

BLASCO IBÁÑEZ VICENTE

MAYFLOWER (FLOR DE
MAYO): A TALE OF THE
VALENCIAN SEASHORE

Vicente Blasco Ibáñez

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	14
CHAPTER III	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	25

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CHAPTER I THE WIDOW'S TAVERN

The morning of that day – it was a Tuesday of the Lenten season – could not have dawned more promisingly. The sea, off the Cabañal, was in flat calm, as smooth as a polished mirror. Not the slightest ripple broke the shimmering triangular wake that the sun sent shoreward over the lifeless surface of the water.

The fishing fleet had headed, bright and early, for the grounds off the Cabo de San Antonio; and all the seines were out to take full advantage of the perfect weather. Prices on the market of Valencia were running high; and every skipper was trying to make a quick catch and get back first to the beach of the Cabañal, where the fisherwomen were waiting impatiently.

Toward noon the weather changed. An easterly wind came up, the dread *levante*, that can blow so wickedly in the gulf of Valencia. The sea at first was lightly wrinkled; but as the hurricane advanced the placid looking-glass gave way to a livid menacing chop, and piles of cloud came racing up from the horizon and blotted out the sun.

Great was the alarm along shore. In the eyes of those poor people, familiar with all the tragedies of the sea, wind from that quarter always meant one of those storms that bring sorrow and mourning to the homes of fishermen. In dismay, their skirts whipping in the blow, the women ran back and forth along the water's edge, wailing and praying to all the saints they trusted. The men at home, pale and frowning, bit nervously at the ends of their cigars, and, from the lee of the boats drawn up on the sand, studied the lowering horizon with the tense penetrating gaze of sailormen, or nervously watched the harbor entrance beyond the Breakwater on whose red rocks the first storm waves were breaking. What was happening to so many husbands and fathers caught with their nets down off shore? Each succeeding squall, as it sent the terrified watchers staggering along the beach, called up the thought of strong masts snapping at the level of the deck and triangular sails torn to shreds, perhaps at that very moment!

About three o'clock on the black horizon a line of sails appeared, driving before the gale like puffs of foam that vanished suddenly in the troughs of the waves to dart back into view again on the crests succeeding. The fleet was returning like a frightened herd in stampede, each boat plunging in the combers with the bellow of the tempest upon its heels. Would they make the lee of the Breakwater? The wind in devilish playfulness would here tear off a shred of canvas, there a yard, and there a mast or a tiller, till a rudderless craft, caught abeam by a mountain of greenish water, would seem surely to be swallowed up. Some of the boats got in. The sailors, drenched to the skin, accepted the embraces of their wives and children impassively, with vacant and expressionless eyes, like corpses suddenly resurrected from the tomb.

That night was long remembered in the Cabañal.

Frenzied women, with their hair down and lashing in the hurricane, their voices hoarse from the prayers they shouted above the howling gale, spent the whole night on the Breakwater, in danger of being swept off by the towering surf, soaked with the brine from the biting spray, and peering out into the blackness as though bent on witnessing the lingering agony of the last stragglers.

Many boats did not appear. Where could they be ... *ay Diós, Diós!* Happy the women who had their sons and husbands safe in their arms! Other boys were out in that tumbling hell, driving through

the night in a floating coffin, tossing from white cap to white cap, dizzily plunging into the yawning trough, while decks groaned beneath their feet, and gray hills of water curled above to break down upon them in a destroying surge!

It rained all night long. Many women waited out till sunrise, drawing their soaked cloaks about their shivering bodies, kneeling in the black mud and coal-dust on the Breakwater, shrieking their prayers to be sure that God would hear, or, again, in desperate rage, stopping to tear their hair and hurl the most frightful blasphemies of the Fishmarket up toward heaven.

And when dawn came, what a glorious dawn it was! As if nothing at all had happened, the sun lifted a smiling hypocritical face above the line of a clean horizon, and spread a broad uneasy glitter of golden beauty over waters that peacefully carried long streaks of foam from the night's turmoil. The first thing that the rays of morning gilded was the battered hulk of a Norwegian barkentine ashore off the Beach of Nazaret, its nose buried in the sand, its midships awash, its bilges agape and in splinters, while strips of canvas floated from the rigging tangled about the broken masts.

The ship had carried a cargo of Northern lumber. Pushed gently along by the lapping waves, timbers and boards were slowly drifting ashore, where they were dragged out by swarms of black ants and disappeared as though sunk in the sand. And they worked hard, those ants. The storm was just what they had been waiting for. Beach-pirates were whipping up their horses gayly along all the roads leading to the *huerta* of Ruzafa. Boards like that would make such fine houses! And the booty was all theirs by rights! What did it matter if a girder were stained, perhaps, with the blood of one of those poor foreigners lying dead back there upon the shore?

Groups of idlers were gathered, with a few policemen, around some corpses that were stretched out on the beach some distance from the water. Strong, handsome fellows they had been, light-haired all; and bits of white skin, soft and smooth, though muscular, could be seen through the rents in their garments, while their blue eyes, glassy and staring in death, looked up at the sky with a mysterious fixity.

The Norwegian had been the most sizeable wreck of the blow, and the newspapers in town gave columns to it. The population of Valencia turned out as on a pilgrimage to look at the hulk, half sunken in the shifting sands. No one gave a thought to the lost fishing boats, and people seemed not to understand the wailing and lamentations of the poor women whose men had not come home.

The disaster to the fleet was not, however, so great as they had thought. The morning wore on and several boats came in that had been given up for lost. Some had made Denia or Gandia. Others had taken refuge in Cullera Harbor. And each craft that appeared roused cheers of rejoicing and thanksgiving throughout the village, which joyfully made vows to all the saints who look after men of the sea.

In the end only one was not accounted for – the boat of *tio* Pascualo, the most thrifty saver of all the savers in the Cabañal, a man, decidedly, with an eye for money, a fisherman in winter and a smuggler in summer, a great skipper, and a frequent visitor to the coasts of Algiers and Oran, which he spoke of always as "across the way," as though Africa were on the sidewalk across the street.

Pascualo's wife, Tona, spent more than a week on the Breakwater, a suckling baby in her arms and another child, a chubby little lad, clinging to her skirts. She was sure Pascualo would come home; and every time a fresh detail of the storm was given her, she would tear her hair and renew her screams for the Holy Virgin's help. The fishermen never talked right out to her, but always stopped at the significant shrug of the shoulders. They had seen Pascualo last off the Cabo, drifting before the gale, dismasted. He could not have gotten in. One man had even seen a huge green wave break over him, taking the boat abeam, though he could not swear the craft had foundered.

In alternate spells of desperation and strange exhilarated hope, the miserable woman waited and waited with her two children. On the twelfth day, a revenue cutter came into the port of the Cabañal, towing *tio* Pascualo's boat behind, bottom-up, blackened, slimy and sticky, floating weirdly

like a big coffin and surrounded by schools of fish, unknown to local waters, that seemed bent on getting at a bait they scented through the seams of the wrecked hull.

The craft was righted and grounded on the sand. The masts were off even with the deck. The hold was full of water. When the fishermen went down inside to bail her out with pails, their bare feet, entangled in the mess of line and baskets and cordage, stepped finally on something soft. After a first instinctive cry of horrified revulsion, the men reached down under water with their hands and drew out – a corpse.

Tio Pascualo was hardly recognizable. His body was swollen, green, the belly inflated to the point of bursting. The decaying flesh was gnawed away in places by hungry little fishes, some of which, loath to let go their prey, were still clinging to it by their teeth, wriggling their tails and giving an appearance of disgusting life to the horrible mass. The bold sailor's fate was clear. He had been hurled through the hatchway by a lunge of the deck before the boat had been lost. Inside there he had lain with his skull crushed. That boat – the dream of his life, the achievement of thirty years of penny-saving – had proved to be his coffin!

Tio Pascualo's widow, in her hysterical weeping, shrank from the repugnant body. The women of the *Cabañal* raised their voices in weird lamentation and trooped in company behind the wooden box that was carried at once to the cemetery. For a week *tio Pascualo* was the subject of every conversation. Then people forgot about him, save that the appearance of his mourning widow, with one child in her arms and another at her side, chanced to remind them of his grewsome end.

Tona, indeed, had lost not her husband only. Dire poverty was upon her, not the poverty that is hard but tolerable, but the poverty that is terrifying even to the poor, the want of the homeless and the bread-less, the want that holds out a mendicant hand from the street corner to beg a penny and give thanks for a crust of mildewed bread.

