BLASCO IBÁÑEZ VICENTE

THE TORRENT (ENTRE NARANJOS)

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Содержание

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PART ONE

I

"Your friends are waiting for you at the Club. They saw you for a moment only, this morning; they'll be wanting to hear all your stories about life in Madrid."

Doña Bernarda fixed upon the young deputy a pair of deep, scrutinizing, severely maternal eyes that recalled to Rafael all the roguish anxieties of his childhood.

"Are you going directly to the Club?…" she added. "Andrés will be starting too, right away."

Rafael, in reply, wished a blunt "good-afternoon" to his mother and don Andrés, who were still at table sipping their coffee, and strode out of the dining-room.

Finding himself on the broad, red-marble staircase in the silence of that ancient mansion, of such princely magnificence, he experienced the sudden sense of comfort and wellbeing that a traveler feels on plunging into a bath after a tedious journey.

Ever since he had arrived, with the noisy reception at the station, the hurrahs, the deafening music, handshakes here, crowding there, the pushing and elbowing of more than a thousand people who had thronged the streets of Alcira to get a close look at him, this was the first moment he had found himself alone, his own master, able to do exactly as he pleased, without needing to smile automatically in all directions and welcome with demonstrations of affection persons whose faces he could scarcely recall.

What a deep breath of relief he drew as he went down the deserted staircase, which echoed his every footstep! How large and beautiful the *patio* was! How broad and lustrous the leaves of the plantains flourishing in their green boxes! There he had spent the best years of his childhood. The little boys who in those days used to be hiding behind the wide portal, waiting for a chance to play with the son of the powerful don Ramón Brull, were now the grown men, the sinewy orchard workers, who had been parading from the station to his house, waving their arms, and shouting *vivas* for their deputy—Alcira's "favorite son."

This contrast between the past and present flattered Rafael's conceit, though, in the background of his thoughts, the suspicion lurked that his mother had been not a little instrumental in the preparation of his noisy reception, not to mention don Andrés, and numerous other friends, ever loyal to anyone connected with the greatness of the Brulls, *caciques*—political bosses—and leading citizens of the district.

To enjoy these recollections of childhood and the pleasure of finding himself once more at home, after several months in Madrid, he stood for some time motionless in the *patio*, looking up at the balconies of the first story, then at the attic windows—from which in mischievous years gone by he had many a time withdrawn his head at the sound of his mother's scolding voice—and lastly, at the veil of luminous blue above—a patch of sky drenched in that Spanish sunlight which ripens the oranges to clusters of flaming gold.

He thought he could still see his father—the imposing, solemn don Ramón—sauntering about the *patio*, his hands behind his back, answering in a few impressive words the questions flung at him by his party adherents, who followed him about with idolatrous eyes. If the old man could only have come back to life that morning to see how his son had been acclaimed by the entire city!…

A barely perceptible sound like the buzzing of two flies broke the deep silence of the mansion. The deputy looked toward the only balcony window that was open, though but slightly. His mother and don Andrés were still talking in the dining-room—and of him, as usual, without a doubt! And, lest they should call him, and suddenly deprive him of his keen enjoyment at being alone, he left the *patio* and went out into the street.

It was only the month of March; but at two in the afternoon the air was almost uncomfortably hot. Accustomed to the cold wind of Madrid and to the winter rains, Rafael inhaled, with a sense of voluptuous pleasure, the warm breeze that wafted the perfume of the blossoming orchards through the narrow lanes of the ancient town.

Once, years before, he had been in Italy on a Catholic pilgrimage, entrusted by his mother to the care of a priest from Valencia, who would not think of returning to Spain without paying a visit to don Carlos. A memory of a Venetian *calle* now came back to Rafael's mind as he traversed the streets of old Alcira—shadowy, cramped, sunk deep as wells between rows of high houses. With all the economy of a city built on an island, Alcira rears its edifices higher and higher as its population grows, leaving just enough space free for the bare needs of traffic.

The streets were deserted. The noisy, orchard workers who had welcomed Rafael had gone back to the fields again. All the idlers had fled to the cafés, and as the deputy walked smartly by in front of these, warm waves of air came out upon him through the windows, with the clatter of poker chips, the noise of billiard balls, and the uproar of heated argument.

Rafael reached the Suburban Bridge, one of the two means of egress from the Old City. The Júcar was combing its muddy, reddish waters on the piles of the ancient structure. A number of row-boats, made fast to the houses on the shore, were tugging at their moorings. Rafael recognized among them the fine craft that he had once used for lonely trips on the river. It lay there quite forgotten, gradually shedding its coat of white paint out in the weather.

Then he looked at the bridge itself; the Gothic-arched gate, a relic of the old fortifications; the battlements of yellowish, chipped rock, which looked as if all the rats of the river had come at night to nibble at them; then two niches with a collection of mutilated, dust-laden images—San Bernardo, patron Saint of Alcira, and his estimable sisters. Dear old San Bernardo, *alias* Prince Hamete, son of the Moorish king of Carlet, converted to Christ by the mystic poesy of the Christian cult,—and still wearing in his mangled forehead the nail of martyrdom!

As Rafael walked past the rude, disfigured statue he thought of all the stories his mother, an uncompromising clerical and a woman of credulous faith, had told him of the patron of Alcira, particularly the legend of the enmity and struggle between San Vicente and San Bernardo, an ingenuous fancy of popular superstition.

Saint Vincent, who was an eloquent preacher arrived at Alcira on one of his tours, and stopped at a blacksmith's shop near the bridge to get his donkey shod. When the work was done the horseshoer asked for the usual price for his labor; but San Vicente, accustomed to living on the bounty of the faithful, waxed indignant, and looking at the Júcar, exclaimed, vindictively:

"Some day folks will say: 'This is where Alcira used to be'."

"Not while Bernardo is here!" the statue of San Bernardo remarked from its pedestal.

And there the statue of the saint still stood, like an eternal sentinel, watching over the Júcar to exorcise the curse of the rancorous Saint Vincent! To be sure the river would rise and overflow its banks every year, reaching to the very feet of San Bernardo sometimes, and coming within an ace of pulling the wily saint down from his perch. It is also true that every five or six years the flood would shake houses loose from their foundations, destroy good farm land, drown people, and commit other horrible depredations—all in obedience to the curse of Valencia's patron; but the saint of Alcira was the better man of the two for all of that! And, if you didn't believe it, there the city was, still planted firmly on its feet and quite unscathed, except for a scratch here and there from times when the rains were exceptionally heavy and the waters came down from Cuenca in a great roaring torrent!

With a smile and a nod to the powerful saint, as to an old friend of childhood, Rafael crossed the bridge and entered the *arrabal*, the "New City," ample, roomy, unobstructed, as if the close-packed houses of the island, to get elbow-room and a breath of air, had stampeded in a flock to the other bank of the river, scattering hither and thither in the hilarious disorder of children let loose from school.

The deputy paused at the head of the street on which his club was located. Even from there he could hear the talking and laughing of the many members, who had gathered in much greater number than usual because of his arrival. What would he be in for down there? A speech, probably! A speech on local politics! Or, if not a speech, idle talk about the orange crop, or cock-fighting. He would be expected to tell them what kind of a man the Premier was—and then spend the afternoon analyzing the character of every minister! Then don Andrés would be there, that boresome Mentor who, at the instance of Rafael's mother, would never let him out of sight for a moment. Bah! The Club could wait! He would have plenty of time later in the day to stifle in that smoke-filled parlor where, the moment he showed his face, everybody would be upon him and pester the life out of him with questions and wire-pulling!

And more and more yielding to the lure of the southern sunshine and to those perfumes of May floating about him in wintertime, he turned off into a lane that led to the fields.

As he emerged from the ancient Ghetto and found himself in the open country, he drew a deep breath, as if to imprison in his lungs all the life, bloom and color of his native soil.

The orange orchards lined both banks of the stream with straight rows of green, round tree-tops. The sun glistened off the varnished leaves; the wheels of irrigating machines sounded from the distance like humming insects. The moisture rising from the canals, joined the clouds from the chimneys of the motors, to form a thin veil of mist over the countryside, that gave a pearly transparency to the golden light of the afternoon.

To one side rose the hill of San Salvador, its crest topped with the Hermitage, and the pines, the cypresses, and the prickly pears around that rough testimonial of popular piety. The sanctuary seemed to be talking to him like an indiscreet friend, betraying the real motive that had caused him to evade his appointment with his political friends and disobey his mother into the bargain.

Something more than the beauty of the fields had enticed him from the city. When the rays of the rising sun had awakened him that morning on the train, the first thing he had seen, before opening his eyes even, was an orange orchard, the bank of the Júcar, and a house painted blue,—the very one that was now in sight away off there, among the round tree-tops along the river.

How many times in past months his thoughts had lingered on the memory of that same scene!

Afternoons, in the Congress, while the Premier on the Blue Bench would be answering the interpellations of the Opposition in sharp incisive tones, Rafael's brain would begin to doze, reduced to jelly, as it were, by the incessant hammering of words, words, words! Before his closed eyes a dark veil would begin to unroll as if the moist, cellar-like gloom in which the Chamber is always plunged, had thickened suddenly, and against this curtain, like a cinema dream, rows of orange-trees would come into view, and a blue house with open windows; and pouring through the windows a stream of notes from a soft voice, ever so sweet, singing *lieder* and ballads as an accompaniment to the hard, sonorous paragraphs snapping from the Premier's teeth. Then applause and disorder! The moment for voting had arrived, and the fading outlines of the Blue House still hovering before his dreamy eyes, the member for Alcira would ask his neighbor:

"How do we vote? Yes or no?"

The same it was at night at the Opera, where music served only to remind him of a familiar voice winding like a thread of gold out across the orchards through the orange trees; and the same again, after dinner with his colleagues on committees, when the deputies, their cigars tilted cockily upwards between their lips, and with all the voluptuous gaiety inspired by good digestions, would troop off to see the night out in some trustworthy house of assignation where their dignity as representatives of the country would not be compromised!

Now that blue house was actually before his eyes! And he was hurrying toward it,—not without some hesitation; a vague uneasiness he could not explain. His heart was in his mouth, it seemed, and he found it hard to breathe.

Orchard workers came along the road, occasionally, stepping aside to make room for the famous man, though he answered their greeting absent-mindedly. What a nuisance! They would all be sure to tell where they had seen him! His mother would know all about it within half an hour! And, that evening, a scene in the dining-room! As Rafael walked on toward the Blue House, he thought bitterly of his situation. Why was he going there anyhow? Why insist on living in a stew all the time? He had had two or three short but violent scenes with his mother a few months before. What a fury that stern, pious, and puritanic woman became when she found out that her son had been calling down at the Blue House and was on friendly terms with a strange lady, an outsider, whom the respectable folk of the city would have nothing to do with, and of whom not a good word was ever heard except from the men at the Club, when they were sure their wives were not in hearing distance!

Tempestuous scenes they had been! He was running for Congress at the time. Was he trying —she wanted to know—to dishonor the family and compromise his political future? Was that what his poor father had lived for—a life of sacrifice and struggle, of service to "the Party," which, many a time, had meant shouldering a gun? And a loose woman was to be allowed to ruin the House of Brull, which for thirty years had been putting every cent it owned into politics, for the benefit of My Lords up in Madrid! And just when a Brull was about to reap the reward of so many sacrifices at last, and become a deputy—the means perhaps of clearing off the property, which was lousy with attachments and mortgages!…

Rafael had been no match for that energetic mother, the soul of "the Party." Meekly he had promised never to return to the Blue House, never to call again on that "loose woman"—doña Bernarda actually hissed as she said the word.

However, the upshot of it all had been that Rafael simply discovered how weak he was. Despite his promise, he returned to the Blue House often, but by round-about ways and over long detours, skulking from cover to cover, as he had done in childhood days when stealing oranges from the orchards. There he was, a man whose name was on the lips of the whole county, and who at any moment might be invested with authority from the people, thus realizing the life-long dream of his father! But the sight of a woman in the fields, a child, a beggar, would make him blanch with terror! And that was not the worst of it! Whenever he entered the Blue House now he had to pretend he came openly, without any fear whatever. And so things had gone on down to the very eve of his departure for Madrid.

As Rafael reached this point in his reminiscences, he asked himself what hope had led him to disobey his mother and brook her truly formidable wrath.

