

**PÍO  
BAROJA**

**THE QUEST**



**Pío Baroja**

# **The Quest**

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END OF "TO BUSCA,"

# **PART ONE**

# CHAPTER I

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Preamble—Somewhat Immoral Notions of a Boarding-House Keeper—A Balcony Is Heard Closing—A Cricket Chirps.

The clock in the corridor had just struck twelve, in a leisurely, rhythmic, decorous manner. It was the habit of that tall old narrow-cased clock to accelerate or retard, after its own sweet taste and whim, the uniform and monotonous series of hours that encircle our life until it wraps it and leaves it, like an infant in its crib, in the obscure bosom of time.

Soon after this friendly indication of the old clock, uttered in a solemn, peaceful voice becoming an aged person, the hour of eleven rang out in a shrill, grotesque fashion, with juvenile impertinence, from a petulant little clock of the vicinity, and a few minutes later, to add to the confusion and the chronometric disorder, the bell of a neighbouring church gave a single long, sonorous stroke that quivered for several seconds in the silent atmosphere.

Which of the three clocks was correct? Which of those three devices for the mensuration of time was the most exact in its indications?

The author cannot say, and he regrets it. He, regrets it, because Time, according to certain solemn philosophers, is the canvas background against which we embroider the follies of our existence, and truly it is little scientific not to be able to indicate at precisely which moment the canvas of this book begins. But the author does not know; all he can say is, that at that moment the steeds of night had for an appreciable time been coursing across the heavens. It was, then, the hour of mystery; the hour when wicked folk stalk abroad; the hour in which the poet dreams of immortality, rhyming *hijos* with *prolijos* and *amor* with *dolor*; the hour in which the night-walker slinks forth from her lair and the gambler enters his; the hour of adventures that are sought and never found; the hour, finally, of the chaste virgin's dreams and of the venerable old man's rheumatism. And as this romantic hour glided on, the shouts and songs and quarrels of the street subsided; the lights in the balconies were extinguished; the shopkeepers and janitors drew in their chairs from the gutter to surrender themselves to the arms of sleep.

In the chaste, pure dwelling of Doña Casiana the boarding-house keeper, idyllic silence had reigned for some time. Only through the balcony windows, which were wide open, came the distant rumbling of carriages and the song of a neighbouring cricket who scratched with disagreeable persistency upon the strident string of his instrument.

At the hour, whatever it was, that was marked by the twelve slow, raucous snores of the corridor clock, there were in the house only an old gentleman,—an impenitent early-riser; the proprietress, Doña Casiana,—a landlady equally

impenitent, to the misfortune of her boarders, and the servant Petra.

At this moment the landlady was asleep, seated upon the rocking-chair before the open balcony; Petra, in the kitchen, was likewise asleep, with her head resting against the window-frame, while the old early-rising gentleman amused himself by coughing in bed.

Petra had finished scouring and her drowsiness, the heat and fatigue had doubtless overcome her. She could be made out dimly in the light of the small lamp that hung by the hearth. She was a thin, scrawny woman, flat-chested, with lean arms, big red hands and skin of greyish hue. She slept seated upon a chair with her mouth open; her breathing was short and laboured.

At the strokes of the corridor clock she suddenly awoke; she shut the window, through which came a nauseating, stable-like odour from the milk-dairy on the ground-floor; she folded the clothes and left with a pile of dishes, depositing them upon the dining-room table; then she laid away in a closet the table-ware, the tablecloth and the left-over bread; she took down the lamp and entered the room in the balcony of which the landlady sat sleeping.

"Señora, señora!" she called, several times.

"Eh? What is it?" murmured Doña Casiana drowsily.

"Perhaps you wish something?"

"No, nothing. Oh, yes! Tell the baker tomorrow that I'll pay him the coming Monday."

"Very well. Good-night."

The servant was leaving the room, when the balconies of the house across the way lighted up. They opened wide and

soon there came the strains of a tender prelude from a guitar.

"Petra! Petra!" cried Doña Casiana. "Come here. Eh? Over in that Isabel's house ... You can tell they have visitors."

The domestic went to the balcony and gazed indifferently at the house opposite.

"Now that's what pays," the landlady went on. "Not this nasty boarding-house business."

At this juncture there appeared in one of the balconies of the other house a woman wrapped in a flowing gown, with a red flower in her hair. A young man in evening dress, with swallow-tail coat and white vest, clasped her tightly about the waist.

"That's what pays," repeated the landlady several times.