Help came readily while her misfortune was fresh in the minds of the villagers. A subscription was taken up among the fisherfolk, and on the proceeds, with other gifts that came in, she was able to get along for three or four months. Then people forgot. Tona was no longer the widow of a man lost at sea. She was a pauper ever on hand with the wail for alms. Many doors were at last shut in her face, and old friends of her girlhood, who had always welcomed her with a smile, now looked the other way when she went by.

But Tona was not the woman to be crushed by general ostracism. *Eah!* Enough of this bawling! We've got to get out of the dumps! She was a woman with two arms like any other, and two brats that could eat and eat and eat!

She had nothing left in the world but the wreck of her husband's boat, in which he had died. It lay rotting out there on the beach, high and dry, now soaked by the rains, now oozing tar under the flaming sun, the mosquitos breeding in the muck inside.

Tona suddenly had an idea. That boat might be good for something. It had killed the father of those tots of hers. Why should it not help to feed them? *Tio Mariano*, a tight-fisted bachelor, first cousin to the late Pascualo, and supposed to be quite well off, had taken a liking to the widow's children; and however much it pained him, he went down into his pocket and gave her the money to make her start.

In one side of the boat a hole was sawed to make a door and a small counter. Against the wall inside some barrels of wine, gin and brandy were ranged in line. The deck was taken off and replaced with a roof of tarred boards, to give head-room, at least, in the dingy hovel. At the bow and at the stern two portholes were cut, and two partitions were set up with the boards remaining – one "stateroom" for the widow, the other for the boys. A shelter with a thatched roof was raised in front of the door; under it a couple of rickety tables, and as many as half a dozen bamboo tabourets. The whole outfit made quite a show. The hulk of death became a beach café within easy reach of the *casa del bòus*, the barn where the oxen for beaching and launching the boats were kept, and at the very place where the fish was brought ashore and where some one was always around.

The women folks of the Cabañal began to rub their eyes. That Tona was the Devil himself! See what an eye she had for business! Her gin and brandy went by the barrellful. The men who used to go to the taverns in town now got their drinks right there of her. They were always playing *truque y flor* on the shaky tables under the shelter while waiting for the boats to put to sea, brightening up the games with glass after glass of *caña*, which Tona averred was genuine imported Cuban rum.

Tio Pascualo's stranded craft went sailing, wind astern, on a new voyage toward prosperity. Out there on the rocking sea with the old skipper's seines, the boat had never earned so much as now under the widow's charge, though its seams were open and its timbers were rotting away. Evidence of profit could have been found in the successive transformations the old hulk kept undergoing. First curtains went up on the stateroom windows, and if you looked inside, you saw new coverlets of down, and white sheets. A coffee percolator began to shine like polished gold on the counter. The shelter outside the door grew longer and longer, with more tables and better ones. A dozen hens or more began to cluck about over the white sand, bossed by a wicked rooster with a tenor voice who was more than a match for any stray dog that came along looking for trouble. From a pen nearby echoed the grunts of a hog too fat to breathe without disturbing the neighborhood. And in front of the counter, outside the hull, were two stoves with rice and fish sputtering fragrantly in oil in their respective frying-pans. A going concern, no doubt of that! Not a question of getting rich, you understand, but a bite to eat for the boys! And Tona would smile and rub her hands gloatingly. Not a cent did she owe in the world. The ceiling of the boat was festooned with dry *morcillas* and shiny *sobreasadas* – her favorite sausages; and there were strips of smoked tunny, and a ham or two sprinkled with red pepper. The barrels were full of drink. Along the shelves stretched an array of bottles with liqueurs of every color. And the pots and pans hanging on the walls could be set sizzling in an instant with all kinds of good nourishing victuals. Just think of it! A widow starving a short time since, and now already on Easy Street! Say all you want – but God looks after decent people!

With plenty to eat and nothing to worry about, Tona seemed to grow young again. Inside her boat there she took on a glowing well-fed buxomness, and her skin, protected from the sun and brine, lost that harsh baked bronze of the women who worked along shore. When serving at the counter her ample breast sported inevitably one of an endless assortment of colored handkerchiefs, *tomate y huevo*, complicated arabesques of tomato red and egg yellow worked into thick well woven silk.

She could even afford purely decorative luxuries. Above the wine casks at the back of the "shop" the whitewashed timbers screamed aloud with cheap high colored chromos that reduced Tona's neck-wear to silence, quite. The fishermen drinking outside under the shelter would look up over the counter and feast their eyes on "The Lion Hunt," "The Death of the Good Man and the Sinner," "The Ladder of Life," not to mention a half dozen miracle-workers with Saint Anthony in the place of honor; and a cartoon showing the lean merchant who trusts, and the fat one who sells for cash, with the customary legend: "If you want credit, come back to-morrow!"

Tona could be quite properly satisfied at the relative comfort in which her young ones were growing up. Business was getting better and better, and an old stocking which she kept hidden between the foot board of her bunk and the big mattress there, was gradually filling with the silver *douros* she had saved.

Sometimes she could contain her happiness no longer; and to view her good fortune in perspective, as it were, she would walk down to the fringe of the surf, and look back with welling eyes at the hen coop, the open-air kitchen, the sonorous pig-pen, and finally the boat itself, its bow and stern projecting from a maze of fences, cane-work and thatch, and painted a clean dazzling white like some bark of dream-land tossed by a hurricane into a barnyard.

Not that life did not still have its hardships for her. She got little sleep. To begin with, she had to be up at sunrise every morning, and oftentimes, after midnight, when boats would make shore late or be leaving before dawn, the fishermen would start banging on her door and she would have to get up and serve them. These early morning spree were the ones that made most money, though they

caused her most uneasiness on the whole. She knew whom she was dealing with. Ashore for a few hours after a week at sea, those men wanted all the pleasures of land crowded into minutes of pure joy. They lighted on wine like flies on honey. If the older men soon fell asleep with their pipes dead between their teeth, not so the sturdier boys, aflame from the privations and abstinence of life at sea. They would look at *siñá* Tona in ways that would bring gestures of annoyance from her and make her wonder how she could fight off the brutal caresses of those Tritons in striped shirts.

She had never been a beauty; but her trace of fleshiness, her big black eyes that seemed to brighten a clean brownish countenance, and especially the light wrapper she would hurriedly throw on to attend to her nocturnal patronage, lent her charm in the eyes of those healthy youths who laid their courses toward the Valencian shore with joyous anticipation of a sight of *siñá* Tona.

But Tona was a woman of brain and brawn, and she knew how to handle those fellows. She bestowed no favors. When their words were over-bold she would answer with disdain. To nudges she replied with cuffs, and once when a sailor seized her suddenly from behind, she laid him flat with a well placed kick, tough as iron and sturdy as a main-mast though he was.

She would have no love affairs, even if other women did! A man would never touch the end of her little finger, no siree! The idea, besides! A mother of two children, little angels, sleeping there behind one thickness of boards – you could hear them breathe, even – and she alone in the world to support them!

The future of the boys was beginning to cause the mother hours of thought. They had been growing up there, on the beach, like two baby gulls, nesting in the shade of the grounded boats when the sun burned hotly, or hunting conchas and periwinkles on the shore uncovered at low tide, their brown chubby legs sinking deep into the masses of seaweed. The older child, Pascualet, was the living likeness of his father, stocky, full-bellied, moon-faced. He looked like a seminary student specializing on the Refectory, and already the fishermen had dubbed him "the Rector," a nickname that was to stick to him for life. He was eight years older than Antonio, a lean, nervous, domineering little fellow who had Tona's eyes.

Pascualet became a real mother to his younger brother. While *siñá* Tona was busy with the tavern, during the earliest days which had been the hard ones, the good-natured boy had carried the baby around with the tenderness of a nurse and had played with the young torments of the water front with that snarling squirming brat in his arms, who would bite and scratch when anything did not suit him. At night, in the cramped "stateroom" of the tavern-boat, "Tonet" would stretch out full length in the most comfortable place, letting his fat brother curl up in a corner where he might, provided he did not disturb the little devil, who in spite of his smallness ruled his elder brother like a tyrant.

The two boys would fall asleep to the lullaby of the waves which on days of spring-tide reached almost to the tavern; and in winter, when the cold wind would try to make its way through the seams in the old boat's walls, they would snuggle close together under the same coverlet. Some nights they would be wakened by the uproar from the drunken sailors in the tavern, and hear the angry words of their mother, or the slaps she would rain on impudent cheeks. More than once the frail partition of their bedroom had threatened to give way as some staggering body fell against it. But then they would go to sleep again, with the carefree innocence of children, with no suspicions, and without alarm.