In that blue house he had found only frank, disinterested friendship,—a somewhat ironic comradeship, the condescending tolerance of a person compelled by solitude to choose as her comrade the least repulsive among a host of inferiors. Alas! How clearly he remembered and could again foresee the sceptical, cold smile with which his words were always received, though he was sure he had crammed them with burning passion! What a laugh she had given,—as insolent and as cutting as a lash,—the day he had dared to declare his love!

"Now the soft-pedal on slush, eh, Rafaelito?… If you want us to go on being friends, all right, but it's on condition you treat me as a man. Comrades, eh, and nothing more."

And with a look at him through those green, luminous, devilish eyes of hers, she had taken her seat at the piano and begun one of her divine songs, as if she thought the magic of her art might raise a barrier between them.

On another occasion, she was irritable rather; Rafael's appealing eyes, his words of amorous adoration, seemed to provoke her, and she had said with brutal frankness:

"Don't waste your breath, please! I am through with love. I know men too well! But even if anyone were to upset me again, it would not be you, Rafaelito dear."

And yet he had persisted, insensible to the irony and the scorn of this terrible *amigo* in skirts, and indifferent as well to the conflicts that his blind passion might provoke at home if his mother knew.

He tried to free himself from his infatuation, but unsuccessfully. With that in view he fixed his attention on the woman's past; it was said that despite her beauty, her aristocratic manners, the brilliancy of mind with which she had dazzled him—a poor country boy—she was only an adventuress who had made her way over half the globe from one pair of arms to another. Well, in that case, it would be a great exploit to win a woman whom princes and celebrated men had loved! But since that was impossible, why go on, why continue endangering his career and having trouble with his mother all the time?

To forget her, he stressed, before his own mind, words and attitudes of hers that might be judged defects; and he would taste the joy of duty well done when, after such gymnastics of the will, he could think of her without great emotion.

At the beginning of his life in Madrid he imagined he had recovered. New surroundings; continuous and petty satisfactions to vanity; the kow-towing of doorkeepers in Congress; the flattery of visitors from here, there and everywhere who came with requests for passes to admit them to the galleries; the sense of being treated as a comrade by celebrities, whose names his father had always mentioned with bated breath; the "honorable" always written before his name; all Alcira speaking to him with affectionate familiarity; this rubbing elbows, on the benches of the conservative majority, with a battalion of dukes, counts and marquises—young men who had become deputies to round out the distinction conferred by beautiful sweethearts or winning thoroughbreds,—all this had intoxicated him, filled his mind completely, crowding out all other thoughts, and persuading him that he had been completely cured.

But as he grew familiar with his new life, and the novelty of all this adulation wore off, tenacious recollections rose again in his memory. At night, when sleep relaxed the will to forget, which his vigilance kept at painful tension, that blue house, the green, diabolical eyes of its principal denizen, that pair of fresh lips with their ironic smile that seemed to quiver between two rows of gleaming white teeth, would become the inevitable center of all his dreams.

Why resist any longer? He could think of her as much as he pleased—that, at least, his mother would never learn. And he gave himself up to the imagination of love, where distance lent an ever stronger enchantment to that woman.

He felt a vehement longing to return to his city. Absence seemed to do away with all the obstacles at home. His mother was not so formidable as he had thought. Who could tell whether, when he went back—changed as he felt himself to be by his new experiences—it would not be easier to continue the old relations? After so much isolation and solitude she might receive him in more cordial fashion!

The Cortes were about to adjourn, so, in obedience to repeated urging from his fellow-partisans, and from doña Bernarda, to *do something*—anything at all—to show interest in the home town—he took the floor one afternoon at the opening of the session, when only the president, the sergeant-at-arms, and a few reporters asleep in the press-gallery, were present, and, with his lunch rising in his throat from emotion, asked the Minister of Internal Affairs to show a little more despatch in the matter of flood protection at Alcira—a bill still in its in-fancy, though it had been pending some seventy years.

After this he was free to return with the halo of a "business-like" deputy shining about his head —"a zealous defender of the region's interests," the local weekly and party organ called him. And that morning, as he stepped off the train, the deputy, deaf to the Royal March and to the *vivas*, stood

up on tiptoe, trying to descry through the waving banners the Blue House nestling in the distance among the orange-trees.

As he approached the place that afternoon he was almost sick with nervousness and emotion. For one last time he thought of his mother, so intent upon maintaining her prestige and so fearful of hostile gossip; of the demagogues who had thronged the doors of the cafes that morning, making fun of the demonstration in his honor; but all his scruples vanished at sight of the hedge of tall rose-bays and prickly hawthorns and of the two blue pillars supporting a barrier of green wooden bars. Resolutely he pushed the gate open, and entered the garden.

Orange-trees stretched in rows along broad straight walks of red earth. On either side of the approach to the house was a tangle of tall rose-bushes on which the first buds, heralds of an early spring, were already beginning to appear.

Above the chattering of the sparrows and the rustle of the wind in the trees, Rafael could hear the sound of a piano—the keys barely touched by the player's fingers—and a soft, timid voice, as if the song were meant for the singer alone.

It was she. Rafael knew the music: a *Lied* by Schubert—the favorite composer of the day; a master "whose best work was still unknown," as she said in the cant she had learned from the critics, alluding to the fact that only the least subtle of the melancholy composer's works had thus far been popularized.

The young man advanced slowly, cautiously, as if afraid lest the sound of his footsteps break in upon that melody which seemed to be rocking the garden lovingly to sleep in the afternoon's golden sunlight.

He reached the open space in front of the house and once more found there the same murmuring palms, the same rubblework benches with seats and backs of flowered tile that he knew so well. There, in fact, she had so often laughed at his feverish protestations.

The door was closed; but through a half-opened window he could see a patch of silk; a woman's back, bending slightly forward over the music.

As Rafael came up a dog began to bark at the end of the garden. Some hens that had been scratching about in sand of the drive, scampered off cackling with fright. The music stopped. A chair scraped as it was pushed back. The lady was rising to her feet.

At the balcony a flowing gown of blue appeared; but all that Rafael saw was a pair of eyes—green eyes, that seemed to fill the entire window with a flood of light.

"Beppa! Beppina!" cried a firm, a warm, a sonorous, soprano voice. "*Apri la porta*. Open the door."

And with a slight inclination of her splendid head of thick auburn hair that seemed to crown her with a helmet of old gold, she smiled to him with a friendly, somewhat mocking, intimacy:

"Welcome, Rafaelito. I don't know why, but I was expecting you this afternoon. We have heard all about your triumphs; the music and the tumult reached even to our desert. My congratulations to the Honorable don Rafael Brull. Come right in, I *su señoría*."

II

From Valencia to Játiva, in all that immense territory covered with rice-fields and orange groves which Valencians embrace under the general and rather vague designation of *La Ribera*, there was no one unfamiliar with the name of Brull and the political power it stood for.

As if national unity had not yet been effected and the country were still divided into *taifas* and *waliatos* as in the days when one Moorish King reigned over Carlet, another over Denia, and a third over Játiva, the election system maintained a sort of inviolable rulership in every district; and when the Administration people came to Alcira in forecasting their political prospects, they always said the same thing:

"We're all right there. We can rely on Brull."

The Brull dynasty had been bossing the district for thirty years, with ever-increasing power.

The founder of this sovereign house had been Rafael's grandfather, the shrewd don Jaime, who had established the family fortune by fifty years of slow exploitation of ignorance and poverty. He began life as a clerk in the *Ayuntamiento* of Alcira; then he became secretary to the municipal judge, then assistant to the city clerk, then assistant-registrar of deeds. There was not a subordinate position in those offices where the poor come in contact with the law that he did not get his hands on; and from such points of vantage, by selling justice as a favor and using power or adroitness to subdue the refractory, he felt his way along, appropriating parcel after parcel of that fertile soil which he adored with a miser's covetousness.

A brazen charlatan he was, every moment talking of "Article Number So-and-So" of the law that applied to the case. The poor orchard workers came to have as much awe for his learning as fear of his malice, and in all their controversies they sought his advice and paid for it, as if he were a lawyer.

When he had gotten a small fortune together, he continued holding his menial posts in the city administration to retain the superstitious respect which is inspired in peasant-folk by all who are on good terms with the law; but not content with playing the eternal beggar, dependent on the humble gratuities of the poor, he took to pulling them out of their financial difficulties, lending them money on the collateral of their future harvests.

But six per cent seemed too petty a profit for him. The real plight of these folk came when a horse died and they had to buy another. Don Jaime became a dealer in dray horses, buying more or less defective animals from gypsies in Valencia, praising their virtues to the skies, and reselling them as thoroughbreds. And no sale on the instalment plan! Cash down! The horses did not belong to him—as he vowed with his hand pressed solemnly to his bosom—and their owners wished to realize on their value at once. The best he could do in the circumstances prompted by his greatness of heart, which always overflowed at the sight of poverty was to borrow money for the purchase from a friend of his.

The peasant in his desperate need would fall into the snare, and carry off the horse after signing all kinds of notes and mortgages to cover the loan of money he had not seen! For the don Jaime who spoke for the unknown party in the deal transferred the cash to the same don Jaime who spoke for the owner of the horse. Result: the rustic bought an animal, without chaffering, at double its value, having in addition borrowed a lot of money at cut-throat interest. In every turn-over of this sort don Jaime doubled his principal. New straits inevitably developed for the dupe; the interest kept piling up; hence new concessions, still more ruinous than the first, that don Jaime might be placated and give the purchaser a month's reprieve.

Every Wednesday, which was market-day in Alcira and brought a great crowd of orchard-folk to town, the street where don Jaime lived was the busiest in the city. People came in droves to ask for renewal of their notes, each leaving a tip of several *pesetas* usually, not to be counted against the debt itself. Others, humbly, timidly, as if they had come to rob the grasping Shylock, would ask for loans; and the strange thing about it, as the malicious noted, was that all these people, after leaving

everything they owned in don Jaime's hands, went off content, their faces beaming with satisfaction, as if they had just been rescued from a danger.

This was don Jaime's chief skill. He had the trick of making usury look like kindness; he always spoke of *those fellows*, those hidden owners of the money and the horses—heartless wretches who were "after him," holding him responsible for the short-comings of all their debtors. The burdens he thus supposedly assumed won him a reputation as a kind-hearted soul, and such confidence was the wily old demon able to instill in his victims that when mortgages were foreclosed on homes or fields, many of the unfortunates despoiled, would say, resignedly:

"It's not his fault. What could the poor man do if they forced him to it? It's those *other fellows* who are sucking the blood of us poor folks."

And so, quietly, leisurely, tranquilly, don Jaime got possession of a field here, then another there, then a third between the two; and in a few years he had rounded out a beautiful orchard of orange-trees with virtually no expenditure of capital at all. Thus his property went on increasing, and, with his radiant smile, his spectacles on his forehead and his paunch growing fatter and fatter, he could be seen surrounded by new victims, addressing them with the affectionate *tu*, patting them on the back, and vowing that this weakness he had for the doing of favors would some day bring him to dying like a dog in the gutter.

Thus he went on prospering. Nor was all the scoffing of city people of any avail in shaking the confidence reposed in him by that flock of rustics, who feared him as they feared the Law itself and believed in him as they believed in God.

A loan to a spendthrift eldest son made him the proprietor of the fine city mansion, which came to be known as "the Brull place." From that date he began to hob-nob with the large real-estate owners of the city, who, though they despised this upstart, made a small place for him in their midst with the instinctive solidarity that characterizes the freemasonry of money. To gain a little more standing for his name, he became a votary of San Bernardo, contributed to the funds for church festivals, and danced attendance on the *alcalde*, whoever that "mayor" might be. In his eyes now, the only people in Alcira were such as collected thousands of *duros*, whenever harvest time came around. The rest were rabble, rabble, sir!

Then, at last he resigned the petty offices he had been filling; and handing his usury business over to those who formerly had served him as go-betweens, he set himself to the task of marrying off his son and sole heir, Ramon, an idling ne'er-do-well, who was always getting into trouble and upsetting the tranquil comfort that surrounded old Brull as he rested from his plunderings.

The father felt the satisfaction of a bully in having such a tall, strong, daring and insolent son, a boy who compelled respect in cafes and clubs more with his fists than with the special privileges conferred in small towns by wealth. Let anyone dare make fun of the old usurer when he had such a fire-eater to protect him!