This notion must have stirred her ill-humour, for she added in an irritated voice:

"Tomorrow I'll have some plain words with that priest and those gadabout daughters of Doña Violante, and all the rest who are behind in their payments. To think a woman should have to deal with such a tribe! No! They'll laugh no more at me! ..."

Petra, without offering a reply, said good-night again and left the room. Doña Casiana continued to grumble, then ensconced her rotund person in the rocker and dozed off into a dream about an establishment of the same type as that across the way; but a model establishment, with luxuriously appointed salons, whither trooped in a long procession all the scrofulous youths of the clubs and



fraternities, mystic and mundane, in such numbers that she was compelled to install a ticket-office at the entrance.

While the landlady lulled her fancy in this sweet vision of a brothel *de luxe*, Petra entered a dingy little room that was cluttered with old furniture. She set the light upon a chair, and placed a greasy box of matches on the top of the container; she read for a moment out of a filthy, begrimed devotionalary printed in large type; she repeated several prayers with her eyes raised to the ceiling, then began to undress. The night was stifling; in that hole the heat was horrible. Petra got into bed, crossed herself, put out the lamp, which smoked for a long time, stretched herself out and laid her head upon the pillow. A worm in one of the pieces of furniture made the wood crack at regular intervals.

Petra slept soundly for a couple of hours, then awoke stifling from the heat. Somebody had just opened the door and footsteps were heard in the entry.

"That's Doña Violante and her daughters," mumbled Petra. "It must be pretty late."

The three women were probably returning from los Jardines, after having supped in search of the pesetas necessary to existence. Luck must have withheld its favour, for they were in bad humour and the two young women were quarrelling, each blaming the other for having wasted the night.

There were a number of venomous, ironic phrases, then the dispute ceased and silence was restored. Petra, thus kept awake, sank into her own thoughts; again footfalls were heard in the corridor, this time light and rapid. Then

came the rasping of the shutter-bolt of a balcony that was being opened cautiously.

"One of them has got up," thought Petra. "What can the fuss be now?"

In a few minutes the voice of the landlady was heard shouting imperiously from her room:

"Irene! ... Irene!"

"Well?"

"Come in from the balcony."

"And why do I got to come in?" replied a harsh voice in rough, ill-pronounced accents.

"Because you must ... That's why."

"Why, what am I doing in the balcony?"

"That's something you know better than I."

"Well, I don't know."

"Well, I do."

"I was taking the fresh air."

"I guess you're fresh enough."

"You mean you are, señora."

"Close the balcony. You imagine that this house is something else."

"I? What have I done?"

"I don't have to tell you. For that sort of thing there's the house across the way, across the way."

"She means Isabel's," thought Petra.

The balcony was heard to shut suddenly; steps echoed in the entry, followed by the slamming of a door. For a long time the landlady continued her grumbling; soon came the murmuring of a conversation carried on in low tones. Then nothing more was heard save the persistent shrilling of the

neighbouring cricket, who continued to scrape away at his disagreeable instrument with the determination of a beginner on the violin.

## CHAPTER II

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Doña Casiana's House—A Morning Ceremony—  
Conspiracy—Wherein Is  
Discussed the Nutritive Value of Bones—Petra and her  
Family—Manuel; his arrival in Madrid.

... And the cricket, now like an obstinate virtuoso, persisted in his musical exercises, which were truly somewhat monotonous, until the sky was brightened by the placid smile of dawn. At the very first rays of the sun the performer relented, doubtless content with the perfection of his artistic efforts, and a quail took up his solo, giving the three regulation strokes. The watchman knocked with his pike at the stores, one or two bakers passed with their bread, a shop was opened, then another, then a vestibule; a servant threw some refuse out on the sidewalk, a newsboy's calling was heard.

The author would be too bold if he tried to demonstrate the mathematical necessity imposed upon Doña Casiana's house of being situated on Mesonero Romanos Street rather than upon Olivo, for, undoubtedly, with the same reason it might have been placed upon Desengaño, Tudescos or any other thoroughfare. But the duties of the author, his obligation as an impartial and veracious chronicler compel

him to speak the truth, and the truth is that the house was on Mesonero Romanos Street rather than on Olivo.

At this early hour not a sound could be heard inside; the janitor had opened the vestibule-entrance and was regarding the street with a certain melancholy.

The vestibule,—long, dingy, and ill-smelling,—was really a narrow corridor, at one side of which was the janitor's lodge.