Siñá Tona had an unjust weakness for her younger son. In the first days of her widowhood, when she saw the two little heads sleeping side by side in the narrow cabin, resting perhaps on the very timbers that had crushed their father's skull, she had felt an equal tenderness for them both, as though the deadly bark were to destroy them as it had killed Pascualo. But when prosperity came, and the memory of the tragedy grew dim with the years, *siñá* Tona showed unmistakable fondness for Tonet, a child of feline shrewdness, who treated everybody with imperious petulance, but for his mother always had the speculative fondness of a sly cat.

What a joy Tonet was for her, a beach vagabond at seven, spending the whole day away from home with one gang or another, and coming back at night with his clothes soaked and torn, and his

pockets full of sand! The older boy, meanwhile, now that his brother had been weaned from him, would be in the tavern, washing dishes, waiting on customers, feeding the hens, or watching, with grave responsibility written on his features, the two frying-pans that were crackling on the stoves.

The mother, sometimes, on suddenly waking from a doze behind the counter and finding Pascualet in front of her, would start with violent surprise. Pascualo, for all the world! Just as she had known him as a boy, before their marriage, when he was "cat" on a fishing vessel! The same round jolly face, the same stout square-shouldered body, the same stubby sturdy legs, the same expression of an honest simpleton with a gift for plodding work that stamped him in advance as a steady reliable chap, an *hombre de bien*. And the same inside, as well! Good-natured, too good-natured if anything, and bashful! But a bull-dog when it came to hanging on to money; and a mad fondness for the sea, prolific mother of men of courage, strong enough and brave enough to earn their living from her bosom!

By the time he was thirteen, the tavern had become quite uncongenial to "the Rector," as he gave to understand with a word dropped here and there, or with one of those occasional half-finished and incoherent sentences, which were all that ever came out of that hard head of his. He had not been born to the tavern business! Something altogether too tame for him! That might do for Tonet, who didn't like real work overwell. As for himself, he was a man of muscle, and he loved the sea. No, he must be a fisherman like his father!

When *siñá* Tona heard such remarks the terrifying thought of the catastrophe of that Lenten Tuesday would come back to her mind. But the boy held his ground. Things like that didn't happen every day. And since he felt a hankering for it, the profession of his father and his grandfather was good enough for him; and *tio* Borrasca, an old skipper who had been a great friend of *tio* Pascualo, thought so too.

One year when the drag-net season came around, the *pesca del bòu*, as the Valencians say, where two boats worked in team, Pascualet shipped with *tio* Borrasca as "cat," *gato de barca*, for his keep, and all he might make, in addition, from the *cabets*, the small fry, shrimp, sea-horses and so on, that came up in the nets from the bottom along with the big fish.

His apprenticeship started auspiciously. Up to that time Pascualet had gotten along on the old clothes his father had left. But *siñá* Tona wanted him to begin his new trade with real dignity; so she closed the tavern, one afternoon, and went off to a ship chandler's bazaar at the Grao. The boy remembered the excitement of that visit to the stores for years and years. What gorgeous things, those blue coats, those yellow oilskins, those big rubber boots – only captains could afford them, surely! But he was proud, withal, of his own helper's outfit – two shirts of mallorquin, as stiff and prickly and rough as so much sand-paper, a sash of black wool, a set of glaring yellow overalls, a red cap to pull down over the back of his head in bad weather, and another of black silk to go ashore in. For once in his life he had on clothes that fitted him. He was through struggling with those old coats of his father that on blowy days filled like mainsails and made him trot down the wind in spite of himself. Shoes had been out of the question. Those nimble feet of his had never known the torment of a leather casing.

And a real calling it was that the boy felt for the sea. The boat of *tio* Borrasca was more to his taste than the grounded hulk on shore there with its grunting hogs and cackling hens. He worked hard; and to supplement his wages he got a few kicks from the old skipper, who could be gentle enough on land, but once with a deck under him would have made Saint Anthony himself toe the mark. He could run up the mast to set the lantern or clear a line as spryly as a cat. When the time came to *chorrar*, to haul the nets, he would take his hand at the ropes. He scrubbed the decks, stowed the baskets of fish in the hold, and kept the fires going in the galley, so that the men of the crew never had a chance to complain. And what luxuries in reward for all that enthusiasm! When the captain and the men were through eating, the leavings were for Pascualet and the other "cat," who had been standing by motionless and respectful during the meal. The two boys would sit down on the bow with

black pots between their legs and loaves of bread under their arms. They would eat almost everything with their spoons, but when scooping became too slow, they would begin to mop the bottoms of the pots with crusts of bread till the metal was polished and shining. Then they would carefully collect the few drops of wine that the men had left in their tin cups. Finally, if there was no work to do, the "cats" would lie down like princes in the forecastle, their shirt-tails hanging out, their bellies toward the stars, their faces pleasantly tickled by the breeze, till they were rocked to sleep by the swaying of the vessel. There was tobacco a-plenty. *Tío Borrasca* was always raising a rumpus because he couldn't understand how his pockets ran empty so soon, now of the *alguilla* of Algiers, now of the Havana fine cut – according to the stock of the latest smuggler to make the *Cabañal*.

That was real life in Pascualet's eyes. Every time he came in, his mother could see that he had grown, was stronger, tanned a darker brown, but as good-natured as ever in spite of his fights with other "cats," husky little hectors who would stop at nothing, and who always puffed smoke in your face, when you talked to them, from pipes as big as they were.

These rapid visits home were all there was to remind *siñá* Tona that she had an elder son at all. The mistress of the tavern had something else on her mind. She was now spending entire days alone in her hulk there. "The Rector" was offshore, earning his share of *cabets*, returning only Sundays to hand over, with a show of pride, the three or four pesetas that represented his week's wage. The other boy, that lost soul Tonet, had turned out a regular waster – that was the very word for him. And he never came home unless he was hungry. He had joined the ragamuffins along shore, a swarm of wharf rats that knew no more about their fathers than the homeless dogs who went with them on their raids. He could swim like a fish, and all through the summer days he loafed around the liners in the harbor, without a stitch on his lean sunburned body, diving for the silver coins the passengers threw overboard. At night he would come home, his trousers in rags, his face scratched and bleeding. His mother had caught him several times fondly caressing the brandy keg; and one evening she had had to put on her shawl and go to harbor-police headquarters, where her tears and lamentations finally got him loose on the promise that she would cure him of his ugly weakness for scraping the bottoms of the sugar boxes stored on the piers.

That Tonet was a limb of the Devil! And, *diós mio*, where did he get it, where did he get it! How could two decent honest parents, such as she and Pascualo had been, ever get to have a boy like that? With a perfectly good dinner waiting for him at home, why did he insist on sneaking around the steamers from Scotland, waiting for the watchman to turn his back so as to be off with a dried codfish under his arm? No, that boy was to be the death of her! Twelve years old, no inclination to work, and not the slightest fear or respect for her, in spite of all the broomsticks she had broken over his back.

Siñá Tona usually confided her troubles to a certain Martinez, a young policeman who patrolled that part of the shore, spending the noon hours under the café shelter, his rifle across his knees, his eyes vaguely fixed on the horizon of the sea, and his ears filled with the running complaint of the tavernkeeper. A handsome chap Martinez was, an Andalusian from Huelva, slender and trim of person, natty as could be in the old service uniform which he sported with a truly martial swagger, twirling the corner of his blond mustache with an air that people called "distinguished." *Siñá* Tona admired the man. After all, breeding will come out! You can tell it a mile away. How Martinez talked, for instance! You could see from his choice of words that he was a man of schooling. For that matter he had studied years and years in the Seminary up his way; and if now he was only a patrolman, it was because he hadn't wanted to be a priest – he had quarreled with his family on the subject – preferring to see a bit of the world by enlisting in the army. The mistress of the tavern listened open-mouthed to the tales he told about himself in a heavy Andalusian dialect where every "s" was like "th" in "thing." In deference to his learning, she answered in kind, floundering about in an absurd and unintelligible Castillian which made people in the village laugh.

"See, *siñor Martines*, that jacknape of mine is driving me mad with all his carrying on. I say to him, I say: 'Anything wrong in this house, jail-bird? Well, then, why go tearing around with that gang

of good-for-nothings, who will die at the end of a rope, every one of them!' now *osté señor Martinez*, you know how to talk in good grammar. You just tell him what is what. You tell him they'll put him in the lock-up at Valencia if he isn't a good boy."