Ramon had wanted to join the Army; but every time he referred to what he called his vocation, his father would fly into a rage. "Do you think that is what I've worked for all these years?" He could remember the time when, as a poor clerk, he had been forced to fawn on his superiors and listen humbly, cringingly, to their reprimands. He did not want a boy of his to be shoved about hither and thither like a mere machine. "Plenty of brass buttons," he exclaimed with the scorn of a man never to be taken in by external show, "and plenty of gold braid! But after all, a slave, a slave!"

No, he wanted to see his son free and influential, continuing the conquest of the city, completing the family greatness of which he had laid the foundations, getting power over people much as he himself had gotten power over money. Ramón must become a lawyer, the only career for a man destined to rule others. It was a passionate ambition the old pettifogger had, to see his scion enter through the front door and with head proudly erect, the precincts of the law, into which he had crawled so cautiously and at the risk, more than once, of being dragged out with a chain fastened to his ankle.

Ramón spent several years in Valencia without getting beyond the elementary courses in Common Law. The cursed classes were held in the morning, you see, and he had to go to bed at dawn —the hour when the lights in the pool-rooms went out. Besides, in his quarters at the hotel he had a magnificent shotgun—a present from his father; and homesickness for the orchards made him pass many an afternoon at the pigeon traps where he was far better known than at the University.

This fine specimen of masculine youth—tall, muscular, tanned, with a pair of domineering eyes to which thick eyebrows gave a touch of harshness—had been born for action, and excitement; Ramón simply couldn't concentrate on books!

Old Brull, who through niggardliness and prudence had placed his son on "half rations," as he put it, sent the boy just money enough to keep him going; but dupe, in turn, of the wiles he had formerly practiced on the rustics of Alcira, he was compelled to make frequent trips to Valencia, to come to some understanding with money lenders there, who had advanced loans to his son on such terms that insolvency might lead Ramón to a prison cell.

Home to Alcira came rumors of other exploits by the "Prince," as don Jaime called his boy in view of the latter's ability to run through money. In parties with friends of the family, don Ramón's doings were spoken of as scandalous actually—a duel after a quarrel at cards; then a father and a brother—common workingmen in flannel shirts!–who had sworn they would kill him if he didn't marry a certain girl he had been taking to her shop by day and to dance-halls by night.

Old Brull made up his mind to tolerate these escapades of his son no longer; and he made him give up his studies. Ramón would not be a lawyer; well, after all, one didn't have to have a degree to be a man of importance. Besides the father felt he was getting old; it was hard for him to look after the working of his orchards personally. He could make good use of that son who seemed to have been born to impose his will upon everybody around him.

For some time past don Jaime had had his eye on the daughter of a friend of his. The Brull house showed noticeable lack of a woman's presence. His wife had died shortly after his retirement from business, and the old codger stamped in rage at the slovenliness and laziness displayed by his servants. He would marry Ramón to Bernarda—an ugly, ill-humored, yellowish, skinny creature—but sole heiress to her father's three beautiful orchards. Besides, she was conspicuous for her industrious, economical ways, and a parsimony in her expenditures that came pretty close to stinginess.

Ramón did as his father bade him. Brought up with all the ideas of a rural skinflint, he thought no decent person could object to marrying an ugly bad-tempered woman, so long as she had plenty of money.

The father-in-law and the daughter-in-law understood each other perfectly. The old man's eyes would water at sight of that stern, long-faced puritan, who never had much to say in the house, but went into high dudgeon over the slightest waste on the part of the domestics, scolding the farmhands for the merest oversight in the orchards, haggling and wrangling with the orange drummers for a *centime* more or less per hundredweight. That new daughter of his was to be the solace of his old age!

Meantime, the "prince" would be off hunting every morning in the nearby mountains and lounging every afternoon in the cafe; but he was no longer content with the admiration of the idlers hanging around a billiard table, nor was he taking part in the game upstairs. He was frequenting the circles of "serious" people now, had made friends with the *alcalde* and was talking all the time of the great need for getting all "decent" folk together to take the "rabble" in hand!

"Ambition is pecking at him," the old man gleefully remarked to his daughter-in-law. "Let him alone, woman; he'll get there, he'll get there… That's the way I like to see him."

Ramón began by winning a seat in the *Ayuntamiento*, and soon was an outstanding figure there. The least objection to his views he regarded as a personal insult; he would transfer debates in session out into the streets and settle them there with threats and fisticuffs. His greatest glory was to have his enemies say of him:

"Look out for that Ramón … He's a tough proposition."

Along with all this combativeness, he sought to win friends by a lavish hand that was his father's torment. He "did favors," assured a living, that is, to every loafer and bully in town. He was ready to be "touched" by anyone who could serve, in tavern and café, as advertising agent of his rising fame.

And he rose rapidly, in fact. The old folks who had pushed him forward with influence and counsel soon found themselves left far behind. In a short time he had become *alcalde;* his prestige outgrew the limits of the city, spread over the whole district, and eventually reached the capital of the province itself. He got able-bodied men exempted from military service; he winked at corruption in the city councils that backed him, although the perpetrators deserved to go to prison; he saw to it that the constabulary was not too energetic in running down the *roders*, the "wanderers," who, for some well-placed shot at election time, would be forced to flee to the mountains. No one in the whole country dared make a move without the previous consent of don Ramón, whom his adherents always respectfully called their *quefe*, their "chief."

Old Brull lived long enough to see Ramón reach the zenith of his fame. That scallawag was realizing the old man's dream: the conquest of the city, ruling over men where his father had gotten only money! And, in addition don Jaime lived to see the perpetuation of the Brull dynasty assured by the birth of a grandson, Rafael, the child of a couple who had never loved each other, but were united only by avarice and ambition.

Old Brull died like a saint. He departed this life with the consolation of all the last sacraments. Every cleric in the city helped to waft his soul heavenward with clouds of incense at the solemn obsequies. And, though the rabble—the political opponents of the son, that is—recalled those Wednesdays long before when the flock from the orchards would come to let itself be fleeced in the old Shylock's office, all safe and sane people—people who had something in this world to lose—mourned the death of so worthy and industrious a man, a man who had risen from the lowest estate and had finally been able to accumulate a fortune by hard work, honest hard work!

In Rafael's father there still remained much of the wild student who had caused so many tongues to wag in his youthful days. But his doings with peasant girls were hushed up now; fear of the *cacique's* power stifled all gossip; and since, moreover, affairs with such lowly women cost very little money, doña Bernarda pretended to know nothing about them. She did not love her husband much. She was leading that narrow, self-centered life of the country woman, who feels that all her duties are fulfilled if she remains faithful to her mate and keeps saving money.

By a noteworthy anomaly, she, who was so stingy, so thrifty, ready to start a squabble on the public square in defense of the family money against day-laborers or middlemen, was tolerance itself toward the lavish expenditures of her husband in maintaining his political sovereignty over the region.

Every election opened a new breach in the family fortune. Don Ramón would receive orders to carry his district for some non-resident, who might not have lived there more than a day or two. So those who governed yonder in Madrid had ordered—and orders must be obeyed. In every town whole muttons would be set turning over the fires. Tavern wine would flow like water. Debts would be cancelled and fistfulls of *pesetas* would be distributed among the most recalcitrant, all at don Ramón's expense of course. And his wife, who wore a calico wrapper to save on clothes and stinted so much on food that there was hardly anything left for the servants to eat, would be arrayed in splendor when the day for the contest came around, ready in her excitement to help her husband throw the entire house through the window, if need be.

This, however, was all pure speculation on her part. The money that was being scattered so madly broadcast was a "loan" simply. Some day she would get it back with interest. Already her piercing eyes were caressing the tiny, dark-complexioned, restless little creature that lay across her knees, seeing in him the privileged heir-apparent who would one day reap the harvest from all such family sacrifices.

Doña Bernarda had taken refuge in religion as in a cool, refreshing oasis in the desert of vulgarity and monotony in her life. Her heart would swell with pride every time a priest would say to her in the church:

"Take good care of don Ramón. Thanks to him the wave of demagogy halts at the temple door and evil fails to triumph in the District. He is the bulwark of the Lord against the impious!"

And when, after such a declaration, which flattered her worldly vanity and assured her of a mansion in Heaven, she would pass through the streets of Alcira in her calico wrapper and a shawl not over-clean, greeted affectionately, effusively, by the leading citizens, she would pardon don Ramón all the infidelities she knew about and consider the sacrifice of her fortune a good investment.

"If it were not for what we do, what would happen to the District.... The lower scum would conquer—those wild-eyed mechanics and common laborers who read the Valencian newspapers and talk about equality all the time. And they would divide up the orchards, and demand that the product of the harvests—thousands and thousands of *duros* paid for oranges by the Englishmen and the French—should belong to all." But to stave off such a cataclysm, there stood don Ramón, the scourge of the wicked, the champion of "the cause" which he led to triumph, gun in hand, at election time; and just as he was able to send any rebellious trouble-maker off to the penal settlement, so he found it easy to keep at liberty all those who, despite the various murders that figured in their biographies, lent themselves to the service of the government in this support of "law and order!"

The patrimony of the House of Brull went down and down, but its prestige rose higher and higher. The sacks of money filled by the old man at the cost of so much roguery were shaken empty over all the District; nor were several assaults upon the municipal treasury sufficient to bring them back to normal roundness. Don Ramón contemplated this squandering impassively, proud that people should be talking of his generosity as much as of his power.

The whole District worshipped as a sacred flagstaff that bronzed, muscular, massive figure, which floated a huge, flowing, gray-flecked mustache from its upper end.

"Don Ramón, you ought to remove that bush," his clerical friends would say to him with a smile of affectionate banter. "Why, man, you look just like Victor Emmanuel himself, the Pope's jailer."

But though don Ramón was a fervent Catholic (who never went to mass), and hated all the infidel turnkeys of the Holy Father, he would grin and give a satisfied twirl at the offending mouth-piece, quite flattered at bottom to be likened to a king.

The *patio* of the Brull mansion was the throne of his sovereignty. His partisans would find him there, pacing up and down among the green boxes of plantain trees, his hands clasped behind his broad, strong, but now somewhat stooping back—a majestic back withal, capable of supporting hosts and hosts of friends.

There he "administered justice," decided the fate of families, settled the affairs of towns—all in a few off-hand but short and decisive words, like one of those ancient Moorish kings who, in that selfsame territory, centuries before, legislated for their subjects under the open sky. On market-days the *patio* would be thronged. Carts would stop in long lines on either side of the door. All the hitching-posts along the streets would have horses tied to them, and inside, the house would be buzzing like a bee-hive with the chatter of that rustic gentry.

Don Ramón would give them all a hearing, frowning gravely meanwhile, his chin on his bosom and one hand on the head of the little Rafael at his side—a pose copied from a chromo of the Kaiser petting the Crown Prince.

On afternoons when the *Ayuntamiento* was in session, the chief could never leave his *patio*. Of course not a chair in the city hall could be dusted without his permission; but he preferred to remain invisible, like a god, knowing well that his power would seem more terrible if it spoke only from the pillar of fire or from the whirlwind.

All day long city councilors would go trotting back and forth from the City Hall to the Brull *patio.* The few enemies don Ramón had in the Council—meddlers, doña Bernarda called them—

idiots who swallowed everything in print provided it were against the King and religion—attacked the *cacique* persistently, censuring everything he did. Don Ramón's henchmen would tremble with impotent rage. "That charge must be answered! Let's see now: somebody go and ask the boss!"

And a *regidor* would be off to don Ramón's like a greyhound; and arriving at the *patio* panting, out of breath, he would heave a sigh of relief and contentment at sight of "the chief" there, pacing up and down as usual, ready to get his friends out of their difficulties as if the limitless resources of Providence were at his command. "So-and-So said this-and-that!" Don Ramón would stop in his tracks, think a moment, and finally say, in an enigmatic oracular voice: "Very well, tell him to put this in his pipe and smoke it!" Whereupon the henchman, mouth agape, would rush back to the session like a racehorse. His companions would gather about him eager to know the reply that don Ramón's wisdom had deigned to suggest; and a quarrel would start then, each one anxious to have the privilege of annihilating the enemy with the magic words—all talking at the same time like magpies suddenly set chattering by the dawn of a new light.

If the opposition held its ground, again stupefaction would come over them. Another mad dash in quest of a new consultation. Thus the sessions would go by, to the great delight of the barber Cupido —the sharpest and meanest tongue in the city—who, whenever the Council met, would observe to his early morning shaves:

"Holiday today: the usual race of councilors bare-back."