On passing this lodge, if you glanced inside, where it was encumbered with furniture till no room was left, you could always make out a fat woman, motionless, very swarthy, in whose arms reposed a pale weakling of a child, long and thin, like a white earthworm. It seemed that above the window, instead of "Janitor" the legend should have read: "The Woman-Cannon and her Child," or some similar sign from the circus tents.

If any question were addressed to this voluminous female she would answer in a shrill voice accompanied by a rather disagreeable gesture of disdain. Leaving the den of this woman-cannon to one side, you would proceed; at the left of the entrance began the staircase, always in darkness, with no air except what filtered in through a few high, grated windows that opened upon a diminutive courtyard with filthy walls punctured by round ventilators. For a broad, roomy nose endowed with a keen pituitary membrane, it would have been a curious sport to discover and investigate the provenience and the species of all the vile odours comprising that fetid stench, which was an inalienable characteristic of the establishment.



The author never succeeded in making the acquaintance of the persons living upon the upper floors. He has a vague notion that there were two or three landladies, a family who let out rooms to permanent gentlemen boarders, but nothing else. Wherefore the author does not climb those heights but pauses upon the first landing.

Here, at least by day, could be made out in the reigning darkness, a tiny door; at night, on the other hand, by the light of a kerosene lantern one could glimpse a tin door-plate painted red, upon which was inscribed in black letters: "Casiana Fernández."

At one side of the door hung a length of blackish rusted chain that could be reached only by standing on tiptoe and stretching out one's arm; but as the door was always ajar, the lodgers could come and go without the need of knocking.

This led to the house. By day, one was plunged into utter obscurity; the sole thing that indicated a change of place was the smell, not so much because it was more agreeable than that of the staircase, as because it was distinct; on the contrary, at night, in the vague light shed by a cork night-taper afloat in the water and oil of a bowl that was attached to the wall by a brass ring, there could be seen through a certain dim nebulosity, the furniture, the pictures and the other paraphernalia that occupied the reception hall.

Facing the entrance stood a broad, solid table on which reposed an old-fashioned music-box consisting of several cylinders that bristled with pins; close beside it, a plaster statue: a begrimed figure lacking a nose, and difficult to distinguish as some god, half-god or mortal.

On the wall of the reception room and of the corridor hung some large, indistinct oil paintings. A person of intelligence would perhaps have considered them detestable, but the landlady, who imagined that a very obscure painting must be very good, refreshed herself betimes with the thought that mayhap these pictures, sold to an Englishman, would, one day make her independent.

There were several canvases in which the artist had depicted horrifying biblical scenes: massacres, devastation, revolting plagues; but all this in such a manner, that, despite the painter's lavish distribution of blood, wounds and severed heads, these canvases instead of horrifying, produced an impression of merriment. One of them represented the daughter of Herodias contemplating the head of St. John the Baptist. Every figure expressed amiable joviality: the monarch, with the indumentary of a card-packing and in the posture of a card-player, was smiling; his daughter, a florid-face dame, was smiling; the familiars, encased in their huge helmets, were smiling, and the very head of St. John the Baptist was smiling from its place upon a repoussé platter. Doubtless the artist of these paintings, if he lacked the gift of design and colour, was endowed with that of joviality.

To the right and left of the house door ran the corridor, from whose walls hung another exhibit of black canvases, most of them unframed, in which could be made out absolutely nothing; only in one of them, after very patient scrutiny, one might guess at a red cock pecking at the leaves of a green cabbage.

Upon this corridor opened the bedrooms, in which, until very late in the afternoon, dirty socks and torn slippers were usually seen strewn upon the floor, while on the unmade beds lay collars and cuffs.

Almost all the boarders in that house got up late, except two travelling salesmen, a bookkeeper and a priest, who arose early through love of their occupations, and an old gentleman who did so through habit or for reasons of hygiene.

The bookkeeper would be off, without breakfast, at eight in the morning; the priest left *in albis* to say mass; but the salesmen had the audacious presumption to eat a bite in the house, and the landlady resorted to a very simple procedure to send them off without so much as a sip of water; these two agents began work between half-past nine and ten; they retired very late, bidding their landlady wake them at eight-thirty. She would see to it that they were not aroused until ten. When they awoke and saw the time, they would jump out of bed, hurriedly dress and dash off like a shot, cursing the landlady. Then, when the feminine element of the house gave signs of life, every nook would echo with cries, discordant voices, conversations shouted from one bedchamber to another, and out of the rooms, their hands armed with the night-service, would come the landlady, one of Doña Violante's daughters, a tall, obese Biscayan Lady, and another woman whom they called the Baroness.