And *señor Martinez* promised to take the little rogue in hand, and he did, in fact, give him a lecture, which reduced Tonet, for a moment at least, to cowering in terror in the presence of that uniform and that heavy gun, which the soldier would never let go of for an instant. These slight favors gradually brought Martinez into the family, making his relations with *señá Tona* more and more intimate. He got his meals now at the tavern, and spent most of his time there; and the mistress finally had the pleasure of darning his stockings and sewing the buttons on his underwear. Poor *señor Martinez*! What would happen to a fine young man like him without a woman around? He would get to be as shabby and disreputable as a stray cat. And, frankly, no decent lady could allow that to happen!

Summer afternoons when the sun was beating full upon the deserted beach, turning the baked sand into a fiery furnace, one scene would always be enacted in the shade of the thatched roof of the tavern shelter. Martinez would be seated on a reed stool with one elbow on the counter, reading Perez Escrich, his favorite author, in bulging grimy volumes with the corners worn down from having passed from patrol to patrol along the coast. *Señá Tona* was convinced at last. That was where he got all those big words and that moral philosophy which stirred the bottom of her soul; and she looked at the books with the superstitious awe of an illiterate. Across the counter, mechanically sewing, without thinking of what she was doing, she would sit looking at Martinez fixedly, studying his thin blond mustache for half an hour at a time, then the elegant lines of his nose for just as long, and finally the exquisite skill with which he parted his hair, making two absolutely even plasters of golden locks on either side.

Sometimes, on looking up at the bottom of a page, Martinez would find the two black eyes of *señá Tona* nailed upon him; and he would blush and go on reading. Then afterwards the tavern keeper would be ashamed of herself. The idea! When Pascualo was alive, she had looked at the fellow casually once or twice, because she thought his face was interesting. But now she sat there looking and looking and looking, like a fool! What would people say if they ever caught her at it! Of course! She liked him! And why not? So handsome, and such fine manners! And how well he could talk! But after all, that was absurd. She was well on toward forty, thirty-six or so, she couldn't just remember. And he, well, twenty-four at the outside! But then again, and then again! What difference did a few years make? She was not so bad looking. She carried her age well. To settle that question, just listen to the men off the boats who were always pestering her! And if it was all so absurd, why were people gossiping about it? The other patrolmen, friends of Martinez, and the fish-women on the beach, were always teasing them with indirect allusions which, if anything, were too direct.

And the expected happened. To silence her own misgivings, *señá Tona* argued that her boys needed a father, and Martinez was just the man. The courageous Amazon, who would cudgel the roughest sailor at the slightest flippancy, herself took the initiative, overcoming the bashfulness of that timid overgrown boy; and he, submissive rather than seeking, allowed things to take their course, like a superior being with thoughts absorbed in higher things, and responding to affairs of earth like an automaton.

The matter did not remain long secret; nor was *Tona* displeased at the talk. She wanted it known that the tavern had a man in charge. When she had something to attend to in the *Cabañal*, she left the shop in care of Martinez, who sat, as he had always sat, under the shelter, looking out to sea with the rifle across his knees. Even the two boys understood that something was going on. "The Rector," on his turns ashore, would look at his mother with a perplexed expression on his face, and he was timid and ashamed in the presence of that big yellow-headed youth in uniform whom he always found about the tavern. Not so Tonet. That rascal smiled broadly all the time, reflecting the gibes and sarcasms he had picked up along shore. And he ceased to be at all impressed at the sermons of the patrolman, which he now rebutted by thumbing his nose and going off down the beach cavorting and turning handsprings.

Meanwhile Tona was passing through a new honeymoon in the full maturity of life. In comparison, her marriage with Pascualo seemed like monotony itself. Into her passion for the soldier she put all the vehemence of a woman whose youth is sloping toward sunset, and she paraded her joy in bold indifference to what people were saying. Let them talk! Let them talk till their tongues wore out! Many women were worse than she was. Of course the girls were sore at her carrying off a good-looking fellow right under their noses!

Martinez, for his part, with the usual dreamy expression on his face, let himself be kissed and pampered as though he deserved every bit of it; besides his prestige had gone up not only in his squad but with his superiors. Why not, with a boat full of the real stuff, not to mention that stocking crammed with silver *duros* that sometimes stuck into his ribs as he lay down on the bed in the stateroom! To make sleeping more comfortable he removed that annoying obstruction, and *siñá* Tona said not a word. Was he not to be her husband? The money was all hers, and so long as the tavern paid as well as it was paying, there was no need to worry.

In four or five months, however, Tona began to go around with a long face. See here, Martinez, *siñor Martines*, just come down out of the clouds and listen to Tona for a moment. Tona is saying something to you. She is saying that something must be done, in the circumstances. The present situation cannot last. A satisfactory explanation must be ready for what is bound to occur. A respectable mother of two children cannot be the respectable mother of three children, without a man there to step forward and say: "This is mine!"

And Martinez said: "*Bueno!*", but there was a sign of annoyed surprise in the way he said it, as though he had suddenly bumped against some hard reality in his plunge from the ideal heights where he always dwelt as a man unappreciated by the world, and where he could dream at leisure of becoming a general, a Dictator, and all the other things the heroes of Perez Escrich become, in that imaginative writer's novels!

Yes, he would send for the certificates necessary for the marriage license. But it would take time of course, because Huelva was a long way off. Tona waited, with her thoughts on Huelva, a city hazy in the distance, which she figured must be off around Cuba, or the Philippines, perhaps. And time went by, while the situation grew more and more alarming.

Martinez, *siñor Martines*, in two months ... Tona cannot pretend any longer! People are noticing. What will the boys say when they find that they have a young brother? But Martinez got cross. It wasn't his fault, if the documents didn't come. She could see how many letters he kept writing.

Finally the patrolman announced one morning that there was no other way out of it. He would have to go and get those cursed papers himself, and he had secured leave of absence from his captain. Fine! *Siñá* Tona thought that was a good idea. She gave him all the money she had, sleeked his hair one last time, wept a little, and ... "Good-by! And don't be long!"

A patrolman going by one day was kind enough to tell her the real truth. All that talk about going to Huelva was a lie. Martinez had been writing for papers all right, but to Madrid, asking to be transferred to another district at the opposite end of Spain, since the climate at Valencia was not good for him. And he had won his point. He had been assigned to the department of La Coruña.

That was a bad moment for *siñá* Tona. The thief! The bandit! You just trust these smooth talkers! So that was to be her pay for giving him her last cent – and combing his hair, the towhead, out there under the shed in the afternoon, as kind and soft-like as a mother.

But for all of Tona's desperation, in a few weeks she was handing out drinks across the counter while she nursed a white sickly girl baby, a tiny little thing with blue eyes and an over-sized yellow head that looked like a ball of gold.

CHAPTER II

SIÑÁ TONA'S FAMILY

And the years rolled on with nothing further to disturb the monotonous course of life for the family sheltered in the tavern-boat. The Rector had grown up to be a lusty sailor, stingy of words, fearless in danger. From *gato de barca* he had graduated to the rank of able-bodied seaman and was the man of the crew on whom *tio* Borrasca most relied. Every month Pascualet handed four or five *duros* over to his mother to keep for him.

Tonet was not settling down to any trade. A stubborn fight was going on between him and his mother. Tona would run her legs off finding him jobs which he would proceed to lose. For about a week he was apprentice to a cobbler. Then he went for a couple of months as "cat" on *tio* Borrasca's boat; and not even that stern disciplinarian was able to kick any obedience into him. Then he tried his hand at coopering, the steadiest of all trades; but his boss bounced him to the sidewalk in a very few days. Then he joined a stevedore's *colla* in town; but he never worked unloading the steamers more than two days a week, and that much quite against his will.

But his many shortcomings as vagrant and rowdy found easy excuse in *siñá* Tona's eyes, when she would see him of a holiday – and what days were not holidays for that rascal? – with that fluffy flat silk cap of his topping off a brown face with just the suggestion of a mustache showing, a blue denim coat fitting close to his figure, and a black silk sash wound around his waist over a flannel shirt with black and green checks. Any woman would be proud to own a boy like that! He was going to be another terror on the lines of that Martinez – curse the wretch – but with more "seasoning," more get-up-and-go, to him. To be sure of that, it was enough to watch the girls in the Cabañal when he was around. They would be willing to scratch each other's eyes out to get him for a lover! Tona was kept posted on all his adventures, and was immensely flattered at the boy's popularity and "social position." A bit too fond of brandy, yes – and what a pity! – but a regular fellow, quite different from that big good-natured booby of a Pascualet, who wouldn't say a word if a cart ran over him.

