which he still imagined he had the right to wield over the whole family, at first thought that he would split his grandson’s head open with the tip of an oar. But then he recalled the negroes that the Cubano had slain yonder across the seas, and—recordons!—you can’t strike that sort of fellow, even if he does belong to the family. Besides, the threat of taking back the redoli frightened him.
Tio Paloma took refuge in morality. If he gave his grandson no money, it was because he knew the boy's character, and money, in the hands of young men, is perdition itself. He would drink it all down, he would go off to gamble with the card-sharks in the gloom of some hut in Saler; wherefore he preferred to save it up, and thus did Tonet a favor. After all, when he died, to whom would all his belongings go if not to his grandson?...

But Tonet was not softened by hopes. He wanted what belonged to him, or else he would take back the redoli. And after hot haggling, which lasted more than three days, the boatman decided one afternoon to dig into his sash, extracting with a painful expression a roll of duros. The boy could have them.... Jew!... Good-for-nothing!... After he had squandered it all in a few days, let him come back for more. He need have no scruples. Let his grandfather go to blazes! He could clearly see what sort of future awaited him in his old age. He would have to work like a slave, in order that his master might live like a lord.... And he left Tonet, as if he had forever lost that little affection for his grandson which he yet had even retained.

The Cubano, now supplied with money, did not return to his father's cabin. He wished to spend his idleness in hunting, leading the life of a warrior, getting his food by powder; and he began by purchasing a musket somewhat larger than the venerable arms that were kept in his house. Sangonera, who had been thrown out of Cañamél's place on the day following Tonet's expulsion, tagged about with the latter, seeing him idle and disgusted with the laborious life he led in his father's cabin.

The Cubano took up with the vagabond. He was a
good comrade, from whom a certain benefit might be derived. He had a place to live, which, although it was worse than a kennel, still would do for refuge.

Tonet would be the hunter and Sangonera the dog. Everything would be divided equally between them: food and wine. Was the vagabond agreeable? Sangonera was happy to consent. He, too, would contribute to their common maintenance. He had a pair of golden hands when it came to pulling the mornells up out of the canals, taking out the fish and returning the nets to the water. He wasn’t like certain unscrupulous thieves who, as the fishermen of Palmar said, robbed not only the soul, but carried off the body as well,—which is to say, the mesh sacks. Tonet would hunt game and he would provide fish. Agreed.

Ever since then, Tio Paloma’s grandson would only rarely be seen in town, with his gun across his shoulder, whistling comically to Sangonera, who walked behind him with bowed head, glancing furtively on all sides to see whether there was anything within reach of his claws worth taking.

They spent several weeks in the Dehesa, leading the life of primitive beings. Tonet, amid his tranquil existence in Palmar, had often missed his warrior life across the ocean,—a life lived in boundless liberty and filled with the dangers of the guerrillero, who, with death ever staring him in the face, sees neither obstacle nor barrier, and gun in hand, satisfies his desires, recognizing only the law of necessity.

The habits contracted during his years of martial experience in the thick forests now reawakened in the Dehesa, only a step from towns where law and authority,
dwelt; with dry wood he and his companion would fashion a hut in any corner of the forest. Whenever they were hungry they would kill a rabbit or some of the wild pigeons that fluttered among the pines; and if they needed money for wine and cartridges, Tonet would shoulder his gun, and in one morning would gather a fine bag of game, which the vagabond would sell in Saler or in the harbor of Catarroja, returning with a wine-skin, which he would hide in the bushes.

Tonet's gun rang out insolently all over the Dehesa, and was a note of defiance to the guards, who had to abandon their quiet lives of recluses.

Sangonera was on the watch like a dog while Tonet hunted, and when with his acute vagabond's eyesight he would see the enemy approach, he would whistle to his friend to get into hiding. Several times the grandson of Tio Paloma had found himself face to face with his persecutors, but he adroitly upheld his determination to live in the Dehesa. One day a guard fired at him; but a few moments later, as a threatening reply, he heard the hiss of a bullet close to his head. It was no use telling the former guerrillero anything. He was a scoundrel who feared neither God nor the devil. He was as good a shot as his grandfather, and if he sent a bullet so close, it was merely in the nature of a warning. If he were to be got rid of, they would have to kill him. The guards, who had large families in their huts, at last silently allowed the insolent huntsman to have his way, and whenever the discharge of his gun rang out, they pretended not to hear very well, and always ran in the opposite direction.