The landlady invariably wore a corset-cover of yellow flannel, the Baroness a wrapper mottled with stains from cosmetics and the Biscayan lady a red waist through whose opening was regularly presented, for the admiration of

those who happened along the corridor, a huge white udder streaked with coarse blue veins.

After this matutinal ceremony, and not infrequently during the same, complaints, disputes, gossip and strife would arise, providing tid-bits for the remaining hours.

On the day following the scrape between the landlady and Irene, when the latter returned to her room after having fulfilled her mission, a secret conclave was held by those who remained.

"Don't you know? Didn't you hear anything last night?" asked the Biscayan.

"No," replied the landlady and the Baroness. "What happened?"

"Irene smuggled a man into the house last night."

"She did?"

"I heard her talking to him myself."

"And he must have opened the street door! The dog!" muttered the landlady.

"No; the man came from this tenement."

"One of the students from upstairs," offered the Baroness.

"I'll tell a thing or two to the rascally fellow," replied Doña Casiana.

"No. Take your time," answered the Biscayan. "We're going to give her and her gallant a fright. If he comes tonight, while they're talking, we'll tell the watchman to knock at the house door, and at the same time we'll all come out of our rooms with lights, as if we were going to the dining-room, and catch them."

While this plot was being hatched in the corridor, Petra was preparing breakfast in the obscurity of the kitchen. There was very little to prepare, for the meal invariably consisted of a fried egg, which never by any accident was large, and a beefsteak, which, in memories reverting to the remotest epoch, had not a single time by any exception been soft.

At noon, the Biscayan, in tones of deep mystery, told Petra about the conspiracy, but the maid-of-all-work was in no mood for jests that day. She had just received a letter that filled her with worry. Her brother-in-law wrote her that Manuel, the eldest of Petra's children, was being sent to Madrid. No lucid explanation of the reason for this decision was given. The letter stated simply that back there in the village the boy was only wasting his time, and that it would be better for him to go to Madrid and learn a trade.

This letter had set Petra thinking. After wiping the dishes, she washed herself in the kneading-trough; she could not shake the fixed idea that if her brother-in-law was sending Manuel to her it was because the boy had been up to some mischief. She would soon find out, for he was due to arrive that night.

Petra had four children, two boys and two girls; the girls were well placed; the elder as a maid, with some very wealthy religious ladies, the younger in a government official's home.

The boys gave her more bother; the younger not so much, since, as they said, he continued to reveal a steady nature. The elder, however, was rebellious and intractable.



"He doesn't take after me," thought Petra. "In fact, he's quite like my husband."

And this disquieted her. Her husband, Manuel Alcázar, had been an energetic, powerful man, and, towards his last days, harsh-tempered and brutal.

He was a locomotive machinist and earned good pay. Petra and he could not get along together and the couple were always at blows.

Folks and friends alike blamed Alcázar the machinist for everything, as if the systematic contrariness of Petra, who seemed to enjoy nagging the man, were not enough to exasperate any one. Petra had always been that way,—wilful, behind the mask of humility, and as obstinate as a mule. As long as she could do as she pleased the rest mattered little.

While the machinist was alive, the family's economic situation had been relatively comfortable. Alcázar and Petra paid sixteen duros per month for their rooms on Relojo street, and took in boarders: a mail clerk and other railroad employés.

Their domestic existence might have been peaceful and pleasurable were it not for the daily altercations between husband and wife. They had both come to feel such a need for quarrelling that the most insignificant cause would lead to scandalous scenes. It was enough that he said white for her to cry black; this opposition infuriated the machinist, who would throw the dishes about, belabour his wife, and smash all the household furniture. Then Petra, satisfied that she had sufficient cause for affliction, shut herself in her room to weep and pray.

What with his alcohol, his fits of temper, and his hard work, the machinist went about half dazed; on one terribly hot day in August he fell from the train on to the roadbed and was found dead without a wound.

Petra, disregarding the advice of her boarders, insisted upon changing residence, as she disliked that section of the city. This she did, taking in new lodgers—unreliable, indigent folk who ran up large bills or never paid at all—and in a short time she found herself compelled to sell her furniture and abandon her new house.

Then she hired out her daughters as servants, sent her two boys off to a little town in the province of Soria, where her brother-in-law was the superintendent of a small railway station, and herself entered as a domestic in Doña Casiana's lodging-house. Thus she descended from mistress to servant, without complaint. It was enough that the idea had occurred to her; therefore it was best.