When party exigencies forced don Ramón to be out of town, it was his wife, the energetic doña Bernarda, who attended to the consultations, issuing statements on party policy, as wise and apt as those of "the chief" himself.

This collaboration in the upbuilding and the up-holding of the family influence was the single bond of union between husband and wife. This cold woman, a complete stranger to tenderness, would flush with pleasure every time the chief approved her ideas. If only she were "boss" of "the Party!" …Don Andrés had often said as much himself!

This don Andrés was her husband's most intimate friend, one of those men who are born to be second everywhere and in everything. Loyal to the family to the point of sacrifice, he served, with the couple itself, to fill out the Holy Trinity of the Brull religion that was the faith of all the District. Where don Ramón could not go in person, don Andrés would be present for him, as the chief's *alter ego*. In the towns he was respected as the supreme vicar of that god whose throne was in the *patio* of the plantain trees; and people too shy to lay their supplications before the god himself, would seek out that jolly advocate,—a very approachable bachelor, who always had a smile on his tanned, wrinkled face, and a story under his stiff cigar-stained mustache.

Don Andrés had no relatives, and spent almost all his time at the Brull's. He was like a piece of furniture that seems always to be getting in the way at first; but when all were once accustomed to him, he became an indispensable fixture in the family. In the days when don Ramón had been a young subordinate of the *Ayuntamiento*, he had met and liked the man, and taking him into the ranks of his "heelers," had promoted him rapidly to be chief of staff. In the opinion of the "boss," there wasn't a cleverer, shrewder fellow in the world than don Andrés, nor one with a better memory for names and faces. Brull was the strategist who directed the campaign; don Andrés the tactician who commanded actual operations and cleaned up behind the lines when the enemy was divided and undone. Don Ramón was given to settling everything in a violent manner, and drew his gun at the slightest provocation. If his methods had been followed, "the Party" would have murdered someone every day. Don Andrés had a smooth tongue and a seraphic smile that simply wound *alcaldes* or rebellious electors around his little finger, and his specialty was the art of letting loose a rain of sealed documents over the District that started complicated and never-ending prosecutions against troublesome opponents.

He attended to "the chief's" correspondence, and was tutor and playmate to the little Rafael, taking the boy on long walks through the orchard country. To doña Bernarda he was confidential adviser.

That surly, severe woman showed her bare heart to no one in the world save don Andrés. Whenever he called her his "señora," or his "worthy mistress," she could not restrain a gesture of satisfaction; and it was to him that she poured out her complaints against her husband's misdeeds. Her affection for him was that of a dame of ancient chivalry for her private squire. Enthusiasm for the glory of the house united them in such intimacy that the opposition wagged its tongues, asserting that doña Bernarda was getting even for her husband's waywardness. But don Andrés, who smiled scornfully when accused of taking advantage of the chief's influence to drive hard bargains to his own advantage, was not the man to be trifled with if gossip ventured to smirch his friendship with the *señora*.

Their Trinity was most closely cemented, however, by their fondness for Rafael, the little tot destined to bring fame to the name of Brull and realize the ambitions of both his grandfather and his father.

Rafael was a quiet, morose little boy, whose gentleness of disposition seemed to irritate the hard-hearted doña Bernarda. He was always hanging on to her skirts. Every time she raised her eyes she would find the little fellow's gaze fixed upon her.

"Go out and play in *the patio*," the mother would say.

And the little fellow, moody and resigned, would leave the room, as if in obedience to a disagreeable command.

Don Andrés alone was successful in amusing the child, with his tales and his strolls through the orchards, picking flowers for him, making whistles for him out of reeds. It was don Andrés who took him to school, also, and who advertised the boy's fondness for study everywhere.

If don Rafael were a serious, melancholy lad, that defect was chargeable to his interest in books, and at the Casino, the "Party's" Club, he would say to his fellow-worshippers:

"You'll see something doing when Rafaelito grows up. That kid is going to be another Canovas."

And before all those rustic minds the vision of a Brull at the head of the Government would suddenly flash, filling the first page of the newspapers with speeches six columns long, and a *To Be Continued* at the end; and they could see themselves rolling in money and running all Spain, just as they now ran their District, to their own sweet wills.

Never did a Prince of Wales grow up amid the respect and the adulation heaped upon little Brull. At school, the children regarded him as a superior being who had condescended to come down among them for his education. A well-scribbled sheet, a lesson fluently repeated, were enough for the teacher, who belonged to "the Party" (just to collect his wages on time and without trouble,) to declare in prophetic tones:

"Go on working like that, señor de Brull. You are destined to great things."

At the *tertulias* his mother attended evenings in his company, it was enough for him to recite a fable or get off some piece of learning characteristic of a studious child eager to bring his school work into the conversation, for the women to rush upon him and smother him with kisses.

"But how much that child knows!… How brilliant he is!"

And some old woman would add, sententiously:

"Bernarda, take good care of the child; don't let him use his brain so much. It's bad for him. See how peaked he looks!…"

He finished his preparatory education with the Dominicans, taking the leading rôle in all the plays given in the tiny theatre of the friars, and always with a place in the first line on prize days. The Party organ dedicated an annual article to the scholastic prodigies of the "gifted son of our distinguished chief don Ramón Brull, the country's hope, who already merits title as the shining light of the future!"

When Rafael, escorted by his mother and half a dozen women who had witnessed the exercises, would come home, gleaming with medals and his arms full of diplomas, he would stoop and kiss his father's hard, bristly hand; and that claw would caress the boy's head and absent-mindedly sink into the old man's vest pocket—for don Ramón expected to pay for all welcome favors.

"Very good," the hoarse voice would murmur. "That's the way I like to see you do …Here's a *duro*."

And not till the following year would the boy again know what a caress from his father meant. On certain occasions, playing in the *patio*, he had surprised the austere old man gazing at him fixedly, as if trying to foresee his future.

Don Andrés took charge of settling Rafael in Valencia when he began his university studies. The dream of old don Jaime, disillusioned in the son, would be fulfilled in the third generation!

"This one at least will be a lawyer!" said doña Bernarda, who in the old days had imbibed don Jaime's eagerness for the university degree, which to her seemed like a title of nobility for the family.

And lest the corruption of the city should lead the son astray as it had done Ramón in his student days, she would send don Andrés frequently to the capital, and write letter after letter to her Valencian friends, particularly to a canon of her intimate acquaintance, asking them not to lose sight of the boy.

But Rafael was good behavior itself; a model boy, a "serious" young man, the good canon assured the mother. The distinctions and the prizes that came to him in Alcira continued to pursue him in Valencia; and besides, don Ramón and his wife learned from the papers of the triumphs achieved by their son in the debating society, a nightly gathering of law students in a university hall, where future Solons wrangled on such themes as "Resolved: that the French Revolution was more of a good than an evil," or "Resolved, that Socialism is superior to Christianity."

Some terrible youths, who had to get home before ten o'clock to escape a whipping, declared themselves rabid socialists and frightened the beadles with curses on the institution of property—all rights reserved, of course, to apply, as soon as they got out of college, for some position under the government as registrar of deeds or secretary of prefecture! But Rafael, ever sane and a congenital "moderate," was not of those fire-brands; he sat on "the Right" of the august assembly of Wranglers, maintaining a "sound" attitude on all questions, thinking what he thought "with" Saint Thomas and "with" other orthodox sages whom his clerical Mentor pointed out to him.

These triumphs were announced by telegraph in the Party papers, which, to garnish the chief's glory and avoid suspicion of "inspiration," always began the article with: "According to a despatch printed in the Metropolitan press …"

"What a boy!" the priests of Alcira would say to doña Bernarda. "What a silver tongue! You'll see; he'll be a second Manterola!"

And whenever Rafael came home for the holidays or on vacation, each time taller than before, dressed like a fashion-plate and with mannerisms that she took for the height of distinction, the saintly mother would say to herself with the satisfaction of a woman who knows what it means to be homely:

"What a handsome chap he's getting to be. All the rich girls in town will be after him. He'll have his pick of them."

Doña Bernarda felt proud of her Rafael, a tall youth, with delicate yet powerful hands, large eyes, an aquiline nose, a curly beard and a certain leisurely, undulating grace of movement that suggested one of those young Arabs of the white cloak and elegant babooshes, who constitute the native aristocracy of Spain's African colonies.

Every time the student came home, his father gave him the same silent caress. In course of time the *duro* had been replaced by a hundred *peseta* note; but the rough claw that grazed his head was falling now with an energy ever weaker and seemed to grow lighter with the years.

Rafael, from long periods of absence, noted his father's condition better than the rest. The old man was ill, very ill. As tall as ever, as austere and imposing, and as little given to words. But he was growing thinner. His fierce eyes were sinking deeper into their sockets. There was little left to

him now except his massive frame. His neck, once as sturdy as a bull's, showed the tendons and the arteries under the loose, wrinkled skin; and his mustache, once so arrogant, but now withering with each successive day, drooped dispiritedly like the banner of a defeated army wet with rain.

The boy was surprised at the gestures and tears of anger with which his mother welcomed expression of his fears.

"Well, I hope he'll die as soon as possible … Lot's of use he is to us!… May the Lord be merciful and take him off right now."

Rafael said nothing, not caring to pry into the conjugal drama that was secretly and silently playing its last act before his eyes.

Don Ramón, that somber libertine of insatiable appetites, prey to a sinister, mysterious inebriation, was tossing in a last whirlwind of tempestuous desire, as though the blaze of sunset had set fire to what remained of his vitality.

With a deliberate, determined lustfulness, he went scouring the District like a wild satyr, and his brutish assaults, his terrorism and abuse of authority, were reported back by scurrilous tongues to the seignorial mansion, where his friend don Andrés was trying in vain to pacify the wife.

"That man!" doña Bernarda would stammer in her rage. "That man is going to ruin us! Doesn't he see he's compromising his son's future?"

His most enthusiastic adherents, without losing their traditional respect for him, would speak smilingly of his "weaknesses"; but at night, when don Ramón, exhausted by his struggle with the insatiable demon gnawing at his spirit, would be snoring painfully away, with a disgusting rattle that made it impossible for people in the house to sleep, doña Bernarda would sit up in her bed with her thin arms folded across her bosom, and pray to herself:

"My Lord, My God! May this man die as soon as possible! May all this come to an end soon, oh Lord!"

And Bernarda's God must have heard her prayer, for her husband got rapidly worse.

"Take care of yourself, don Ramón," his curate friends would say to him. They were the only ones who dared allude to his disorderly life. "You're getting old, and boyish pranks at your age are invitations to Death!"

The *cacique* would smile, proud, at bottom, that all men should know that such exploits were possible for a man at his age.

He had enough strength left for one more caress the day when, escorted by don Andrés, Rafael entered with his degree as a Doctor of Law. He gave the boy his shotgun—a veritable jewel, the admiration of the entire District—and a magnificent horse. And as if he had been waiting around just to see the realization of old Don Jaime's ambition, which he himself had not been able to fulfill, he passed away.

All the bells of the city tolled mournfully.

The Party weekly came out with a black border a palm wide; and from all over the District folks came in droves to see whether the powerful don Ramón Brull, who had been able to rain upon the just and unjust alike on this earth, could possibly have died the same as any other human being.

III

When doña Bernarda found herself alone, and absolute mistress of her home, she could not conceal her satisfaction.

Now they would see what a woman could do.

She counted on the advice and experience of don Andrés, who was closer than ever to her now; and on the prestige of Rafael, the young lawyer, who bade fair to sustain the reputation of the Brulls.

The power of the family continued unchanged. Don Andrés, who, at the death of his master, had succeeded to the authority of a second father in the Brull house, saw to the maintenance of relations with the authorities at the provincial capital and with the still bigger fish in Madrid. Petitions were heard in the *patio* the same as ever. Loyal party adherents were received as cordially as before and the same favors were done, nor was there any decline of influence in places that don Andrés referred to as "the spheres of public administration."

There came an election for Parliament, and as usual, doña Bernarda secured the triumph of the individual whose nomination had been dictated from Madrid. Don Ramón had left the party machine in perfect condition; all it needed was enough "grease" to keep it running smoothly; and there his widow was besides, ever alert at the slightest suggestion of a creak in the gearing.