Sangonera, cuffed and dismissed everywhere he went, felt strong and proud under Tonet's protection, and when
he entered Saler he would look insolently at everybody, like a barking dog that counts on his master's defense. In exchange for this protection he gave his services as a scout, and if from time to time a pair of civil guards would approach from the suburb of Ruzafa, Sangonera would guess their coming before seeing them, as if he could scent the fellows.

"The three-cornered hats!" he would say to his comrade. "They're here!"

The days on which yellow belts and polished three-cornered hats were seen in the vicinity of the Dehesa, Tonet and Sangonera would take refuge in the Albufera. Crouching in one of Tio Paloma's skiffs, they would go from thicket to thicket, shooting birds, which the vagabond would gather, often having to get up to his chin in the water, in mid-winter.

On stormy nights,—the dark and rainy ones that Tio Paloma waited for as for a blessing, since these were the times of the large catches, Tonet and Sangonera would spend the time in the latter's cabin, huddled into a corner, for the water poured down in torrents through the holes in the roof.

When Tonet was at his father's elbow, he avoided his sad, severe look. La Borda would steal in cautiously with a change of clothing for Tonet, and to lend those services that only a woman can. The poor girl, exhausted with the day's toil, would mend the men's rags by the light of a lantern, sitting near the two tramps, addressing not a word of reproof, daring only to glance now and then at her brother with a pained expression.

When the two boon companions passed the night alone,
they would talk, drinking endlessly, and utter their most intimate thoughts. Tonet, habituated by Sangoneria's example to a continuous drunkenness, could not resist the burden of his secret, and he communicated to his companion the tale of his love affair with Neleta.

The vagabond at first tried to protest. That was bad. "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." But as he went on, carried away by his gratitude to Tonet, he found excuses and justification for the fault, with the clumsy casuistry that he had picked up while serving as vicar's assistant. The truth was that they had a certain right to love each other. Had they become acquainted after Neleta's marriage, their relations would have been a gross sin. But they had known each other since childhood; they had been sweethearts, and it was all Cañamèl's fault, for having mixed in where nobody asked him, disturbing their relations. He well deserved what had come about. And recalling the many times that the flabby proprietor had thrown him out of the tavern, he laughed with deep satisfaction at his conjugal misfortune and considered himself avenged.

Then, when there was no wine left in the skin and the lantern began to grow dim, Sangoneria's eyes would shut with drunkenness and he would discourse incoherently upon his beliefs.

Tonet, accustomed to this talk, would doze off and not hear a thing he said, while the straw roof of the cabin was shaken by the wind, and the rain filtered through.

Sangoneria did not grow tired of talking. Why was he so unfortunate? Why did Tonet suffer ennui and melancholy because he could not see Neleta? . . . Because
everything in this world was injustice; because people, dominated by money, insisted upon living just opposite to the way that God ordains.

And drawing close to Tonet’s ear, he would wake him, whispering in a mysterious voice about the forthcoming realization of his hopes. The good times were fast approaching. He was already upon earth. He had seen Him, just as plainly as he now saw Tonet, and He had touched him,—poor sinner that he was,—with His hand, which was of a divine coolness. And for the tenth time he related his mysterious encounter on the shore of Albufera. He was returning from Saler with a package of cartridges for Tonet, and on the road that borders the lake he had been overcome by a deep emotion, as if something were approaching him that paralyzed his energy. His legs bent beneath him and he fell to the ground, with a deep desire to sleep, to vanish completely and never awaken.

“You were drunk,” said Tonet, when he reached this part.

But Sangonera protested. No; he was not drunk. That day he had drunk but little. The proof lay in the fact that he remained awake, even though his body refused to obey him.

The afternoon was drawing to a close: the Albufera had a purple color; afar, in the mountains, the sky was aflame with waves of blood, and against this background, coming along the road, Sangonera beheld a man who stopped as he reached his side.

The vagabond trembled at the recollection. His glance was gentle and sad, His beard parted, His hair long. How was He dressed? He could recall only a white covering,
something like a tunic or a very long smock, and on His back, as if He were groaning beneath its weight, a huge bulk that Sangonera had not been able to make out. Perhaps it was the instrument of a new torture with which mankind would be redeemed. . . . He had bent over him, and all the light of the dusk seemed to be concentrated in His eyes. He stretched out a hand and with His fingers touched Sangonera’s forehead, with a cold touch, which made him shudder from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes. He murmured certain strange, melodious words that the vagabond could not understand, and went off smiling, while he, overcome by emotion, fell into a deep sleep, to awake hours later in the darkness of night.