One Sunday evening in a tavern appositely labeled the "Inn of Good Morals," he began to throw bottles at some stevedores who had accepted a cut in wages; and when the police came in to restore order, they caught him, red-handed, chasing his enemies over the tops of the tables with his knife drawn. More than one week-end he spent in the jail at headquarters whence his mother's tears and the "pull" *tio* Mariano had as a politician and distributor of election money, would finally extricate him. And arrest proved so salutary to him that on the very night of one of his discharges he was taken again for drawing a knife on two English sailors, who, after a number of treats, tried to explain some of the details of the Marquis of Queensbury rules to him. Not much good at drudgery, but able to drink anybody under the table, and do it night after night, passing from dive to dive, and not showing his face at home for weeks at a time!

Tonet had an intimate way of conducting his more serious love-affairs that made many people suspect him of anticipating legal ceremonies. But his mother took no stock in such reports. She did not insist on a princess for her Tonet, but how could any one think he would ever marry that girl of *tio* Paella the truckman! Dolores, shameless hussy, was pretty enough, to be sure, but bound to make the woman who got her for a daughter-in-law lead a song – and a dance! What could you expect of a girl brought up without a mother by that *tio* Paella, a tippler who could never walk straight as he went out to hitch up at daylight, and who was getting thinner and thinner from alcohol, except for his nose that was growing so big it almost covered his puffy cheeks.

A tough customer was *tio* Paella, and no one said a good word for him. His trade was all in town, in the Fishmarket section of Valencia. When an English boat came in, he openly offered his services to take sailors to places only he knew about; and on summer nights he would load his wagon

up with girls in white wrappers, with painted cheeks and flowers in their hair, and drive parties of men off with them to various resorts along the shore, where they would have one grand carousal till sunrise, while he sat off in a corner, his whip in one hand and a wine mug in the other, paternally chaperoning what, sacrilegiously, he called his "flock."

And he talked right out regardless of his girl's presence. The language he used to her was the language he used to the women he knew in town. When he was drunk he would tell everything to the last detail; and little Dolores, crouching at a safe distance from her father's boots, would listen to the whole story with her eyes wide open in amazement and, written on her face, an eager unhealthy curiosity in all the filthy things *tio* Paella would be talking about in his brutal soliloquy, gloating over the infamous revelries he had been witnessing.

That was good training for a girl, wasn't it! What she didn't know was probably not worth knowing. And Tona was to be mother-in-law of a piece like that! Pretty as she was, all that had kept her off the streets so far was the good advice some of the women of the neighborhood gave her.

Even so, her conduct with Tonet was getting to be the talk of the village. The boy went in and out in her house as though he were quite at home; and he took his meals there, knowing very well that the truckman would not be back till late at night. Dolores did his washing and even rifled *tio* Paella's pockets to get money for her lover; and that made the teamster vomit mouthfuls of vile oaths on the subject of false friendship, because he thought his tavern companions had robbed him while he was drunk. One thing at a time, Tonet was moving all his belongings from the tavern-boat to the truckman's cabin, as though the girl were foreclosing on his property.

And *siñá* Tona was living more and more by herself. The Rector was always off peseta-hunting, as he said, either fishing, or sometimes shipping on one of the *laúds* that ran to Torrevieja for salt. Tonet was hanging around the liquor places or staying up at *tio* Paella's. Poor Tona was growing old behind the counter of her little shop, carrying the yellow-headed baby around, loving her with a strange vehemence at times, and then again hating her at the thought of that thief of a Martinez – whom the Devil take in due time!

So it was only off and on that God looked after decent people! Things were not going so well as they used to go, in the early days of Tona's widowhood. Other old hulks had been turned by copy-cats into taverns along the beach; and the fishermen could choose where they would go. She, besides, was not so pretty as she had been once; and the younger fellows were not so eager to buy drinks of her on the chance of getting something more. The tavern was living on its old habitués, and bringing in just enough to keep the wolf from the door. More than once Tona would walk down to the water as she used to and sadly look back at the two stoves now cold, the fences now rickety and tumbling down, the pig-pen where a lean hog scarcely ever grunted at all, and the half dozen hens hungrily pecking about the sands. How time dragged for her in that stultifying life of solitude, which was enlivened only when Tonet got into trouble or when Tona's eyes would fall on a picture of *señor Martines* in uniform, which she had hung up in the stateroom as a constant and refinedly cruel reminder of her one mistake.

Little Roseta, a favor left behind in the tavern-boat by the considerate patrolman, gave her mother hardly a moment's peace. She was growing up like an untameable wildcat. Every evening Tona had to go and hunt for her before she could shut her up in the boat after a hard spanking; and from morning till night she would never be seen unless she happened to be hungry. Thy will be done! One more cross for poor Tona to drag through this vale of tears! Taciturn and fond of her own company, Roseta would lie out full length on the wet sand, playing with shells or making piles of seaweed. She would sit for hours with her blue eyes staring into space with fixed hypnotic vacancy, the breeze twirling her yellow locks, as twisted and withy as so many snakes, or blowing up the faded old frock that reached the knees of two slim legs, shiny white, which had known no stockings other than the coat of brown the sun burned over their extremities in summer. Or for hours also she would lie face downward on the sand, which would take on the imprint of her body under her, bathing her

face in the thin ripple of water that the surf threw up and sucked back again over the shining beach spangled with all the capricious tracings of *moiré*.

She was an incorrigible truant, a chip of the old block, as Tona put it, thinking of that loafer who had been responsible for her, and who also sat staring day in day out at the horizon like a good-for-nothing idiot, half awake. If Tona had had to depend on that girl for a living, a fine mess she would have been in! Lazy, irresponsible, was no name for it! Couldn't wipe a plate or wash a glass in the café without breaking up housekeeping! Put a herring on to fry when she was tending the fire and she'd burn it black! Much better to let her run the beach or go to the dressmaker's shop in the Cabañal.

At times the child showed a mad eagerness to study, and at the risk of a whipping, would run away from home and go to the village school. But when Tona found this out and was inclined to encourage her, she would play truant all the time. It was only in summer that she was of any use at all. Then a fondness for money could be reconciled with her passion for roving aimlessly here and there; so during the bathing season, she would take a jar almost as big as herself, fill it with water from the *font de Gas*, and go glass in hand among the bathers, or even among the carriages driving on the pier, shaking her tangled yellow head of hair and crying in rather a faint voice: *Al ua fresqueta!* Other times it would be a basket, instead, filled with cakes, seasoned some with salt and some with sugar, which she hawked plaintively about: *Salaes y dolces!* In this way Roseta would bring as many as two *reals* to her mother in the evening, and Tona's face would brighten up, for with business going as it was, she was getting selfish.

That was the story of Roseta's infancy and girlhood – a frowning antipathy toward people generally; a menacing submissiveness to her mother's whippings; hatred for Tonet who had never paid the slightest attention to her; a smile at times for the Rector, who, on his brief visits home, would playfully twitch one of her yellow curls; and scorn for the ragamuffins of the beach whom she refused to play with and held off with the haughty reserve of a queen forty inches long.

Tona eventually lost all interest in the child, though Roseta was her last resource in that miserable hovel which, in the long nights of winter, was as lonely as a tomb. Tonet and the teamster's daughter were her one concern. That wench was bent on carrying off everything Tona had in the world! First it had been Tonet; but now Dolores had stolen the Rector also. For when Pascualet came ashore of late he would barely look in at the tavern-boat and then be off to the truckman's house where, evidently, he was a far from troublesome witness to what the lovers were doing. But it wasn't so much that, in itself, as the influence Dolores was coming to have with the boys, and thus spoiling a plan that Tona had had for a long time, of marrying Tonet to the daughter of an old friend of hers.

For mere looks, Rosario could not, of course, compare with the daughter of *tio* Paella; but her goodness – the strong point of insignificant human beings – was something Tona could not praise highly enough, though she never mentioned the most important thing of all, that Rosario was an orphan. Her parents had kept a store in the Cabañal, and from them Tona had bought her stock. Now that they were dead, the girl was left with a fortune almost, three or four thousand *duros*, to put it low. And how the poor thing loved Tonet! Whenever she met him on the streets of the Cabañal, she always had one of her placid wistful smiles for him; and she spent her afternoons with *siná* Tona on the beach, just because the old lady was the mother of that bantam who was forever turning the village upside down.