She had been there for two years, saving her pay. Her ambition was to have her sons study in a seminary and graduate as priests. And now came the return of Manuel, the elder son, to upset her plans. What could have happened?

She made various conjectures. In the meantime with her deformed hands she removed the lodgers' dirty laundry. In through the courtyard window wafted a confusion of songs and disputing voices, alternating with the screech of the clothes-line pulleys.

In the middle of the afternoon Petra began preparation for dinner. The mistress ordered every morning a huge quantity of bones for the sustenance of her boarders. It is

very possible that there was, in all that heap of bones, a Christian one from time to time; certainly, whether they came from carnivorous animals or from ruminants, there was rarely on those tibiae, humeri, and femora a tiny scrap of meat. The ossuary boiled away in the huge pot with beans that had been tempered with bicarbonate, and with the broth was made the soup, which, thanks to its quantity of fat, seemed like some turbid concoction for cleaning glassware or polishing gilt.

After inspecting the state of the ossuary in the stew-pot, Petra made the soup, and then set about extracting all the scrap meat from the bones and covering them hypocritically with a tomato sauce. This was the *pièce de résistance* in Doña Casiana's establishment.

Thanks to this hygienic regimen, none of the boarders fell ill with obesity, gout or any of those other ailments due to excess of food and so frequent in the rich.

After preparing the meal and serving it, Petra postponed the dish-washing, and left the house to meet her son.

Night had not yet fallen. The sky was vaguely red, the air stifling, heavy with a dense mist of dust and steam. Petra went up Carretas Street, continued through Atocha, entered the Estación del Mediodía and sat down on a bench to wait for Manuel....

Meanwhile, the boy was approaching the city half asleep, half asphyxiated, in a third-class compartment.

He had taken the train the night before at the railway station where his uncle was superintendent. On reaching Almazán, he had to wait more than an hour for a mixed

train, so he sauntered through the deserted streets to kill time.

To Manuel, Almazán seemed vast, infinitely sad; the town, glimpsed through the gloom of a dimly starlit night, loomed like a great, fantastic, dead city. The pale electric lights shone upon its narrow streets and low houses; the spacious plaza with its arc lights was deserted; the belfry of a church rose into the heavens.

Manuel strolled down towards the river. From the bridge the town seemed more fantastic and mysterious than ever; upon a wall might be made out the galleries of a palace, and several lofty, sombre towers shot up from amidst the jumbled dwellings of the town; a strip of moon gleamed close to the horizon, and the river, divided by a few islets into arms, glittered as if it were mercury.

Manuel left Almazán had to wait a few hours in Alcuneza for the next train. He was weary, and as there were no benches in the station, he stretched himself out upon the floor amidst bundles and skins of oil.

At dawn he boarded the other train, and despite the hardness of the seat, managed to fall asleep.

Manuel had been two years with his relatives; he departed from their home with more satisfaction than regret.

Life had held no pleasure for him during those two years.

The tiny station presided over by his uncle was near a poor hamlet surrounded by arid, stony tracts upon which grew neither tree nor bush. A Siberian temperature reigned in those parts, but the inclemencies of Nature were nothing

to bother a little boy, and gave Manuel not the slightest concern.

The worst of it all was that neither his uncle nor his uncle's wife showed any affection for him, rather indifference, and this indifference prepared the boy to receive their few benefactions with utter coldness.

It was different with Manuel's brother, to whom the couple gradually took a liking.

The two youngsters displayed traits almost absolutely opposite; the elder, Manuel, was of a frivolous, slothful, indolent disposition, and would neither study nor go to school. He was fond of romping about the fields and engaging in bold, dangerous escapades. The characteristic trait of Juan, the younger brother, was a morbid sentimentalism that would overflow in tears upon the slightest provocation.

Manuel recalled that the school master and town organist, an old fellow who was half dominie and taught the two brothers Latin, had always prophesied that Juan would make his mark; Manuel he considered as an adventure-seeking rover who would come to a bad end.

As Manuel dozed in the third-class compartment, a thousand recollections thronged his imagination: the events of the night before at his uncle's mingled in his mind with fleeting impressions of Madrid already half forgotten. One by one the sensations of distinct epochs intertwined themselves in his memory, without rhyme or reason and among them, in the phantasmagoria of near and distant images that rolled past his inner vision, there stood out



clearly those sombre towers glimpsed by night in Almazán by the light of the moon....