He had never seen Him again, but it had been He, he was certain. He had returned to earth to save His work, which had been endangered by man: he was going once again in quest of the poor, of the simple, of the fishermen of the lakes. Sangonera must be one of the elect; not for nothing had He touched him with His hand. And the vagabond announced with all the fervor of faith his determination to abandon his companion as soon as the new, gentle apparition should present Himself once more.

But Tonet replied ill-humoredly, since his sleep had been disturbed, and threatened him in a thick, sullen voice. He had told him many a time that this had been nothing but a drunkard’s dream. If he had been sober and dry, which was the condition in which he ought to do all his business, he would have seen that the mysterious man was a certain wandering Italian who had spent two days in Palmar sharpening knives and scissors, and who carried his grinding-machine on his back.
Sangonera grew silent, out of fear of his protector's hand, but his faith was scandalized, and he mutely rebelled against Tonet's vulgar explanations. . . . He would see Him again! He was positive that he would hear again that strange and soothing language, feel His cold hand upon his forehead and see again that tender smile. Only he was saddened by the possibility that the meeting would again take place during the late afternoon, when he had many times satisfied his thirst and his legs would be paralyzed.

Thus did the winter pass for the two idlers; Sangonera cherishing the most extravagant hopes; Tonet thinking of Neleta, whom he rarely saw, for the young man, in his rare trips to Palmar, stopped in the square before the church, not daring to approach Cañamél's place.

This absence, prolonging itself for month after month, caused the remembrance of his former happiness to grow in his mind, until it assumed illusive proportions. Neleta's image filled his eyes. He could see her in the forest where they had been lost when they were children, in the lake where they had surrendered to each other, surrounded by the sweet mystery of night. He could not take a step in this circle of water and mud in which he lived his present life, without stumbling against something that summoned memory of her. Goaded by continuance and impassioned by the vigorousness of his vagrant life, Tonet spent many a night in agitated dreams, and Sangonera would hear him call to Neleta with the fervor of the lovesick male.

One day, Tonet, impelled by this passion that was driving him mad, felt the necessity of seeing her. Cañamél, growing daily more infirm, had gone off to the city. The Cubano resolutely entered the tavern at noon, when all
the customers were at home and he might meet Neleta alone behind the counter.

The tavern-keeper’s wife, beholding him in the doorway, uttered a piercing cry, as if a ghost had appeared. A flash of joy passed through her eyes; but at once they darkened, as if reason had returned to her, and she lowered her head with a harsh, intractible gesture.

“Be off! Be off!” she murmured. “Do you want to ruin me?”

He, wish to ruin her! . . . And this supposition cut him so deeply that he did not dare to protest. Instinctively he recoiled, and no sooner had he repented of his weakness than he was in the square, far from the tavern.

He did not try to return. Whenever his stifled passion suggested a visit to her, it was enough for him to recall that gesture and her look, whereupon immediately he would be overcome by a great coolness. Cañamél, who formerly was the butt of their jests, had now become an insuperable obstacle.

The hatred that he felt for the husband sent him off in search of his grandfather, in the belief that whatever he did against the latter would react against Neleta’s husband. Money! He wanted money! They were getting rich on La Sequiôta, and he, who was its owner, was entirely forgotten! These demands led to so many discussions and disagreements that it was a miracle they did not lead to blows on the canal banks. The old boatmen were astonished at the patience shown by Tio Paloma in trying to convince his grandson. It was a bad year; La Sequiôta was not yielding the results they had hoped for; besides, Cañamél was sick and was intractable. Tio Paloma himself at certain moments wished that the year
would end and a new drawing take place, so that he could send to the devil a business that gave him so much trouble. His old system was the best: let each one fish on his own hook: as to partnerships, nothing doing!...

Whenever Tonet would succeed in extorting a few duros from his grandfather, he would whistle merrily to Sangonera, and from tavern to tavern they would make their way to Valencia, carousing several days in the wine-shops of the suburbs, until the lightness of their pockets compelled them to return to the Albufera.

From the conversations with his grandfather he had learned of Cañamèl’s illness. This was the sole topic of discussion in Palmar, for the tavern-keeper was the first personage of the town, since all the folk, in their moments of need, solicited his favors. Cañamèl was getting worse; at first everybody had thought there was no cause for fear; his health was broken. But as they beheld him getting always heavier, more swollen, oozing fat, people gravely declared that he would die of excess of health and high living.