But nothing good would ever come of that rogue! Not even Dolores, with all the control she had over him, could keep him in hand when one of his fits of devilry came on. He would disappear for weeks at a time, when everything was as nice as you please, and then you would learn, not from him but from what people said, that he had been in Valencia, sleeping daytimes in some house in the Fishmarket district, getting drunk every night, beating the bad women of cheap lodging houses, and setting the whole town in an uproar whenever he had come off a heavy winner in some gambling-dive of the slums.

It was on one of these sprees that he took the foolish step which cost his mother days and days of lamentation and weeping. Tonet, with some other boys of his kind, went and joined the navy. Life in the Cabañal had grown too tame for them, and the wine there had lost its flavor. And the time came when the wretched scamp, in a blue sailor suit, a white cap cocked over one ear, and a bundle of clothes over his shoulders, dropped in to bid Dolores and his mother good-bye, on his way to Cartagena where he had been ordered to report for service.

Good riddance, after all! *Siñá* Tona was fond of her boy, but he wouldn't be getting into trouble again for a while! What a pity, though, for that poor girl Rosario, so modest and unassuming and never saying a word, who took her sewing down to the beach with Roseta, and was always timidly asking whether *siñá* Tona had had any word from Tonet. As time went on, the three women from the old hulk there on the shore followed all the voyages and stops of the schoolship *Villa de Madrid* with Tonet on board as able seaman. And how excited they would get when the postman would throw down on the wet counter a narrow envelope, sometimes sealed with red wax and then again with bread dough, and a complicated address written all over it in huge fat letters: "*For siñora tona The Woman who keeps The little café near The barn on the Beach.*"

A strange exotic perfume seemed to come from the four pages of rough paper – a suggestion of trees and flowers the poor women did not know, of tempestuous seas, of shores draped in rosy mists under skies of fire, of Cuban negroes and Philippine Chinese, or of great cities of South America. What a boy, eh? What a lot he would have to talk about when he came home! Perhaps that crazy idea he had had of going away to see the world would be the making of him in the end. And *siñá* Tona, with a return of the preference which made her idolize her younger son, felt an occasional flare of jealous anger as she pictured her Tonet, her fine brave little boy, off on that navy vessel under the strict discipline of cross officers, while the other one, the Rector, whom she had always thought a sleepy-head, was getting on in the world like anything, and had come to be quite a person in fishing circles.

Whenever Pascualet went out now, it was on shares with the skipper of his boat; and he had his secrets with *tio* Mariano, the important individual whom Tona fell back on in all her plights. The boy was making money, I'll bet you, and *siñá* Tona was hurt to the quick that he never brought a cent home any longer, and, indeed, now called at the tavern-boat, and sat a moment or two under the shelter outside, more for appearance's sake than anything else. He was saving his earnings, then! Well, who was keeping the money for him! Dolores! Dolores, of course, that witch who had given love-philters to both her boys – otherwise, why were they always following round after her as if they didn't dare say their soul was their own?

The Rector stuck to the teamster's house as if the poor fool thought he had some business there! Didn't he know, idiot, that Dolores was for the other one? Hadn't he seen Tonet's letters and the answers she got a neighbor who had been to school to write for her? But three times donkey that he was, without paying the least attention to his mother's gibes, the Rector kept on going there and taking the favored place his brother had enjoyed, and apparently without appreciating the progress he was making. Dolores was now attending to him as she had to Tonet. She kept his clothes mended, and, – something she had never been troubled with in the case of that roistering loafer – she also was taking care of his savings.

One day *tio* Paella was brought home dead. He had got drunk and fallen from the seat of his cart, both wheels passing over him. But he died true to his reputation and just as he had lived, his whip clutched in one hand, sweating brandy from every pore, and the wagon full of the girls he spoke of, sacrilegiously, as his "flock." Dolores had no one else to lean on in her trouble than her *tia* Picores, the fish-woman, a chaperone not in every sense desirable, for she tempered kindness with fisticuffs.

Then it was, some two years after Tonet had gone away, that the big surprise occurred. Dolores, *gran diós!* and the Rector, were getting married. The Cabañal sat up nights discussing the overwhelming piece of news. And she did the proposing, I'll have you know! And people added other spicy bits of information that kept the laughing going. Tona talked more picturesquely than she had

ever talked before. So Her Royal Highness of the Horseshoe, that wench of a teamster's daughter, was getting into the family, as she had always meant to do! Well, that Queen Virtuous knew which side her bread was buttered on. Just what she needed – a husband with a thick skull and nothing inside it, who would be able to work like a cart-horse from morning till night. The pickpocket! Just like her to steal the only man in the family that could earn a cent!

But then suddenly Tona thought of something, and she broke off her tirade. Better let them get married! That simplified the situation and favored her own plans. Tonet would now take Rosario! Though it was hard to swallow it all, she consented even to attend the wedding and say *filla mehua* to that scheming hussy who changed her men as she changed her clothes!

But what would Tonet say, what would Tonet do, when he heard the glad tidings? That was something to worry about, because everybody remembered the kind of temper he had when he got angry. So another surprise was due when the boy wrote back that everything was all right and that he was glad of it. Been away so long, you see, new faces, new places! That, doubtless, was why he found it so natural that Dolores should take a husband, since she had no one else to fall back on. Besides, – and this is what Tonet himself said – it was better for her to marry his brother than run any risk on some one else; and the Rector was a good sort, too.

And the sailor showed himself just as reasonable when he turned up in the Cabañal one evening, with his discharge papers in his pocket and his bundle of clothes slung over his shoulder, surprising everybody with the fine appearance he made and with the reckless way he threw money around from the back pay he had just collected. Dolores he greeted affectionately as a sister he was fond of. Oh, that? What the devil! Don't even think of that! It was all right, all right! He had not been having a bad time himself on his trip around the world! And, in the midst of the popularity he was enjoying as a returned hero, Tonet seemed to forget all about Dolores and the Rector.

In front of the door of *tio* Paella's old place, now occupied by Pascualet, the villagers would sit in the open air all night sometimes, on low stools or on the ground, listening open-mouthed while the sailor told about the countries he had visited, embroidering his adventures with harmless embellishments to rouse greater thrills in his simple-minded audience. As compared with the uncouth fishermen they knew, dull and stupid from the routine of daily toil, or with the stevedores he used to work with in Valencia, Tonet looked like an aristocrat to the girls of the Cabañal, with his palish-dark face, his carefully curled mustache, his hands clean and well manicured, his hair sleek and neatly brushed with a parting in the middle and – pasted down on his forehead – two cowlicks just visible under a silk cap!

Siñá Tona, for her part, was quite satisfied with her boy. As much of a scamp as ever, but he had himself more in hand, and it was evident that the navy discipline had done him good. The same old Tonet, but he had been taught to dress better and cleaner, and he could drink without drinking too much. A dandy still, but not sure to be getting into jail every other minute, and less bent on venting the caprices of a law-breaking daredevil than on satisfying the selfish cravings of a rake!

Proof of such progress was that he now took kindly to his mother's suggestions. Marry Rosario? No objection! Good girl, and a penny or two, that would be just the thing for a man of ideas, and the brains to carry them out. Money, after all, was what he needed. You couldn't expect a fellow fresh from the Royal Navy to go back to lugging bags and boxes on a wharf! Anything but that! And to *siñá* Tona's unbounded delight, Tonet took Rosario to wife.

Everything went finely. That was a handsome pair now, wasn't it? – a tiny little thing, Rosario, timid, obedient, believing in her husband as she believed in God; and Tonet, proud of his good luck, carrying himself as stiffly as if, under his flannel shirt, he had a coat-of-mail, made of his wife's silver dollars, dispensing favors to right and left, living like a village squire, smoking his pipe all afternoon and evening in the tavern, and sporting long rubber boots on days when it rained!

Dolores showed no trace of emotion in the presence of her former sweetheart – only in her domineering eyes one might have seen an intenser sparkle, a glint of golden fire, – telltale evidence

of yearnings unconfessed. And a happy year went rapidly by. But the money which penny by penny had been painfully assembled in the wretched store where Rosario had been born, streamed away between the fingers of the spendthrift husband; and the cow was running dry, as the mistress of the tavern-boat observed to her son one day, in a lecture on prodigality.