At provincial headquarters they spoke of the District with the usual confidence:

"It's ours. Brull's son is as powerful as the old man himself."

The truth was that Rafael took little interest in "the Party." He looked upon it as one of the family properties, the title to which no one could dispute. He confined his personal activities to obeying his mother. "Go to Riola with don Andrés. Our friends there will be happy to see you." And he would go on the trip, to suffer the torment of an interminable rally, a *paella*, during which his fellow partisans would bore him with their uncouth merriment and ill-mannered flattery. "You really ought to give your horse a couple of days' rest. Instead of going out for a ride, spend your afternoon at the Club! Our fellows are complaining they never get a sight of you." Whereupon Rafael would give up his rides—his sole pleasure practically—and plunge into a thick smoke-laden atmosphere of noise and shouting, where he would have to answer questions of the most illustrious members of the party. They would sit around, filling their coffee-saucers with cigar-ash, disputing as to which was the better orator, Castelar or Canovas, and, in case of a war between France and Germany, which of the two would win—idle subjects that always provoked disagreements and led to quarrels.

The only time he entered into voluntary relations with "the Party" was when he took his pen in hand and manufactured for the Brull weekly a series of articles on "Law and Morality" and "Liberty and Faith,"—the rehashings of a faithful, industrious plodder at school, prolix commonplaces seasoned with what metaphysical terminology he remembered, and which, from the very reason that nobody understood them, excited the admiration of his fellow partisans. They would blink at the articles and say to don Andrés:

"What a pen, eh? Just let anyone dare to argue with him.... Deep, that noodle, I tell you!"

Nights, when his mother did not oblige him to visit the home of some influential voter who must be kept content, he would spend reading, no longer, however, as in Valencia, books lent him by the canon, but works that he bought himself, following the recommendations of the press, and that his mother respected with the veneration always inspired in her by printed paper sewed and bound, an awe comparable only to the scorn she felt for newspapers, dedicated, every one of them, as she averred, to the purpose of insulting holy things and stirring up the brutal passions of "the rabble."

These years of random reading, unrestrained by the scruples and the fears of a student, gradually and quietly shattered many of Rafael's firm beliefs. They broke the mould in which the friends of his mother had cast his mind and made him dream of a broader life than the one known to those about him. French novels transported him to a Paris that far outshone the Madrid he had known for a

moment in his graduate days. Love stories awoke in his youthful imagination an ardor for adventure and involved passions in which there was something of the intense love of indulgence that had been his father's besetting sin. He came to dwell more and more in the fictitious world of his readings, where there were elegant, perfumed, clever women, practicing a certain art in the refinement of their vices.

The uncouth, sunburned orchard-girls inspired him with revulsion as if they had been women of another race, creatures of an inferior genus. The young ladies of the city seemed to him peasants in disguise, with the narrow, selfish, stingy instincts of their parents. They knew the exact market price of oranges and just how much land was owned by each aspirant to their hand; and they adjusted their love to the wealth of the pretender, believing it the test of quality to appear implacable toward everything not fashioned to the mould of their petty life of prejudice and tradition.

For that reason he was deeply bored by his colorless, humdrum existence, so far removed from that other purely imaginative life which rose from the pages of his books and enveloped him with an exotic, exciting perfume.

Some day he would be free, and take flight on his own wings; and that day of liberation would come when he got to be deputy. He waited for his coming of age much as an heir-apparent waits for the moment of his coronation.

From early boyhood he had been taught to look forward to the great event which would cut his life in two, opening out new pathways for a "forward march" to fame and fortune.

"When my little boy gets to be deputy," his mother would say in her rare moments of affectionate expansiveness, "the girls will fight for him because he is so handsome! And he'll marry a millionairess!"

Meanwhile, in long years of impatient anticipation, his life went on, with no special circumstance to break its dull monotony—the life of an aspirant certain of his lot, "killing time" till the call should come to enter on his heritage. He was like those noble youngsters of bygone centuries who, graced in their cradles by the rank of colonel from the monarch, played around with hoop and top till they were old enough to join their regiments. He had been born a deputy, and a deputy he was sure to be: for the moment, he was waiting for his cue in the wings of the theatre of life.

His trip to Italy on a pilgrimage to see the Pope was the one event that had disturbed the dreary course of his existence. But in that country of marvels, with a pious canon for a guide, he visited churches rather than museums. Of theatres he saw only two—larks permitted by his tutor, whose austerity was somewhat mollified in those changing scenes. Indifferently they passed the famous artistic works of the Italian churches, but paused always to venerate some relic with miracles as famous as absurd. Even so, Rafael managed to catch a confused and passing glimpse of a world different from the one in which he was predestined to pass his life. From a distance he sensed something of the love of pleasure and romance he had drunk in like an intoxicating wine from his reading. In Milan he admired a gilded, adventurous bohemia of opera; in Rome, the splendor of a refined, artistic aristocracy in perpetual rivalry with that of Paris and London; and in Florence, an English nobility that had come in quest of sunlight and a chance to air its straw hats, show off the fair hair of its ladies, and chatter its own language in gardens where once upon a time the somber Dante dreamed and Boccaccio told his merry tales to drive fear of plague away.

That journey, of impressions as rapid and as fleeting as a reel of moving-pictures, leaving in Rafael's mind a maze of names, buildings, paintings and cities, served to give greater breadth to his thinking, as well as added stimulus to his imagination. Wider still became the gulf that separated him from the people and ideas he met in his common everyday life. He felt a longing for the extraordinary, for the original, for the adventuresomeness of artistic youth; and political master of a county, heir of a feudal dominion virtually, he nevertheless would read the name of any writer or painter whatsoever with the superstitious respect of a rustic churl. "A wretched, ruined lot who haven't even a bed to die on," his mother viewed such people; but Rafael nourished a secret envy for all who lived in that ideal world, which he was certain must be filled with pleasures and exciting things he had scarcely

dared to dream of. What would he not give to be a bohemian like the personages he met in the books of Murger, member of a merry band of "intellectuals," leading a life of joy and proud devotion to higher things in a bourgeois age that knew only thirst for money and prejudice of class! Talent for saying pretty things, for writing winged verses that soared like larks to heaven! A garret underneath the roof, off there in Paris, in the Latin Quarter! A Mimí poor but spiritual, who would love him, and—between one kiss and another—be able to discuss—not the price of oranges, like the girls who followed him with tender eyes at home—but serious "elevated" things! In exchange for all that he would gladly have given his future deputyship and all the orchards he had inherited, which, though encumbered by mortgages not to mention moral debts left by the rascality of his father and grandfather —still would bring him a tidy annuity for realizing his bohemian dreams.

Such preoccupations made life as a party leader, tied down to the petty interests of a constituency, quite unthinkable! At the risk of angering his mother, he fled the Club, to court the solitude of the hills and fields. There his imagination could range in greater freedom, peopling the roads, the meadows, the orange groves with creatures of his fancy, often conversing aloud with the heroines of some "grand passion," carried on along the lines laid down by the latest novel he had read.

One afternoon toward the close of summer Rafael climbed the little mountain of San Salvador, which lies close to the city. From the eminence he was fond of looking out over the vast domains of his family. For all the inhabitants of that fertile plain were—as don Andrés said whenever he wished to emphasize the party's greatness—like so many cattle branded with the name of Brull.

As he went up the winding, stony trail, Rafael thought of the mountains of Assisi, which he had visited with his friend the canon, a great admirer of the Saint of Umbria. It was a landscape that suggested asceticism. Crags of bluish or reddish rock lined the roadway on either side, with pines and cypresses rising from the hollows, and extending black, winding, snaky roots out over the fallow soil. At intervals, white shrines with tiny roofs harbored mosaics of glazed tiles depicting the Stations on the *Via Dolorosa*. The pointed green caps of the cypresses, as they waved, seemed bent on frightening away the white butterflies that were fluttering about over the rosemary and the nettles. The parasol-pines projected patches of shade across the burning road, where the sun-baked earth crackled and crumbled to dead dust under every footstep.

Reaching the little square in front of the Hermitage, he rested from the ascent, stretching out full length on the crescent of rubblework that formed a bench near the sanctuary. There silence reigned, the silence of high hill-tops. From below, the noises of the restless life and labor of the plain came weakened, softened, by the wind, like the murmuring of waves breaking on a distant shore. Among the prickly-pears that grew in close thicket behind the bench, insects were buzzing about, shining in the sun like buds of gold. Some hens, belonging to the Hermitage, were pecking away in one corner of the square, clucking, and dusting their feathers in the gravel.

Rafael surrendered to the charm of the exquisite scene. With reason had it been called "Paradise" by its ancient owners, Moors from the magic gardens of Bagdad, accustomed to the splendors of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but who went into ecstacies nevertheless on beholding for the first time the wondrous *ribera* of Valencia!

Throughout the great valley, orange groves, extending like shimmering waves of velvet; hedges and enclosures of lighter green, cutting the crimson earth into geometric figures; clumps of palms spurting like jets of verdure upward toward the sky, and falling off again in languorous swoons; villas blue and rose-colored, nestling in flowering gardens; white farmhouses half concealed behind green swirls of forest; spindling smokestacks of irrigation engines, with yellow sooty tops; Alcira, its houses clustered on the island and overflowing to the opposite bank, all of whitish, bony hue, pock-marked with tiny windows; beyond, Carcagente, the rival city, girdled in its belt of leafy orchards; off toward the sea, sharp, angular mountains, with outlines that from afar suggested the fantastic castles imagined by Doré; and inland, the towns of the upper *ribera* floating in an emerald lake of orchard, the distant

mountains taking on a violet hue from the setting sun that was creeping like a bristly porcupine of gold into the hot vapors of the horizon.

Behind the Hermitage all the lower *ribera* stretched, one expanse of rice-fields drowned under an artificial flood; then, Sueca and Cullera, their white houses perched on those fecund lagoons like towns in landscapes of India; then, Albufera, with its lake, a sheet of silver glistening in the sunlight; then, Valencia, like a cloud of smoke drifting along the base of a mountain range of hazy blue; and, at last, in the background, the halo, as it were, of this apotheosis of light and color, the Mediterranean—the palpitant azure Gulf bounded by the cape of San Antonio and the peaks of Sagunto and Almenara, that jutted up against the sky-line like the black fins of giant whales.

As Rafael looked down upon the towers of the crumbling convent of La Murta, almost hidden in its pine-groves, he thought of all the tragedy of the Reconquest; and almost mourned the fate of those farmer-warriors whose white cloaks he could imagine as still floating among the groves of those magic trees of Asia's paradise. It was the influence of the Moor in his Spanish ancestry. Christian, clerical even, though he was, he had inherited a melancholy, dreamy turn of mind from the very Arabs who had created all that Eden.

He pictured to himself the tiny kingdoms of those old *walis*; vassal districts very like the one his family ruled. But instead of resting on influence, bribery, intimidation, and the abuse of law, they lived by the lances of horsemen as apt at tilling the soil as at capering in tournaments with an elegance never equalled by any chevaliers of the North. He could see the court of Valencia, with the romantic gardens of Ruzafa, where poets sang mournful strophes over the wane of the Valencian Moor, while beautiful maidens listened from behind the blossoming rose-bushes. And then the catastrophe came. In a torrent of steel, barbarians swept down from the arid hills of Aragon to appease their hunger in the bounty of the plain—the *almogávares*—naked, wild, bloodthirsty savages, who never washed. And as allies of this horde, bankrupt Christian noblemen, their worn-out lands mortgaged to the Israelite, but good cavalrymen, withal, armored, and with dragonwings on their helmets; and among the Christians, adventurers of various tongues, soldiers of fortune out for plunder and booty in the name of the Cross —the "black sheep" of every Christian family. And they seized the great garden of Valencia, installed themselves in the Moorish palaces, called themselves counts and marquises, and with their swords held that privileged country for the King of Aragon, while the conquered Saracens continued to fertilize it with their toil.

"Valencia, Valencia, Valencia! Thy walls are ruins, thy gardens grave-yards, thy sons slaves unto the Christian …" groaned the poet, covering his eyes with his cloak. And Rafael could see, passing like phantoms before his eyes, leaning forward on the necks of small, sleek, sinewy horses, that seemed to fly over the ground, their legs horizontal, their nostrils belching smoke, the Moors, the real people of Valencia, conquered, degenerated by the very abundance of their soil, abandoning their gardens before the onrush of brutal, primitive invaders, speeding on their way toward the unending night of African barbarism. At this eternal exile of the first Valencians who left to oblivion and decay a civilization, the last vestiges of which today survive in the universities of Fez, Rafael felt the sorrow he would have experienced had it all been a disaster to his family or his party.