He complained more and more, without being able to localize his malady. The treacherous rheumatism, which was a product of that swampy soil, aided by a life of inactivity, was darting about his unwieldy body, playing at hide and seek, pursued by poultices and home remedies, which could never catch up with it in its mad career. In the morning the tavern-owner would complain of his head, and in the afternoon of his stomach or a swelling at the extremities. The nights were terrible, and more than once he had jumped out of bed in mid-winter, to open the window, saying that he was choking in the room, and that he could not get enough air to breathe. There
was a certain time when he believed that he had un-masked his malady. He had caught it! And he knew the huzzy’s name! It was when he ate a great deal that he found the greatest difficulty in breathing and felt violent nausea. His illness resided in his stomach. And he commenced to doctor himself, recognizing that Tio Pal-oma was a learned fellow indeed. The trouble with him was an excess of good things, as the boatman had said. His illness was eating too much and drinking too well. Abundance was his enemy.

La Samarucu, his terrible sister-in-law, had drawn closer to him ever since he had thrown Tonet out of the tavern. At last, as she affirmed with harpy-like truculence, her brother-in-law had felt shame for once.

She would manage to meet Cañamél when he went for a walk about town; she would call him out of the tavern—for she dared not enter the place in Neleta’s presence, knowing that she would be unceremoniously thrown out—and during these chats she would inquire with exaggerated interest after her brother-in-law’s health, deploiring his follies. He should have remained single after he had lost “his dead wife.” He had tried to play the young blade by marrying a young girl, and now he had all he was looking for: troubles and loss of health. That piece of imprudence was breaking out on him, and he ought to be thankful that it had not cost him his life altogether.

When Cañamél spoke to her about his stomach trouble, the malicious woman stared at him in astonishment, as if she had been struck with a thought that terrified her. Was it really his stomach that was out of order? . . . . Hadn’t they given him something to do away with him? And in the evil old witch’s eyes the tavern-keeper read
such clear, odious suspicion against Neleta, that he grew furious, barely restraining himself from striking her. Off with you, old devil! His poor deceased wife had already told him; she had feared her sister more than the devil himself. And he turned his back upon La Samarucia, resolved never to talk to her again.

To suspect such horrible things of Neleta! . . . Never had his wife been so tender and solicitous as now. If any rancor remained in Tio Paco's soul from the time when Tonet had taken possession of the tavern with the tacit consent of his wife, it had all disappeared before Neleta's conduct; she forgot all the affairs of the establishment for the purpose of devoting all her thoughts to her husband.

She had no faith in the skill of that almost itinerant doctor,—a sad day-laborer of the profession who arrived twice per week at Palmar, prescribing quinine as his sole remedy, as if he knew no other treatment,—and combating the growing indolence of her husband, she would dress him as if he were a little child, putting on every garment of his amid his complaints and protests of rheumatic pains, and she would take him to Valencia to have the reputable physicians examine him. She spoke for him, cautioning him like a mother to do everything that those gentlemen counselled.

The reply was always the same. All he suffered from was rheumatism, but it was a powerful rheumatism, which did not settle in any one spot, but which dominated his whole body, as a result of his wild, adventurous youth and the indolent, sedentary life he led now. He must take plenty of exercise, move about, and above all, avoid excesses. No drinking, for one could detect in him the
habits of a tavern-keeper who drinks with his customers. No other abuses, either. And the physicians lowered their voices, completing their recommendations with significant winks, for they did not dare to speak them plainly in the presence of a woman.

They would return to Albufera animated by a sudden energy, as a result of the physicians’ words. He was ready to follow their advice to the letter: he would keep moving about, so that he could get rid of that fat which enwrapped his body and stifled his lungs; he would visit the baths they had recommended; he would obey Neleta, who knew more than he, and who astounded him with her pertness of speech in the presence of those grave gentlemen. But no sooner did he enter the tavern than his will would give way; he would feel himself overpowered by the voluptuousness of inertia, and would not venture to move an arm without complaints and supreme efforts. He would spend the days beside the fireplace, gazing into the flames, his thoughts astray, drinking down glass after the glass at the urgent invitation of his friends. One glass more wasn’t going to kill him! And if Neleta glared at him severely, scolding him as if he were a child, the massive fellow would humbly excuse himself. He could not slight his customers; he must oblige them; business before health.