Along with poverty, discord, tears, and finally the flying fist entered Tenet's house. Rosario joined the neighbors on the beach and began to dirty her hands on the slimy fish baskets. Falling from her high estate as heiress and lady she became a fish-woman, one of the poorest and hardest-working followers of that soul-killing trade. She was up now every morning shortly after midnight, waiting on the shore with her feet in the puddles, drawing a frayed and threadbare shawl about her shivering body, when the storms blew. All the way to Valencia she would go on foot carrying that back-breaking load of fish, and it would be dark again by the time she got home, faint with hunger and fatigue, but happy withal because her lord and master could still live the life of a gentleman without any humiliations to translate into swear-words and beatings. That Tonet might pass his night in the café, swapping stories with engineers from the steamers or skippers from the fishing boats, she would, many a time in the Fishmarket in town, stifle the hunger that gripped her at sight of the cups of steaming chocolate and the breaded chops her companions were busy with at the tables in their stalls.

The important thing was to keep her idol appeased, an idol so quick to wrath, so prone to curse the rotten marriage he had made. He had to have his *peseta* for the night's session at coffee and dominoes. He had to have his square meal and his flashy flannel shirts. He had a reputation to keep up. And so long as he had what he wanted, the poor little wife, thinner and more peaked every day, found all her struggles well worth while, cost her what it might. She was an old woman before thirty, but she could boast of exclusive proprietorship of the handsomest buck in the Cabañal.

Privation brought them closer to the Rector's household, which, while they were going down and down, was going up and up, on the wings of prosperity. Brothers have to stand together in hard luck. Of course! And Rosario, though much against her inner preferences, went to see Dolores often, and accepted a renewal of intimate friendship between her husband and his sister-in-law. She was worried, but there must not be an open quarrel. The Rector would get mad; and he it was who kept them going on weeks when no fish came in, or when the village dandy found nothing to get a commission on as go-between in one of the little business deals that feature life in a seaport town. But the moment came when the two women, deadly enemies underneath, could pretend cordiality no longer. Four years after her marriage, Dolores was at last able to announce the coming of an heir to the Rector's fortune; and the Rector, with a silly smile on his moon-face, advertised the auspicious event on every hand – and all his acquaintances were delighted, though they smiled with a sly wink he did not notice. No one really knew, to be sure. But funny, wasn't it! That rather deliberate decision of Dolores corresponded strangely with the time Tonet had become a less frequent visitor to the café and had begun to spend more of his time in his brother's house.

The two women now spoke their minds with the savage frankness of their station. The breach between them became permanent. Tonet kept going to the Rector's place, but alone; and that made Rosario very angry, and the quarrels in her home now ended always in ferocious cudgelings. And the time came when Rosario began to say openly that the baby looked like Tonet. Her husband meanwhile stuck closer than ever to the Rector, who had revived his old fondness for his younger brother, letting himself be sponged on in spite of his tight-fistedness. The pretty daughter of *tio* Paella poked biting fun at that wreck she had for a sister-in-law, that old hen, quite *passée*, poor as a rat, a mere day laborer of the meanest kind, who couldn't hang on to the man she had married! Tonet, in fact, as in earlier days, was again following Dolores around like an obedient dog, sitting up when he was told to sit up, and charging when he was told to charge.

A withering blast of relentless hatred, of flaying jest and stinging insolence, swept from the old home of *tio* Paella, now repainted and with a new ell, toward the wretched tumble-down shack where Rosario had finally taken refuge in her penury. And well-meaning busybodies, with the holiest good-

will toward both, kept telling what Rosario had said about Dolores and what Dolores had said about Rosario, taking care that every apostrophe should reach its destination and receive its fit reply.

When Rosario, flaming with anger and weeping from sheer despair, would simply have to tell some one of her troubles, she would go off to the tavern-boat, which, like its mistress, was also aging rapidly with the years. There she would be listened to in silence, with an expression of sorrow, or a shake of the head from *siñá* Tona and Roseta, who were living on in sullen antipathy toward one another in spite of their relationship, agreeing only on one thing, that men were beneath contempt. The old hulk, that served them as lair, was a sort of vantage point from which they were able to follow the war between the two families.

"Men! Men! What fleas!" *siñá* Tona would say, with a glance at the picture of the patrolman, who seemed to be the presiding genius of the place. "Men! Crooks every one of them, not worth the rope to hang them with!" And Roseta, with her big bright sea-green eyes – the eyes of a virgin who knows all about the world and is quite sure of herself – would murmur for once approvingly: "And those who are not scamps like Tonet are like the Rector – puddingheads!"

CHAPTER III

A FAMILY ENTERPRISE

Though spring had not yet come, the sun was so hot, that day, that the Rector and Tonet, to talk things over down on the beach, had sought out the shade of an old boat drawn up high and dry on the sand. There would be plenty of time to get their tan on when they got out to sea. The two men talked slowly and sleepily as if the glare and the heat along shore had gone to their heads. A real day, come now! Who would have thought Easter was still a week away, when, usually, there were squalls all the time and sudden tempests.

The sky, overflowing with sunlight, had a whitish sheen. A few silver clouds were lazily drifting along like handfuls of foam scattered hap-hazard over the expanse of heaven; and from the heated sands a damp radiation was shimmering, giving tremulous, hazy outlines to objects in the distance. Nothing was going on along the beach itself. The *casa del bòus*, where the launching oxen were idly chewing their cud, rose with its red roof and its blue trimmings, over long lines of boats drawn up on shore to make a sort of nomad city with streets and cross roads, much like a Greek encampment of the Heroic Age, when the triremes were used for entrenchments. The lateen masts, gracefully tilted forward, with their points blunt and fat, looked like a forest of headless lances. The tarred ropes twined and intertwined like lichens and vines. Under the big sails, which had been lowered to the decks, a whole people of amphibians was swarming, – red legs bare and caps pulled down over ears – repairing nets or tending galley fires where fish were frying with appetizing fragrance. The hulls, of wide bilge, painted white or blue, stretched away along the glaring shore, like big-bellied sailors lying on their backs and taking the sun.

In this improvised city, which might, before the night was over, be broken up and scattered to the four winds beyond the girdling horizon, the order and symmetry of a modern town laid out by a surveyor could have been discerned. In the front line, nearest the waves which rippled in like thin blades of crystal over the spangled sand, were the little boats, the trollers, *al volantí*, tiny spry craft that looked like chicks of the heavy boats lying, in the row behind, in pairs of the same size and color —*barcas del bòu*. In the third file, the retired veterans of the shore, old hulks, their sides wide open, their worm-eaten ribs showing through the black gaps, reminded one of the decrepit nags used in the bull ring, and lay meditating, it seemed, on the ingratitude of men who do so little for deserving old age.

Rust-colored nets, with flannel shirts and trousers of yellow baize, were strung along most of the masts; and above this array of color, some gulls, apparently drunk with sunshine, were leisurely planing in wide circles, occasionally dropping for a moment into the sea, where the water was shivering and seething in blebs of light under the high noon.

The Rector was talking about the weather, letting his yellowish eyes wander sleepily and placidly over the sea and down the coast. Along the green horizon line some pointed sails dotted the sky like wings of doves that might have been drinking off there. The shore at this point receded, forming a bight in the land, with masses of green and clusters of white cottages alternating along the coast. Here were the hills of the Puig, big swellings in the low-lying strand, which the sea sometimes swept over in its angry moods. And there was the castle of Sagunto, its wavy ramparts curling up and down along the summit of the ridge of caramel brown. Beyond that, and closing the horizon shoreward, was the saw-toothed Cordillera, with ripples of red granite, its unmoving crests reaching up to lap the sky like tongues.

Yes, the good weather had come early that year! You could take it from the Rector! Everybody from the Cabañal knew that, in such matters, he had inherited from his master, *tio* Borrasca, an instinct that never failed. A puff or two next week, a bit of chop, but nothing much! The stormy

season was over ahead of time, thank heaven, and a fellow could earn an honest day's pay without fear of putting to sea.

The Rector talked drawlingly, biting at a black "cardoon" from a smuggler's stock, his whole being swallowed up in the majestic slumber of the shore. Above the peaceful lulling whispers of the sea, the voice of a girl came from far away, up from under the ground, it seemed, chanting the monotonous cadence of a hoisting song: *Oh ... oh ... isa!* and a number of boys would tug at the mast they were stepping, pulling all together at the proper beat in the sleepy rhythm. It was dinner time; and tangle-haired women kept calling in shrill notes from the galley doors; for the "cats" were off gadding in the barn, looking at the oxen. In every direction the heavy mallets of calkers could be heard hammering away in deadening regularity. And all these noises evaporated, as it were, into the vast, light-filled calm, where sounds and things took on outlines of fantastic indistinctness.