While he was thinking of all these dead things, life in its feverish agitation surrounded him. A cloud of sparrows was darting about the roof of the Hermitage. On the mountain side a flock of dark-fleeced sheep was grazing; and when any of them discovered a blade of grass among the rocks, they would begin calling to one another with a melancholy bleating.

Rafael could hear the voices of some women who seemed to be climbing the road, and from his reclining position he finally made out two parasols that were gradually rising to view over the edge of his bench. One was of flaming red silk, skilfully embroidered and suggesting the filigreed dome of a mosque; the second, of flowered calico, was apparently keeping at a respectful distance behind the first.

Two women entered the little square, and as Rafael sat up and removed his hat, the taller, who seemed to be the mistress, acknowledged his courtesy with a slight bow, went on to the other end of the esplanade, and stood, with her back turned toward him, looking at the view. The other sat down some distance off, breathing laboriously from the exertion of the climb.

Who were those women?… Rafael knew the whole city, and had never seen them.

The one seated near him was doubtless the servant of the other—her maid or her companion. She was dressed in black, simply but with a certain charm, like the French soubrettes he had seen in illustrated novels. But rustic origin and lack of cultivation were evident from the stains on the backs of her unshapely hands; from her broad, flat, finger-nails; and from her large ungainly feet, quite out of harmony with the pair of stylish boots she was wearing—cast-off articles, doubtless, of the lady. She was pretty, nevertheless, with a fresh exuberance of youth. Her large, gray, credulous eyes were those of a stupid but playful lamb; her hair, straight, and a very light blond, hung loosely here and there over a freckled face, dark with sunburn. She handled her closed parasol somewhat awkwardly and kept looking anxiously at the doubled gold chain that drooped from her neck to her waist, as if to reassure herself that a gift long-coveted had not been lost.

Rafael's interest drifted to the lady. His eyes rested on the back of a head of tightly-gathered golden hair, as luminous as a burnished helmet; on a white neck, plump, rounded; on a pair of broad, lithe shoulders, hidden under a blue silk blouse, the lines tapering rapidly, gracefully toward the waist; on a gray skirt, finally, falling in harmonious folds like the draping of a statue, and under the hem the solid heels of two shoes of English style encasing feet that must have been as agile and as strong as they were tiny.

The lady called to her maid in a voice that was sonorous, vibrant, velvety, though Rafael could catch only the accented syllables of her words, that seemed to melt together in the melodious silence of the mountain top. The young man was sure she had not spoken Spanish. A foreigner, almost certainly!…

She was expressing admiration and enthusiasm for the view, talking rapidly, pointing out the principal towns that could be seen, calling them by their names,—the only words that Rafael could make out clearly. Who was this woman whom he had never seen, who spoke a foreign language and yet knew the *ribera* well? Perhaps the wife of one of the French or English orange-dealers established in the city! Meanwhile his eyes were devouring that superb, that opulent, that elegant beauty which seemed to be challenging him with its indifference to his presence.

The keeper of the Hermitage issued cautiously from the house—a peasant who made his living from visitors to the heights. Attracted by the promising appearance of the strange lady, the hermit came forward to greet her, offering to fetch water from the cistern, and to unveil the image of the miraculous virgin, in her honor.

The woman turned around to answer the man, and that gave Rafael an opportunity to study her at his leisure. She was tall, ever so tall, as tall as he perhaps. But the impression her height of stature made was softened by a grace of figure that revealed strength allied to elegance. A strong bust, sculpturesque, supporting a head that engaged the young man's wrapt attention. A hot mist of emotion seemed to cloud his vision as he looked into her large eyes, so green, so luminous! The golden hair fell forward upon a forehead of pearly whiteness, veined at the temples with delicate lines of blue. Viewed in profile her gracefully moulded nose, quivering with vitality at the nostrils, filled out a beauty that was distinctly modern, piquantly charming. In those lineaments, Rafael thought he could recognize any number of famous actresses. He had seen her before. Where?… He did not know. Perhaps in some illustrated weekly! Perhaps in some album of stage celebrities! Or maybe on the cover of some match-box—a common medium of publicity for famous European belles. Of one thing he was certain: at sight of that wonderful face he felt as though he were meeting an old friend after a long absence.

The recluse, in hopes of a perquisite, led the two women toward the door of the hermitage, where his wife and daughter had appeared, to feast their eyes on the huge diamonds sparkling at the ears of the strange lady.

"Enter, *siñorita*" the rustic invited. "I'll show you the Virgin, the Virgin *del Lluch*, you understand, the only genuine one. She came here alone all the way from Majorca. People down in Palma claim they have the real Virgin. But what can they say for themselves? They are jealous because our Lady chose Alcira; and here we have her, proving that she's the real one by the miracles she works."

He opened the door of the tiny church, which was as cool and gloomy as a cellar. At the rear, on a baroque altar of tarnished gold, stood the little statue with its hollow cloak and its black face.

Rapidly, by rote almost, the good man recited the history of the image. The Virgin *del Lluch* was the patroness of Majorca. A hermit had been compelled to flee from there, for a reason no one had been able to discover—perhaps to get away from some Saracen girl of those exciting, war-like days! And to rescue the Virgin from profanation he brought her to Alcira, and built this sanctuary for her. Later people from Majorca came to return her to their island. But the celestial lady had taken a liking to Alcira and its inhabitants. Over the water, and without even wetting her feet, she came gliding back. Then the Majorcans, to keep what had happened quiet, counterfeited a new statue that looked just like the first. All this was gospel truth, and as proof, there lay the original hermit buried at the foot of the altar; and there was the Virgin, too, her face blackened by the sun and the salt wind on her miraculous voyage over the sea.

The beautiful lady smiled slightly, as she listened. The maid was all ears, not to lose a word of a language she but half understood, her credulous peasant eyes traveling from the Virgin to the hermit and from the hermit to the Virgin, plainly expressing the wonder she was feeling at such a portentous miracle. Rafael had followed the party into the shrine and taken a position near the fascinating stranger. She, however, pretended not to see him.

"That is only a legend," he ventured to remark, when the rustic had finished his story. "You understand, of course, that nobody hereabouts accepts such tales as true."

"I suppose so," the lady answered coldly.

"Legend or no legend, don Rafael," the recluse grumbled, somewhat peeved, "that's what my grandfather and all the folk of his day used to say; and that's what people still believe. If the story has been handed down so long, there must be something to it."

The patch of sunlight that shone through the doorway upon the flagstones was darkened by the shadow of a woman. It was a poorly clad orchard worker, young, it seemed, but with a face pale, and as rough as wrinkled paper, all the crevices and hollows of her cranium showing, her eyes sunken and dull, her unkempt hair escaping from beneath her knotted kerchief. She was barefoot, carrying her shoes in her hand. She stood with her legs wide apart, as if in an effort to keep her balance. She seemed to feel intense pain whenever she stepped upon the ground. Illness and poverty were written on every feature of her person.

The recluse knew her well; and as the unfortunate creature, panting with the effort of the climb, sank upon a little bench to rest her feet, he told her story briefly to the visitors.

She was ill, very, very ill. With no faith in doctors, who, according to her, "treated her with nothing but words"; she believed that the Virgin *del Lluch* would ultimately cure her. And, though at home she could scarcely move from her chair and was always being scolded by her husband for neglecting the housework, every week she would climb the steep mountain-side, barefoot, her shoes in her hand.

The hermit approached the sick woman, accepting a copper coin she offered. A few couplets to the Virgin, as usual, he supposed!

"Visanteta, a few *gochos*!" shouted the rustic, going to the door. And his daughter came into the chapel—a dirty, dark-skinned creature with African eyes, who might just have escaped from a gipsy band.

She took a seat upon a bench, turning her back upon the Virgin with the bored ill-humored expression of a person compelled to do a dull task day after day; and in a hoarse, harsh, almost frantic voice, which echoed deafeningly in that small enclosure, she began a drawling chant that rehearsed the story of the statue and the portentous miracles it had wrought.

The sick woman, kneeling before the altar without releasing her hold upon her shoes, the heels of her feet, which were bruised and bleeding from the stones, showing from under her skirts, repeated a refrain at the end of each stanza, imploring the protection of the Virgin. Her voice had a weak and hollow sound, like the wail of a child. Her sunken eyes, misty with tears, were fixed upon the Virgin with a dolorous expression of supplication. Her words came more tremulous and more distant at each couplet.

The beautiful stranger was plainly affected at the pitiful sight. Her maid had knelt and was following the sing-song rhythm of the chant, with prayers in a language that Rafael recognized at last. It was Italian.

"What a great thing faith is!" the lady murmured with a sigh.

"Yes, *señora*; a beautiful thing!"

Rafael tried to think of something "brilliant" on the grandeur of faith, from Saint Thomas, or one of the other "sound" authors he had studied. But he ransacked his memory in vain. Nothing! That charming woman had filled his mind with thoughts far other than quotations from the Fathers!

The couplets to the Virgin came to an end. With the last stanza the wild singer disappeared; and the sick woman, after several abortive efforts, rose painfully to her feet. The recluse approached her with the solicitude of a shopkeeper concerned for the quality of his wares. Were things going any better? Were the visits to the Virgin doing good?… The unfortunate woman did not dare to answer, for fear of offending the miraculous Lady. She did not know!… Yes … she really must be a little better … But that climb!… This offering had not had such good results as the previous ones, she thought; but she had faith: the Virgin would be good to her and cure her in the end. At the church door she collapsed from pain. The recluse placed her on his chair and ran to the cistern to get a glass of water. The Italian maid, her eyes bulging with fright, leaned over the poor woman, petting her:

"*Poverina! Poverina!… Coraggio*!" The invalid, rallying from her swoon, opened her eyes and gazed vacantly at the stranger, not understanding her words but guessing their kindly intention.

The lady stepped out to the *plazoleta*, deeply moved, it seemed, by what she had been witnessing. Rafael followed, with affected absent-mindedness, somewhat ashamed of his insistence, yet at the same time looking for an opportunity to renew their conversation.

On finding herself once more in the presence of that wonderful panorama, where the eye ran unobstructed to the very limit of the horizon, the charming creature seemed to breathe more freely.

"Good God!" she exclaimed, as if speaking to herself. "How sad and yet how wonderful! This view is ever so beautiful. But that woman!… That poor woman!"

"She's been that way for years, to my personal knowledge," Rafael remarked, pretending to have known the invalid for a long time, though he had scarcely ever deigned to notice her before. "Our peasants are queer people. They despise doctors, and refuse their help, preferring to kill themselves with these barbarous prayers and devotions, which they expect will do them good."

"But they may be right, after all!" the lady replied. "Disease is often incurable, and science can do for it about as much as faith—sometimes, even less.... But here we are laughing and enjoying ourselves while suffering passes us by, rubs elbows with us even, without our noticing!"…

Rafael was at a loss for reply. What sort of woman was this? What a way she had of talking! Accustomed as he was to the commonplace chatter of his mother's friends, and still under the influence of this meeting, which had so deeply disturbed him, the poor boy imagined himself in the

presence of a sage in skirts—a philosopher under the disguise of female beauty come from beyond the Pyrenees, from some gloomy German alehouse perhaps, to upset his peace of mind.

The stranger was silent for a time, her gaze fixed upon the horizon. Then around her attractive sensuous lips, through which two rows of shining, dazzling teeth were gleaming, the suggestion of a smile began to play, a smile of joy at the landscape.

"How beautiful this all is!" she exclaimed, without turning toward her companion. "How I have longed to see it again!"

At last the opportunity had come to ask the question he had been so eager to put: and she herself had offered the opportunity!

"Do you come from here?" he asked, in a tremulous voice, fearing lest his inquisitiveness be scornfully repelled.

"Yes," the lady replied, curtly.

"Well, that's strange. I have never seen you...."

"There's nothing strange about that. I arrived only yesterday."

"Just as I said!… I know everyone in the city. My name is Rafael Brull. I'm the son of don Ramón, who was mayor of Alcira many times."