In this languishing condition, with his will dead and his body in the clutches of pain, his carnal instinct seemed to grow, becoming so sharp that it tormented him at all hours with pincers of flame. He experienced a certain relief in seeking out Neleta. She was a stimulant that stirred his being and after which his nerves seemed to calm down. She scolded him. He was killing himself!
REEDS AND MUD

He must recall the doctors' advice! But Tío Paco excused himself just as when he would drink an extra glass. One time more wasn't going to kill him. And she would yield resignedly, while her feline eyes gleamed with a spark of mysterious malignancy as if in the depths of her being she felt a strange delight in this invalid's love that was hastening the end of a life.

Cañamél, a prey to his carnal instincts, would groan. It was his sole diversion, his constant thought amid the painful inactivity of rheumatism. At night he would stifle as he lay abed: he would have to wait for morning seated on his rope armchair near the window, breathing with the painful wheeze of the asthmatic. By day he would feel better, and when he wearied of toasting his feet before the fireplace, he would enter with wavering step into the inner rooms.

"Neleta! . . . Neleta! . . ." he would cry in an eager voice, in which his wife would divine an entreaty.

And Neleta would answer with a resigned mien, leaving the bar in charge of her aunt, remaining away for more than an hour, while the customers smiled, well aware of everything because of their intimacy with the tavern-proprietor and his wife.

Tío Paloma, who, with the approach of the end of the exploitation of the redoli showed less and less respect for his partner, said that Cañamél and his wife chased after each other in the tavern just like dogs on the street.

La Samaruca declared that they were assassinating her brother-in-law. That hussy Neleta was a criminal, and her aunt a witch. Between the two they had given Tío Paco something that had turned his head: perhaps those "passion powders" that certain women made to conquer
men's indifference. And that was why the poor fellow followed her around so wildly, never able to sate his thirst, each day losing a new bit of health. And there was no justice upon earth to punish such a crime!...

Tio Paco's condition justified such talk. The customers saw him sit motionless beside the fireplace, even in midsummer, seeking the heat over which the *paellas* were boiling. The flies would flit about his face, and he would not show the least desire to frighten them away. On sunny days he would be wrapped in his cloak, groaning like a child, complaining of the cold caused by his pains. His lips were turning blue; his cheeks, flabby and full, were as yellow as wax, and his bulging eyes were surrounded by a black aureole, into which they seemed to sink. He was a huge, obese, quivering spectre, who cast a gloom over the customers by his presence. Tio Paloma, who had concluded the business of the *redoli* with Cañamèl, no longer patronized the tavern. He said that the wine tasted much worse when you had to look at that bundle of pains and groans. As the old fellow had money, he frequented a little place whither his friends had followed him, and Cañamèl's custom suffered a great decline.

Neleta advised her husband to go to the baths that the physicians had recommended. Her aunt would accompany him.

"A little later," the invalid would answer. "Later... Later."

And he would continue to sit motionless in his mat-weed chair, unable to tear himself away from his wife and that corner, to which his very existence seemed chained.

"His ankles began to swell, assuming monstrous dimen-
sions. Neleta had been expecting this. It was the swelling of the malleolus (that was it, she remembered the name well) which a doctor had predicted the last time she had gone to Valencia.

This manifestation of his illness roused Cañamèl from his torpor. He knew what this was. The cursed dampness of Palmar that had got into his legs because of his inactivity. And he obeyed Neleta, who counselled him to make a change of environment. At Ruzafa they had, like all the wealthy folk of Palmar, their hired cottage for purposes of recuperation. There they could have the services of the Valencian physicians and apothecaries. Cañamèl took the trip, accompanied by his wife's aunt, and was away for a fortnight. But scarcely had the swelling gone down a trifle than he wished to return, asserting that he was already well. He could not live without his Neleta. At Ruzafa he had felt the chill of death when, calling his wife, there would come in reply to the summons her aunt, with her wrinkled face and her eelish looks.

He resumed his old habits, and Cañamèl's feeble whining would resound continually in the tavern.

At the beginning of autumn he was forced to return to Ruzafa, worse than ever. The swelling was commencing to extend over his legs, which were huge and disfigured by rheumatism, looking for all the world like those of an elephant; he dragged them along with difficulty, leaning upon his nearest neighbor and emitting a groan every time his foot touched the ground.