Tonet studied his brother's face expectantly, waiting for that phlegmatic fellow, to whom words came so hard, to finish formulating his proposal.

At last the Rector came to the point. In two words, he was tired of making money penny by penny and day by day. He wanted to make a killing as so many others had done. There was a living in the sea for any man. Some people ate bread black, after sweating for it; others took it white and without the crust, for a moment's work – but risking something! You get the idea, eh, Tonet!

But the Rector did not wait for Tonet's reply. He got up and walked to the bow of the old boat, to see if any one were eavesdropping on the other side.

Not a soul! The beach was deserted as far as the eye could see, away along to the bath-houses at the resort, where the Valencians came to play in summer. Beyond lay the harbor, prickly with masts from the shipping, and flags everywhere, a maze of cross-trees and yards, red and black smokestacks and cranes that looked like gibbets. Seaward stretched the Breakwater, a cyclopean wall of red boulders heaped up in confusion to make a lee on that storm-swept shore. As background to the whole scene, the tall buildings of the Grao, warehouses, office buildings, – the aristocracy and money of the port; and then a long straight line of roofs, the *Cabañal*, the *Cañamelar*, the *Cap de Fransa*, a rambling agglomeration of many colored houses, less close together as they left the water, summer places in front with many stories and slender cupolas, white cabins behind, where the farm land began, the thatched coverings of the huts rumpled by the strong sea winds.

There were no spies around. The Rector sat down again at his brother's side.

His wife had put the idea into his head. He had thought it over carefully, and come to the conclusion it was a good one. A trip "across the way," as people remembered his father used to say, over to the *costa d'afora*, to Algiers! No fishing, you understand. Fish aren't always around when you need them most. No, not that! But a cargo of contraband, the boat crammed to the decks with *alguilla* and *flor de mayo*, God of Gods! There, *rediel*, was business for you! And that was what the old man had done a thousand times. Well, what did Tonet say?

The honest Rector, who would never have dreamed of breaking a town ordinance or a harbor rule, laughed like a saint in heaven at the thought of that haul of tobacco which for days and days had been dancing before his eyes, till now he could actually see the fragrant bundles standing there wrapped in burlap on the sand. He was a son of the Spanish coast, proud of the deeds of his ancestors. In his eyes smuggling was the one thing a self-respecting sailor could take up when he got tired of fishing.

Tonet thought it was a bright idea. He had made two trips like that, though as ordinary seaman. Now that business was dull on the wharves, and *tio* Mariano hadn't gotten him that job in the coast and harbor survey he had wanted so, there was no reason why he shouldn't go along with his brother.

The Rector rounded out the plan. The most important thing he had already – his own boat, *la Garbosa*. Tonet gasped with surprise, so the Rector enlarged further on that detail. Of course he realized the tub was broken amidships, the ribs strained, the deck warped and sagging in the middle – squeaking like an old guitar every time a sea went under her, ready for breaking up, about. But

they hadn't fooled him, they hadn't fooled him! Thirty *duros*, he had paid, not a cent more. And the firewood in her was worth that much. But she would keep afloat under men who knew the taste of salt water. For his part, he could negotiate that pond in a shoe with the tap gone! Besides, you see, – and he gave a knowing wink – if the revenue people caught them and confiscated the boat – well, thirty *duros*! And that clinched the argument for the wily Rector. Not a thought of the chance he was taking with his life in such a sieve!

The crew?.. Himself, his brother, and two men he knew and could trust. That was all there was to that. Now all he needed to do was have a talk with *tío* Mariano, who was on the inside track down in Algiers, as an old hand at the business. And like a man who has his mind made up and is afraid he'll change it if he waits too long, he thought he would go at once to see that influential personage whom they both could be mighty proud to call their uncle. They would probably find him – it was around noon you see – up at the *Carabina*, where he usually went to sit a while and smoke.

And the two brothers started off in that direction. On walking past the ox-barn they glanced casually at the tavern-boat, blacker and more ramshackle every day. *Adiós, mare!* They had caught sight of their mother's glossy wrinkly face peering over the counter in front of the opening into the wine store, her head swathed as usual in a white kerchief like a coif. Some dirty underfed sheep were browsing the marsh grass near the first houses of the village. From the pools of fresh water behind the dunes frogs were croaking in monotone, their *garumps* faintly blending with the murmuring of the surf. Wine-colored nets, the warps festooned with cork toggles, were spread out on the sand, and among them some young roosters were pecking about or grooming their shiny feathers, all agleam with a metallic rainbow luster. Along the drain from the Gas House a number of women on hands and knees were scrubbing clothes or washing dishes in a pestilential water that stained the stones on its edges black. Here was the frame of a new boat about which some carpenters were pounding, and from a distance the skeleton of unpainted timber looked like the remains of some prehistoric saurian. Across the drain, some rope-walkers, hanks of hemp about their waists, were backing away from the lathe, letting the yellow strands revolve between their deft fingers. And then the Cabañal, so called from the miserable cabins there which sheltered the very poorest of all those toilers of the sea! The streets were as straight and regular as the buildings were capricious, of every shape and size. The red-brick sidewalks went joyously up and down at different levels according to the height of the door sills on the huts. The roads were sloughs of mud, with deep ruts, and puddles from rain that had fallen weeks before. Two rows of dwarf olive trees brushed the heads of passersby with their dusty branches, and ropes were stretched from trunk to trunk to serve as clothes-lines for the wash of the water-front, which was waving like a regalia of banners in the fresh sea-breeze.

Cabins alternated with tenements of several stories. Those incorrigible tars could not forget the water-line even when they were ashore, for all the buildings were finished off with spar-varnish, and painted in two colors, like boats. Many a front door had a figure-head carved in wood, as though that portal were the bow-sprit of the sailor's habitation, which, in all its details of architecture, of color and line, called up memories of life at sea. The village looked like a collection of grounded craft. In front of some of the cabins stout masts with pulleys had been set up, and the pulley and mast meant that there lived a skipper of a pair of *bòu*-boats. At the top of the staffs, the most complicated tackle was out drying, waving in the wind like the majestic emblem of a consul. The Rector eyed those poles in envy unconcealed. When would that Christ up at the Grao answer his prayer so that he could plant a mast like that in front of his door in honor of Dolores?

Now the drain had come to an end. They were well into the village, in the section where people from Valencia had their summer cottages. The houses here were low studded, with bulging gratings, painted green, over the windows. Everything was closed and silent. Footsteps echoed back across the broad sidewalks as in an abandoned town. Tufted plane trees were languishing in the solitude, pining for the gay nights of summer when there was laughing everywhere, people running about, and a piano banging in every cottage. Now scarcely any one was in sight. An occasional villager went by, in his

pointed cap, with his hands in his pockets, and his pipe in his mouth, sauntering lazily toward this tavern or that; for the cafés were the only places where anything was going on.

The *Carabina*, for instance, was crowded. Under the awning in front were any number of blue coats, black silk caps, and weather-beaten countenances. Dominoes were rattling on the tables, and though everything was open to the air, the strong smell of gin and tobacco struck you in the face.

Tonet had pleasant memories of the place – the scene of his triumphs in generosity in the first months of his marriage to Rosario.

At one of the stands sat *tio* Mariano, pulling at his pipe and waiting, probably, for the sheriff, or some other town notable, to enjoy the usual afternoon chat. He was listening in disdainful condescension to *tio* Gori, an old ship-carpenter from down the beach, who had been going to that café every afternoon for twenty years, to read the newspaper aloud, advertisements and all, to a greater or smaller number of sailors, according to the chance offshore; and the men would sit there silent and attentive till nightfall.

"So then, if you are ready, gentlemen ... *Señor* Segasta has something to say to us to-day..."

But *tio* Gori held up his reading to observe to the man next to him:

"That Segasta is a humbug, you know!"

And with that comprehensive annotation, he adjusted his spectacles, and the Premier's speech in the Cortes began to unwind, syllable by syllable, from under the carpenter's white tobacco-stained mustache:

"Gen-tle-men-of-the-Cham-ber! In-re-ply-to-what-the-Hon-o-ra-ble-De-pu-ty-said-yes-ter-day..."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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