When one of his travelling companions announced that they had already reached Madrid, Manuel was filled with genuine anxiety. A red dusk flushed the sky, which was streaked with blood like some monster's eye; the train gradually slackened speed; it glided through squalid suburbs and past wretched houses; by this time, the electric lights were gleaming pallidly above the high signal lanterns....

The train rolled on between long lines of coaches, the round-tables trembled with an iron rumble, and the Estación del Mediodía, illuminated by arc lamps, came into view.

The travellers got out; Manuel descended with his little bundle of clothes in his hand, looked in every direction for a glimpse of his mother and could not make her out anywhere on the wide platform. For a moment he was confused, then decided to follow the throng that was hurrying with bundles and bird-cages toward a gate; he was asked for his ticket, he stopped to go through his pockets, found it and issued into the street between two rows of porters who were yelling the names of hotels.

"Manuel! Where are you going?"

There was his mother. Petra had meant to be severe; but at the sight of her son she forgot her severity and embraced him effusively.

"But—what happened?" Petra asked at once.

"Nothing."

"Then—why have you come?"

"They asked me whether I wanted to stay there or go to Madrid, and I said I'd rather go to Madrid."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more," replied Manuel simply.

"And Juan? Was he studying?"

"Yes. Much more than I was. Is the house far off, Mother?"

"Yes, Why? Are you hungry?"

"I should say. I haven't had a bite all the way."

They left the Station at the Prado; then they walked up Alcalá street. A dusty mist quivered in the air; the street-lamp shone opaquely in the turbid atmosphere.... As soon as they reached the house Petra made supper for Manuel and prepared a bed for him upon the floor, beside her own. The youth lay down, but so violent was the contrast between the hamlet's silence and the racket of footsteps, conversations and cries that resounded through the house, that, despite his weariness, Manuel could not sleep.

He heard every lodger come in; it was past midnight when the disturbance quieted down; suddenly a squabble burst out followed by a crash of laughter which ended in a triply blasphemous imprecation and a slap that woke the echoes.

"What can that be, Mother?" asked Manuel from his bed.

"That's Doña Violante's daughter whom they've caught with her sweetheart," Petra answered, half from her sleep. Then it occurred to her that it was imprudent to tell this to her boy, and she added, gruffly:

"Shut up and go to sleep."

The music-box in the reception-room, set going by the hand of one of the boarders, commenced to tinkle that sentimental air from *La Mascotte*,—the duet between Pippo and Bettina:

*Will you forget me, gentle swain?*  
Then all was silent.

## CHAPTER III

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First Impressions of Madrid—The Boarders—Idyll—Sweet and Delightful Lessons.

Manuel's mother had a relation, her husband's cousin, who was a cobbler. Petra had decided, some days previously, to give Manuel into apprenticeship at the shoe-shop; but she still hoped the boy would be convinced that it was better for him to study something than to learn a trade, and this hope had deterred her from the resolution to send the boy to her relative's house.

Persuading the landlady to permit Manuel to remain in the house cost Petra no little labour, but at last she succeeded. It was agreed that the boy would run errands and help to serve meals. Then when the vacation season had passed, he would resume his studies.

On the day following his arrival the youngster assisted his mother at the table.

All the borders, except the Baroness and her girl, were seated in the dining-room, presided over by the landlady with her wrinkle-fretted, parchment-hued face and its thirty-odd moles.

The dining-room, a long, narrow habitation with a window opening on the courtyard, communicated with two narrow corridors that switched off at right angles; facing the window stood a dark walnut sideboard whose shelves were laden with porcelain, glassware and cups and glasses in a row. The centre table was so large for such a small room that when the boarders were seated it scarcely left space for passage at the ends.

The yellow wall-paper, torn in many spots, displayed, at intervals, grimy circles from the oil of the lodgers' hair; reclining in their seats they would rest the back of the chairs and their heads against the wall.

The furniture, the straw chairs, the paintings, the mat full of holes,—everything in that room was filthy, as if the dust of many years had settled upon the articles and clung to the sweat of several generations of lodgers.

By day the dining-room was dark; by night it was lighted by a flickering kerosene lamp that smudged the ceiling with smoke.

The first time that Manuel, following his mother's instructions, served at table, the landlady, as usual, presided. At her right sat an old gentleman of cadaverous aspect,—a very fastidious personage who conscientiously wiped the glasses and plates with his napkin. By his side this gentleman had a vial and a dropper, and before eating he would drop his medicine into the wine. To the left of the landlady rose the Biscayan, a tall, stout woman of bestial appearance, with a huge nose, thick lips and flaming cheeks; next to this lady, as flat as a toad, was Doña