

going, while it lasted." He put his glass down on the night table.

"What about my spare-parts deal, Paco. Any new ideas?"

"I've asked around. You have an appointment at nine P.M. the day after tomorrow with a Pablo Perez, room 513 in the INRA building. He'll listen. That's all I can promise you."

"Thanks, Paco. I'll take it from there."

"Do you think you can make it?"

"Sure. I come back fast."

"I just hope you don't frighten him to death with that Frankenstein puss you are wearing."

"It will make me look easy and breakable. He'll like that."

"How did you like the woman I gave you at my house?"

"Great, I guess. I passed out and don't even remember it. What was her name?"

"Rita Carlos."

"Yeah, that's it. A sweet kid."

"You can have her anytime."

"O.K., pal. Right now I got other things on my mind and, believe me, I'm not at my best."

Paco got to his feet. "Keep in touch, buddy. Let me know how you come out with Perez."

During the next two days Wilson recovered rapidly from his beating and by the evening of his appointment with Perez felt almost normal. He dusted his facial bruises with talcum powder and peered into the mirror. The evidences of the beating he had taken were now reduced to the point of only adding a further look of toughness to his appearance. He winked at his reflection in the mirror, switched off the light, and left the room.

He took a taxi up Calle 23, meeting a flow of

traffic that moved down the busy street with only parking lights lit. The street lights were out, apparently in an effort to save electricity and the imported fuel oil which generated it. In contrast to the unnatural darkness of a large part of the city, the Plaza de la Republica was brightly lighted when they reached it and filled with a heavy movement of vehicles and pedestrians. The massive bulk of the INRA building loomed nearby, lights blazing in nearly all of its windows.

Wilson was stopped at the entrance by a cold-faced guard who asked why he wanted to enter the building and demanded identification. The guard carefully examined the Canadian passport and compared the picture in it with Wilson's appearance. He then turned and examined an appointment list on a nearby table. Reaching for a numbered blue card, he inserted it into a time clock which printed the time upon it.

"Take this card, señor. Show it when you are asked, and return it to this guard post when you leave the building." The guard handed the card to Wilson and waved him inside.

The lobby of the building was filled with people seeking audiences with the bureaucrats of the Revolutionary Government. An odor of sweat and garlic permeated the warm, humid air and the sound of human voices echoed and re-echoed through the austere hallways. He took a crowded elevator to the fifth floor and pushed his way out into another mass of people that had overflowed from the waiting room of Perez's office into the hallway. Removing his suit jacket and loosening his tie, he shouldered his way through the wall of people in an effort to reach the receptionist seated imperturbably at a desk near the door to the inner office, ignoring the bedlam about her.

When he was about ten feet away, Wilson began to wave his arms and to shout his name. After an interval, the receptionist glanced at him, consulted a list,

and smiled and nodded. "Señor Wilson," she called. "Si. *Si. Esta bien. Esta bien.*"

He faded back into the jostling human mass and found a spot along the wall near the door where there was a slight movement of air. He put his back squarely against the wall and relaxed. In the manner of all Latin American bureaucrats, Perez would probably keep him waiting two or three hours.

It was over three hours. A few minutes after midnight the receptionist stood up at her desk and peering nearsightedly out over the crowd, shouted his name. "Señor Wilson. Señor Wilson, *por favor.*" He tightened his tie and slipped on his coat over his sweat-stained shirt before presenting himself. He had to look like a half a million dollars worth of spare parts. The receptionist motioned him around her desk and opened a door into Perez's office. A wave of cool, light air engulfed him. At least in Perez's office the air conditioning system was working.

Pablo Perez was a large, corpulent man over six feet tall in his fifties with thinning gray hair and a prominent brown birthmark on one cheek. He arose from behind his huge walnut desk and came around it with a surprising agility, extending a hamlike hand. "Señor Wilson! How honored I am! I have heard of you, of course—one of the indomitable little band in the hills. You are immortal! How I wish I had been with you, but I was in charge of the Communist cell in the miners union. It was my unhappy lot to live in Havana and to appear to collaborate with the tyrant. No clean, direct, soul-cleansing combat, only intrigue, dissimulation. Yet we all played our part." He turned toward two men standing nearby. "May I introduce Señor Rodríguez and Señor Castillo? My colleagues, experts on machinery and industrial plants. Invaluable to me, a mere administrator."