Neleta accompanied her husband to the mail-boat. Her aunt had gone on ahead, in the morning, on the “eel cart,” to get the cottage at Ruzafa in readiness.
REEDS AND MUD

At night, after closing the tavern and going to bed, Neleta thought she could hear from the direction of the canal a soft whistling that she had known from childhood. She pried open a window to see. He was there! He paced up and down like a poor dog, in the vain hope that the house would be opened for him. Neleta then closed the window and returned to bed. Tonet’s proposal was sheer folly. She couldn’t be such a fool as to compromise her future in a rapture of juvenile passion. As her enemy Samarupa said, she knew more than an old woman.

Flattered, nevertheless, by Tonet’s passionate pursuit, for he came running to her as soon as he imagined she would be alone, the tavern-keeper’s wife fell asleep thinking of her lover. They must be patient and let time pass. Perhaps, when they least expected it, their former happiness would burgeon forth anew.

Tonet’s life had undergone a new change. He became a good son once again, returned to his father’s roof, to the work in the fields, which were by now almost covered with earth, thanks to Tio Toni’s tenacity.

The Cubano’s misdeeds had come to an end. The civil guard of the Ruzafa district paid frequent visits to the forest. Those mustachioed soldiers, with inquisitorial faces, convinced him of their determination to answer with a bullet the very first shot that he discharged in the pine groves. The Cubano heeded the warning. Those fellows in the yellow belts were not like the guards of the Dehesa: they could leave him stretched out at the foot of a tree, and afterwards they would hush up the matter with a report giving their own version of the deed. He discharged Sangonera, and once again the vagrant went back to his wandering life, crowning himself with the flowers
of the banks whenever he was drunk, and seeking over the lake the mystic apparition that had so impressed him.

Tonet, on his side, hung up his musket in his father’s cabin, and swore before it an oath of everlasting repentance. He wished to be taken henceforth as a dignified man. He would be respectful and kind to Tio Tòni, just as the latter had been with his grandfather. He had sown his wild oats, and that time was gone forever. His father, deeply moved, embraced Tonet, (something he had not done since his son had returned from Cuba) and together they devoted themselves to the filling-in of the fields with the ardor of one who sees his labors about to be crowned with success.

Sadness endowed Tonet with new strength, hardening his will-power. Impelled by passion, which was gnawing at his entrails, he had hovered about the tavern for several nights, knowing that Neleta was alone. He had noticed the shutters of a window being slightly pushed apart and then closed again. Doubtless she had recognized him, yet in spite of this she had said nothing, remaining unapproachable. All that was left to him now was the affection of his own people. And he grew closer and closer to Tio Tòni and to La Borda, sharing their illusions and their disappointments, partaking of their poverty and filling them with astonishment at the simplicity of his habits, for he scarcely drank now and would spend the evenings telling his father all about his adventures as a guerrillero. La Borda was radiant with happiness, and whenever she spoke with a neighbor she praised her brother. Poor Tonet! How good he was! How happy he made his father when he wished!...
Neleta suddenly left the tavern to go to Ruzafa. So great was her haste, that she did not care to wait for the mail-boat, and summoned Tío Paloma, to have him take her in his skiff to Saler, to the harbor of Catarroja, to any part of the mainland whence she could leave for Ruzafa.

Cañamèl was very low: he was in agony. This was not the most important part of the news to Neleta. Her aunt had arrived that morning with tidings that had left her motionless with surprise behind the counter. La Samarucu had been in Ruzafa for the past four days. She had established herself in the house as a relative, and the poor aunt had not dared to protest. Besides, she had brought with her a nephew, whom she loved as if he were her own son, and who lived with her: the same whom Tonet had struck during the night of the albaes. At first the nurse had said nothing, like the kind, simple woman she was: they were relatives of Cañamèl, and she was not so wicked-hearted as to deprive the invalid of these visitors. But afterward she had heard certain conversations between Cañamèl and his sister-in-law. That old witch was doing her best to convince him that nobody cared for him so much as she and her nephew. She spoke of Neleta, declaring that as soon as he had left on his trip, Tío Paloma’s grandson had taken to entering his house every night. Besides... (here the old woman hesitated out of fear) on the previous day two men had been brought into the house by La Samarucu and her nephew: one who questioned Cañamèl in a low voice, and the other who wrote down what he said. It must be his will.