At last he had let it out! The poor fellow had been dying to reveal his name, tell who he was, pronounce that magic word so influential in the District, certain it would be the "Open Sesame" to that wonderful stranger's grace! After that, perhaps, she would tell him who she was! But the lady commented on his declaration with an "Ah!" of cold indifference. She did not show that his name was even known to her, though she did sweep him with a rapid, scrutinizing, half-mocking glance that seemed to betray a hidden thought:

"Not bad-looking, but what a dunce!"

Rafael blushed, feeling he had made a false step in volunteering his name with the pompousness he would have used toward some bumpkin of the region.

A painful silence followed. Rafael was anxious to get out of his plight. That glacial indifference, that disdainful courtesy, which, without a trace of rudeness, still kept him at a distance, hurt his vanity to the quick. But since there was no stopping now, he ventured a second question:

"And are you thinking of remaining in Alcira very long?…"

Rafael thought the ground was giving way beneath his feet. Another glance from those green eyes! But, alas, this time it was cold and menacing, a livid flash of lightning refracted from a mirror of ice.

"I don't know …" she answered, with a deliberateness intended to accentuate unmistakable scorn. "I usually leave places the moment they begin to bore me." And looking Rafael squarely in the face she added, with freezing formality, after a pause:

"Good afternoon, sir."

Rafael was crushed. He saw her turn toward the doorway of the sanctuary and call her maid. Every step of hers, every movement of her proud figure, seemed to raise a barrier in front of him. He saw her bend affectionately over the sick orchard-woman, open a little pink bag that her maid handed her, and, rummaging about among some sparkling trinkets and embroidered handkerchiefs, draw out a hand filled with shining silver coins. She emptied the money into the apron of the astonished peasant girl, gave something as well to the recluse, who was no less astounded, and then, opening her red parasol, walked off, followed by her maid.

As she passed Rafael, she answered the doffing of his hat with a barely perceptible inclination of her head; and, without looking at him, started on her way down the stony mountain path.

The young man stood gazing after her through the pines and the cypresses as her proud athletic figure grew smaller in the distance.

The perfume of her presence seemed to linger about him when she had gone, obsessing him with the atmosphere of superiority and exotic elegance that emanated from her whole being.

Rafael noticed finally that the recluse was approaching, unable to restrain a desire to communicate his admiration to someone.

"What a woman!" the man cried, rolling his eyes to express his full enthusiasm.

She had given him a *duro*, one of those white discs which, in that atheistic age, so rarely ascended that mountain trail! And there the poor invalid sat at the door of the Hermitage, staring into her apron blankly, hypnotized by the glitter of all that wealth! *Duros, pesetas*, two-*pesetas*, dimes! All the money the lady had brought! Even a gold button, which must have come from her glove!

Rafael shared in the general astonishment. But who the devil was that woman?

"How do I know!" the rustic answered. "But judging from the language of the maid," he went on with great conviction: "I should say she was some Frenchwoman … some Frenchwoman … with a pile of money!"

Rafael turned once more in the direction of the two parasols that were slowly winding down the slope. They were barely visible now. The larger of the two, a mere speck of red, was already blending into the green of the first orchards on the plain … At last it had disappeared completely.

Left alone, Rafael burst into rage! The place where he had made such a sorry exhibition of himself seemed odious to him now. He fumed with vexation at the memory of that cold glance, which had checked any advance toward familiarity, repelled him, crushed him! The thought of his stupid questions filled him with hot shame.

Without replying to the "good-evening" from the recluse and his family, he started down the mountain, in hopes of meeting the woman again, somewhere, some time, he knew not when nor how. The heir of don Ramón, the hope of the District, strode furiously on, his arms aquiver with a nervous tremor. And aggressively, menacingly, addressing his own ego as though it were a henchman cringing terror-stricken in front of him, he muttered:

"You imbecile!… You lout!… You peasant! You provincial ass! You … rube!"

IV

Doña Bernarda did not suspect the reason why her son rose on the following morning pale, and with dark rings under his eyes, as if he had spent a bad night. Nor could his political friends guess, that afternoon, why in such fine weather, Rafael should come and shut himself up in the stifling atmosphere of the Club.

When he came in, a crowd of noisy henchmen gathered round him to discuss all over again the great news that had been keeping "the Party" in feverish excitement for a week past: the Cortes were to be dissolved! The newspapers had been talking of nothing else. Within two or three months, before the close of the year at the latest, there would be a new election, and therewith, as all averred, a landslide for don Rafael Brull. The intimate friend and lieutenant of the House of Brull was the best informed. If the elections took place on the date indicated by the newspapers, Rafael would still be five or six months short of his twenty-fifth birth-day. But don Andrés had written to Madrid to consult the Party leaders. The prime minister was agreeable—"there were precedents!"—and even though Rafael should be a few weeks short of the legal age, the seat would go to him just the same. They would send no more "foundlings" from Madrid! Alcira would have no more "unknowns" foisted upon her! And the whole Tribe of Brull dependents was preparing for the contest with the enthusiasm of a prize-fighter sure of victory beforehand.

All this bustling expectation left Rafael cold. For years he had been looking forward to that election time, when the chance would come for his free life in Madrid. Now that it was at hand he was completely indifferent to the whole matter, as if he were the last person in the world concerned.

He looked impatiently at the table where don Andrés, with three other leading citizens, was having his daily hand at cards before coming to sit down at Rafael's side. That was a canny habit of don Andrés. He liked to be seen in his capacity of Regent, sheltering the heir-apparent under the wing of his prestige and experienced wisdom.

Well along in the afternoon, when the Club parlor was less crowded with members, the atmosphere freer of smoke, and the ivory balls less noisy on the green cloth, don Andrés considered his game at an end, and took a chair in his disciple's circle, where as usual Rafael was sitting with the most parasitic and adulatory of his partisans.

The boy pretended to be listening to their conversation, but all the while he was preparing mentally a question he had decided to put to don Andrés the day before.

At last he made up his mind.

"You know everybody, don Andrés. Well, yesterday, up on San Salvador, I met a fine-looking woman who seems to be a foreigner. She says she's living here. Who is she?"

The old man burst into a loud laugh, and pushed his chair back from the table, so that his big paunch would have room to shake in.

"So you've seen her, too!" he exclaimed between one guffaw and another. "Well, sir, what a city this is! That woman got in the day before yesterday, and everybody's seen her already. She's the talk of the town. You were the only one who hadn't asked me about her so far. And now you've bitten! … Ho! Ho! Ho! What a place this is!"

When he had had his laugh out—Rafael, meanwhile, did not see the joke—he continued in more measured style:

"That 'foreign woman,' as you call her, boy, comes from Alcira. In fact, she was born about two doors from you. Don't you know doña Pepa, 'the doctor's woman,' they call her—a little lady who has an orchard close by the river and lives in the Blue House, that's always under water when the Júcar floods? She once owned the place you have just beyond where you live, and she's the one who sold it to your father—the only property don Ramón ever bought, so far as I know. Don't you remember?"

Rafael thought he did. As he went back in his memory, the picture of an old wrinkled woman rose before his mind, a woman round-shouldered, bent with age, but with a kindly face smiling with simple-mindedness and good nature. He could see her now, with a rosary usually in her hand, a camp-stool under her arm, and her *mantilla* drawn down over her face. As she passed the Brull door on her way to church, she would greet his mother; and doña Bernarda would remark in a patronizing way: "Doña Pepa is a very fine woman; one of God's own souls.... The only decent person in her family."

"Yes; I remember; I remember doña Pepa," said Rafael.

"Well, your 'foreigner,'" don Andrés continued, "is doña Pepa's niece, daughter of her brother, the doctor. The girl has been all over the world singing grand opera. You were probably too young to remember Doctor Moreno, who was the scandal of the province in those days...."

But Rafael certainly did remember Doctor Moreno! That name was one of the freshest of his childhood recollections, the bugaboo of many nights of terror and alarm, when he would hide his trembling head under the clothes. If he cried about going to bed so early, his mother would say to him in a mysterious voice:

"If you don't keep quiet and go right to sleep I'll send for Doctor Moreno!"

A weird, a formidable personage, the Doctor! Rafael could see him as clearly as if he were sitting there in front of him; with that huge, black, curly beard; those large, burning eyes that always shone with an inner fire; and that tall, angular figure that seemed taller than ever as young Brull evoked it from the hazes of his early years. Perhaps the Doctor had been a good fellow, who knows! At any rate Rafael thought so, as his mind now reverted to that distant period of his life; but he could still remember the fright he had felt as a child, when once in a narrow street he met the terrible Doctor, who had looked at him through those glowing pupils and caressed his cheeks gently and kindly with a hand that seemed to the youngster as hot as a live coal! He had fled in terror, as almost all good boys did when the Doctor petted them.

What a horrible reputation Doctor Moreno had! The curates of the town spoke of him in terms of hair-raising horror. An infidel! A man cut off from Mother Church! Nobody knew for certain just what high authority had excommunicated him, but he was, no doubt, outside the pale of decent, Christian folks. Proof of that there was, a-plenty. His whole attic was filled with mysterious books in foreign languages, all containing horrible doctrines against God and the authority of His representatives on earth. He defended a certain fellow by the name of Darwin, who claimed than men were related to monkeys, a view that gave much amusement to the indignant doña Bernarda, who repeated all the jokes on the crazy notion her favorite preacher cracked of a Sunday in the pulpit. And such a sorcerer! Hardly a disease could resist Doctor Moreno. He worked wonders in the suburbs, among the lower scum; and those laborers adored him with as much fear as affection. He succeeded with people who had been given up by the older doctors, wiseacres in long frocks and with gold-headed canes, who trusted more in God than in science, as Rafael's mother would say in praise of them. That devil of a physician used new and unheard-of treatments he learned from atheistic reviews and suspicious books he imported from abroad. His competitors grumbled also because the Doctor had a mania for treating poor folk gratis, actually leaving money, sometimes, into the bargain; and he often refused to attend wealthy people of "sound principles" who had been obliged to get their confessor's permission before placing themselves in his hands.

"Rascal!… Heretic!… Lower scum!…" doña Bernarda would exclaim.

But she said such things in a very low voice and with a certain fear, for those days were bad ones for the House of Brull. Rafael remembered how gloomy his father had been about that time, hardly even leaving the *patio*. Had it not been for the respect his hairy claws and his frowning eye-brows inspired, the rabble would have eaten him alive. "Others" were in command, … "others" … everybody, in fact, except the House of Brull.

The monarchy had been treasonably overturned; the men of the Revolution of September were legislating in Madrid. The petty tradesmen of the city, ever rebellious against the tyranny of don

Ramón, had taken guns in their hands and formed a little militia, ready to send a fusilade into the *cacique* who had formerly trodden them under foot. In the streets people were singing the *Marseillaise*, waving tricolored bunting, and hurrahing for the Republic. Candles were being burned before pictures of Castelar. And meantime that fanatical Doctor, a Republican, was preaching on the public squares, explaining the "rights of man" at daytime meetings in the country and at night meetings in town. Wild with enthusiasm he repeated, in different words, the orations of the portentous Tribune who in those days was traveling from one end of Spain to the other, administering to the people the sacrament of democracy to the music of his eloquence, which raised all the grandeurs of History from the tomb.

Rafael's mother, shutting all the doors and windows, would lift her angry eyes toward heaven every time the crowd, returning from a meeting, would pass through her street with banners flying and halt two doors away, in front of the Doctor's house, where they would cheer, and cheer. "How long, oh Lord, how long?" And though nobody insulted her nor asked her for so much as a pin, she talked of moving to some other country. Those people demanded a Republic—they belonged, as she said, to the "Dividing-up" gang. The way things were going, they'd soon be winning; and then they would plunder the house, and perhaps cut her throat and strangle the baby!

"Never mind them, never mind them!" the fallen *cacique* would reply, with a condescending smile. "They aren't so bad as you imagine. They'll sing their *Marseillaise* for a time and shout themselves hoarse. Why shouldn't they, if they're content with so little? Other days are coming. The Carlists will see to it that our cause triumphs."

In don Ramón's judgment, the Doctor was a good sort, though his head may have been a bit turned by books. He knew him very well: they had been schoolmates together, and Rafael's father had never cared to join the hue and cry against Doctor Moreno. The one thing that seemed to bother him was that, as soon as the Republic was proclaimed, the Doctor's friends were eager to send him as a deputy to the Constituent Assembly of '73. That lunatic a deputy! Whereas he, the friend and agent of so many Conservative ministries, had never dared think of the office for himself, because of the fairly superstitious awe in which he held it! The end of the world was surely coming!