At this news Neleta revealed her true character. Her
cajoling voice with its sugary inflexions turned hoarse; 
the clear pupils of her eyes glittered like tinsel, and a wave 
of greenish pallor coursed over her white skin.

"Recordöns!" she roared, like any of the boatmen who 
patronized her tavern.

And was it for this she had married Cañamél? Was it 
for this she had put up with an incurable disease, forcing 
she herself to appear kind and affectionate? Within her 
stirred in all its vast power the egotism of the rustic 
maiden who places worldly interest above love.

Her first impulse was to beat her aunt for taking so 
long in bringing her the news, when perhaps it was too 
late to remedy matters. But such an explosion of anger 
would have meant a loss of time, and she preferred to 
rush to Tío Paloma's boat in such a hurry that she herself 
grasped an oar to get as soon as possible out of the canal 
and raise sail.

In the middle of the afternoon she entered the cottage 
at Ruzafa like a whirlwind. At sight of her La Samaruc-
ca paled, and instinctively backed toward the door; but 
before she could manage to escape she caught a resounding 
blow from Neleta, and the two women seized each other's 
hair in a mute struggle, panting with muffled rage, rolling 
about from one corner to the other, bumping against the 
walls, overturning the furniture, their fingers tightly 
grasping each other's chignon, like two yoked oxen who 
fight with their heads joined, unable to separate.

La Samarucba was strong and inspired a certain fear 
among the gossips of Palmar, but Neleta, behind her 
sweet smile and her melodious voice concealed a snake's 
agility and bit her enemy in the face with such fury that 
she swallowed the blood.
“What is that?” groaned Cañamél’s voice from an adjoining room. The noise of the brawl had frightened him. “Qué pasa?... What’s going on?...”

The doctor, who happened to be with him, came out of the bed-room, and aided by La Samaruc’s nephew, managed to separate the two women, after great effort and not without receiving plenty of scratches. The neighbors were knocking at the door. They admired the blind fury with which women fight, and praised the pluck of the little blonde, who was crying because she could not vent her wrath in full.

Cañamél’s sister-in-law fled, followed by her nephew; the door of the house was shut, and Neleta, with hair all dishevelled and her white complexion reddened by scratches, entered her husband’s room, after wiping off the other woman’s blood that stained her teeth.

Cañamél was a wreck. His feet were swollen to monstrous size: the œdema, according to the physician, was already extending to the stomach, and his mouth had the livid, bluish hue of a corpse.

He seemed more massive than ever when he sat in his rope chair, his head sunk between his shoulders, fallen into an apoplectic torpor, out of which he would waken only with great effort. He did not ask for the reason of the hubbub, as if he had at once forgotten it, and only on beholding his wife did he make a languid gesture of joy and murmur:

“I’m a very sick man. ... Very sick.”

He could not move. No sooner did he lie down than he would stifle, and they had to run and raise him as if his last hour had come.

Neleta made arrangements to remain there. La Sa-
maruca would play no more tricks. She would not desert her husband until she brought him back safe and well to the town.

But she herself made a gesture of incredulity at the chances of Cañamèl being able to return to La Albufera. The physicians did not conceal their pessimistic opinions. He would die of cardiac rheumatism, of asystole. It was an incurable disease; at the least expected moment his heart would fail to contract and all would be over.

Neleta did not leave her husband's side. Those gentlemen who had written papers at his dictation did not go out of her thoughts. Cañamèl's stupor infuriated her; she wished to learn what he had dictated under the cursed inspiration of La Samaruca, and she tried to shake him out of his lethargy.

But Tio Paco, when for a moment he would gather his wits, would always answer the same. He had arranged everything perfectly. If she were good, if she loved him as much as she so often swore to him, she need fear naught.

Two days later Cañamèl died in his mat-weed armchair, asphyxiated by asthma, swollen everywhere, and his legs livid.

Neleta hardly wept. Something else was on her mind. When the corpse had left for the cemetery and she found herself free from the solace that the people of Ruzafa had tried to bring her, she thought only of seeking out the notary who had drawn up the will, and of discovering what her husband had dictated.

Her wish did not wait long for fulfillment. Cañamèl had arranged everything perfectly, as he had said in his final moments.
He declared Neleta his heiress, leaving no other bequests and naming no other executors. But he ordered that if she ever married again, or showed by her conduct that she was maintaining amorous relations with any man, that part of the fortune which he could legally dispose of should pass to his sister-in-law and to all other relatives of his first wife.