But the Doctor had refused the nomination. If he were to go to Madrid, what would become of the poor people who depended on him for health and protection? Besides, he liked a quiet, sedentary life, with his books and his studies, where he could satisfy his desires without quarrels and fighting. His deep convictions impelled him to mingle with the masses, and speak in public places—where he proved to be a successful agitator, but he refused to join party organizations; and after a lecture or an oration, he would spend days and days with his books and magazines, alone save for his sister —a docile, pious woman who worshipped him, though she bewailed his irreligion—and for his little daughter, a blonde girl whom Rafael could scarcely remember, because her father's unpopularity with the "best people" kept the little child away from "good society."

The Doctor had one passion—music; and everybody admired his talent for that art. What didn't the man know, anyhow? According to doña Bernarda and her friends, that remarkable skill had been acquired through "evil arts." It was another fruit of his impiety! But that did not prevent crowds from thronging the streets at night, cautioning pedestrians to walk more softly as they approached his house; nor from opening their windows to hear better when that devil of a doctor would be playing his violoncello. This he did when certain friends of his came up from Valencia to spend a few days with him—a queer, long-haired crew that talked a strange language and referred to a fellow called Beethoven with as much respect as if he were San Bernardo himself.

"Yes, don Andrés," said Rafael. "I remember Doctor Moreno very well." And his ears seemed to tingle again with the diabolical melodies that had floated in to the side of his little bed on terrible nights still fresh in his memory.

"Very well," continued the old man. "That lady is the Doctor's daughter. What a man he was! How he made your father and me fume in the days of '73! Now that all that is so far in the past, I'll say he was a fine fellow. His brain had gone somewhat bad from reading too much, like don Quixote; and

he was crazy over music. Most charming manners he had, however. He married a beautiful orchard-girl, who happened to be very poor. He said the marriage was … for the purpose of perpetuating the species—those were his very words—of having strong, sound, healthy children. For that he didn't need to bother about his wife's social position. What he was looking for was health. So he picked out that Teresa of his, as strong as an ox, and as fresh as an apple. But little good it did the poor woman. She had one baby and died a few days afterward, despite the science and the desperate efforts of her husband. They had lived together less than a year."

Rafael's companions were listening with as much attention as he; for morbid curiosity is the characteristic of the people of small places, where the keenest pleasure available is that of knowing the private affairs of others intimately.

"And now comes the good part," don Andrés continued. "The mad Doctor had two saints: Castelar and Beethoven. The pictures of those fellows were scattered in every room of the house, even in the attic. This Beethoven (in case you don't know it), was an Italian or an Englishman, I'm not sure which—one of those fellows who makes music up out of his head for people to play in theatres or for lunatics like Moreno to amuse themselves with. Well, when his daughter was born the Doctor wondered what name to give her. As a tribute to Emilio Castelar, his idol, he felt he ought to call her Emilia: but he liked the sound of Leonora better (no, not Lenor, but Leonora!). According to what he told us, that was the title of the only opera Beethoven ever wrote—an opera he could read, for that matter, the way I read the paper. Anyhow, the foreigner won out; and the Doctor packed the child off to church with his sister, who took a few neighbors of the poorer sort along to see Leonora baptized.

"You can imagine what the priest said after he had looked in vain through the catalogue of saints for that name. At the time I was employed in the municipal offices, and I had to intervene. This was all before the Revolution; Gonzalez Brabo was boss in those days—and good old days they were! Let an enemy of law and order or sound religion just raise his voice and he was off on his way to Fernando Pio in no time. Well, what a racket the Doctor raised! He sat himself down in that church —first time he'd ever been in the place—and insisted that his daughter be labeled as he directed. Later he thought he would take her home without any baptism at all, saying he had no use for the ceremony anyhow, and that he put up with it only to please his sister. During the argument, he called all the curates and acolytes assembled in the sacristy there, a pack of 'brahmans.'"

"He must have said Brahmins," interrupted Rafael.

"Yes, that's it: and Bonzes, too—just joking, of course—I remember very well. But finally he compromised and let her be baptized with the orthodox name of 'Leonor.' Not that he cared what they called her in the church. As he went out he said to the priest: "She will be 'Leonora' for reasons that please her father, and which you wouldn't understand even if I were to explain them to you." What a hubbub followed! Don Ramón and I had to interfere to calm the good curates; they were for sending him up for sacrilege, insult to religion, what not! We had to go some to quiet things down. In those days, boy, a matter of that sort was more serious than killing a man."

"Which name did she keep?" asked a friend of Rafael.

"Leonora, as her father wished. That girl always took after the old man. Just as queer as he was. The Doctor all over again! I haven't seen her yet. They say she's a stunning beauty, like her mother, who was a blonde, and the handsomest girl in all these parts. When the Doctor had dressed his wife up like a lady, she wasn't much for manners, but she certainly was something to look at...."

"And what became of Moreno?" asked another. "Is it true, as they said years ago, that he shot himself?"

"Oh, some say one thing, some another. Perhaps it's all a lie. Who knows! It all happened so far away.... After the Republic fell, it was the turn of decent people again. Poor Moreno took it all harder than he did the death of his Teresa, and kept himself locked up in his house day in, day out. Your father was stronger than before and we ran things in a way that was a sight for sore eyes! Don Antonio up in Madrid gave orders to the Governors to give us a free hand in cleaning up everything

that was left of the Revolution. The people who before had been cheering for the Doctor all the time, now kept away from him for fear we should catch them. Some afternoons he would go for a walk in the suburbs, or a stroll over to his sister's orchard, near the river—always with Leonora at his side. She was now about eleven years old. All his affection was centered on her. Poor Doctor! How things had changed from the days when his mobs would meet the troops shot for shot in the streets of Alcira, shouting *vivas* for the Federal Republic!… In his solitude and in all the dejection coming from the defeat of his perverted ideas, he took more than ever to music. He had but one joy left him. Leonora loved music as much as he. She learned her lessons rapidly; and soon could accompany her father's violoncello on the piano. They would spend the days playing together, going through the whole pile of music sheets they kept stored in the attic along with those accursed medical books. Besides, the little girl showed she had a voice, and it seemed to grow fuller and more beautiful every day. 'She will be a singer, a great singer,' her father proclaimed enthusiastically. And when some tenant of his or one of his dependents came into the house and could hardly believe his ears at the sweetness of the little angel's voice, the Doctor would rub his hands and gleefully exclaim: 'What do you think of the little lady, eh?… Some day people in Alcira will be proud she was born here.'"

Don Andrés paused to sift his recollections, and after a long silence added:

"The truth is, I can't tell you any more. At that time, we were in power again, and I had very little to do with the Doctor. We gradually lost sight of him, forgot him, practically. The music we heard when going by the house was all there was to remind us of him. We learned one day, through his sister, doña Pepa, that he had gone way off with the little girl somewhere—what was that city you visited, Rafael?—Milan, yes, Milan, that's it! I've been told that's the market for singers. He wanted his Leonora to become a prima donna. He never came back, poor fellow!… Things must have gone badly with them. Every year he would write home to his sister to sell another piece of land. It is known that over there they lived in real poverty. In a few years the little fortune the Doctor got from his parents was gone. Poor doña Pepa, kind old soul, even disposed of the house—which belonged half to the Doctor and half to her—sent him every cent of the money, and moved to the orchard. Ever since then she's been coming in to mass and to Forty Hours in all sorts of weather. I could learn nothing for certain after that. People lie so, you see. Some say poor Moreno shot himself because his daughter left him when she got placed on the stage; others say that he died like a dog in a poorhouse. The only sure thing is that he died and that his daughter went on having a great time all over those countries over there. The way she went it! They even say she had a king or two. As for money! Say, boys, there are ways and ways of earning it, and ways and ways of spending it! The fellow who knows all about that side of her is the barber Cupido. He imagines he's an artist, because he plays the guitar; and besides he has a Republican grouch, and was a great admirer of her father's. He's the only one in town who followed all she was up to, in the papers. They say she doesn't sing under her own name, but uses some prettier sounding one—foreign, I believe. Cupido is a regular busybody and you can get all the latest news in his barbershop. Only yesterday he went to doña Pepa's farmhouse to greet the '*eminent artist*,' as he calls her. There's no end to what he tells. Trunks in every corner, enough to pack a house-full of things into, and silk dresses … shopfuls of them! Hats, I can't say how many; jewelry-boxes on every table with diamonds that strike you blind. And she told Cupido to have the station-agent get a move on and send what was still missing—the heavier luggage—boxes and boxes that come from way off somewhere—the other end of the world, and that cost a fortune just to ship.... There you are!… And why not? The way she earned it!"

Don Andrés winking maliciously and laughing like an old faun, gave a sly nudge at Rafael, who was listening in deep abstraction to the story.

"But is she going to live on here?" asked the young man. "Accustomed as she is to flitting about the world, do you think she'll be able to stand this place?"

"Nobody can tell," don Andrés replied. "Not even Cupido can find that out. She'll stay until she gets bored, he says. And to be in less danger of that, she has brought her whole establishment along on her back, like a snail."

"Well, she'll be bored soon enough," one of Rafael's friends observed. "I suppose she thinks she's going to be admired and stared at as she was abroad! Moreno's girl! Did you ever hear of such a family?… Daughter of that *descamisado*, as my father calls him because he died without a stitch on his back! And all people say of them! Last night her arrival was the subject of conversation in every decent home in town, and there wasn't a man who did not promise to fight shy of her. If she thinks Alcira is anything like the places where they dance the razzle-dazzle and there's no shame, she'll be sadly disappointed."

Don Andrés laughed slyly.

"Yes, boys! She'll be disappointed. There's a plenty of morality in this town, and much wholesome fear of scandal. We're probably as bad as people in other places, but we don't want anybody to find us out. I'm afraid this Leonora is going to spend most of her time with her aunt—a silly old thing, whatever her many virtues may be. They say she's brought a French maid along.... But she's beginning to cry 'sour grapes' already. Do you know what she said to Cupido yesterday? That she had come here with the idea of living all by herself, just to get away from people; and when the barber spoke to her of society in Alcira, she made a wry face, as much as to say the place was filled with no-accounts. That's what the women were talking most about last night. You can see why! She has always been the favorite of so many big guns!"

An idea seemed to flit across the wrinkled forehead of don Andrés, tracing a wicked smile around his lips:

"You know what I think, Rafael? You're young and you're handsome, and you've been abroad. Why don't you make a try for her, if only to prick the bubble of her conceit and show her there are people here, too. They say she's mighty good-looking, and, what the deuce! It wouldn't be so hard. When she finds out who you are!…"

The old man said this with the idea of flattering Rafael, certain that the prestige of his "prince" was such that no woman could resist him. But Rafael had lived through the previous afternoon, and the words seemed very bitter pills. Don Andrés at once grew serious, as if a frightful vision had suddenly passed before his eyes; and he added in a respectful tone:

"But no: that was only a jest. Don't pay any attention to what I say. Your mother would be terribly provoked."

The thought of doña Bernarda, the personification of austere, uncompromising virtue, chased the mirth from every face in the company.

"The strange thing about all this," said Rafael, who was anxious to turn the conversation in a different direction, "is that now everybody remembers the Doctor's daughter. But years and years went by without her name being mentioned, in my hearing at least."

"Well, it's a question of District matters, you see," the old man answered. "All I've been telling you boys, happened long before your day, and your parents, who knew the Doctor and his daughter, have always been careful not to bring this woman into their conversation; for, as Rafael's mother says, she's the disgrace of Alcira. From time to time we got a bit of news; something that Cupido fished out of the newspapers and spread all over town, or something that that silly doña Pepa would let drop, while telling inquisitive people about the glories her niece was winning abroad; anyhow, all a heap of lies that were invented I don't know where or by whom. They kept all that quiet, banking the fire, so to speak. If it hadn't got into the girl's head to come back to Alcira, you would never have heard of her probably. But now she's here, and they're telling all they know, or think they know, about her life, digging up tales of things that happened years and years ago. You take my word for it, boys, I've always considered her a high-flyer myself, but, just the same, people here do tell awful whoppers … and swear to them. She can't be as bad as they say … If one were to swallow everything

one hears! Wasn't poor don Ramón the greatest man the District ever produced? Well, what don't they say about him?…"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.