He offered Wilson a cigar and lit one himself, ig-

norning his companions. Gesturing toward a table across the room surrounded by club chairs, he threw a heavy arm over Wilson's shoulder and propelled him in that direction. "Let us sit over here, my friend, away from that desk. It is a little less formal, more appropriate for a friendly talk between *compañeros.*"

When the four men were seated, Perez put the thick fingers of his hands tip to tip and looked over them with intent, slightly hooded eyes.

"We are direct in the new Cuba, Señor Wilson. I shall come to the point. You, I am told, have spare parts to sell. What are they? What is the price?"

"I have a list here," Wilson said, taking a soiled sheath of papers out of his coat pocket. "The parts are described in detail and the prices at Toronto are in the right column."

Perez reached for the list and glanced down it rapidly, handing each sheet to Rodríguez and Castillo as he finished. When he had handed the last sheet to Rodríguez, he sat silently for a moment looking at the end of his cigar ash. It finally fell on his bulging shirt front. "The prices appear high, Señor Wilson." His left hand brushed ineffectually at the cigar ash.

"Five per cent over U.S."

"Five per cent over U.S. retail, I believe."

"That's right."

"You have nothing more generous to offer Socialist Cuba?"

Wilson grinned. "Let's don't get all emotional, Señor Perez. I'm in this for a profit. Everything considered, the price is fair. As you know, these parts are not available for purchase by Cuba on the open market."

"What is your source of supply?"

"That is a trade secret."

"I see." Perez and his companions exchanged glances. "Then, *compañero*, we deal at arm's length?"

"Exactly."

"We would have to inspect the parts on arrival in Havana before payment."

"No. You can take delivery in Toronto and inspect the parts there before payment."

"How do you wish payment?"

"Cash, or a prepaid letter of credit."

Perez raised his eyes to Wilson's and said coldly, "You have come a long way since the days in the hills. You act like a typical bourgeois capitalist."

"As I said, Señor Perez, don't get emotional. The revolution is over. This is business. After taking a fair profit, I have to pay my suppliers."

Perez stared unblinkingly at Wilson for a time, then placed his hands on his chair arms and pushed himself into a standing position. "We shall think the matter over carefully, Señor Wilson. Unfortunately we have much equipment of American origin and the American blockade has deprived us of the spare parts we need. You are aware of this, of course. That is why you are here. We may have to discuss terms with you and rely on your generosity. May we keep the list?"

"Sure. As I say, the prices are in the right column."

Perez turned to his companions who had also risen. "Have you questions? Señor Rodriguez? Señor Castillo?" Both men shook their heads without comment. Perez nodded and moved toward the door. "Thank you, Señor Wilson. You shall hear from us."

Wilson turned at the door, nodding at the silent Rodriguez and Castillo and taking Perez's offered hand. "Good-bye, Señor Perez. I shall be at the Vedado Hotel for the next five days, at least."

A highly amused smile spread over Perez's face. "Thank you again, señor. We shall know where to find you."

NINE

THE next afternoon Pablo Perez telephoned Wilson.

"Señor Wilson, we have not yet come to a decision concerning the spare parts, but I am calling to offer you some diversion. How would you like to go fishing tomorrow?"

"Fishing?"

"Deep-sea fishing, for marlin, about ten miles off Havana."

"Swell, but I haven't any gear."

"I will take care of everything. Just dress for a day on the water."

"O.K., I'm with it. Thanks a lot."

"You are a *compañero*, señor. Say nothing more about it. Meet me at berth twelve at the Worker's Recreational Club in Reparto Biltmore."

"Where is that?"

"You may remember it as the Biltmore Yacht

and Country Club. The Maximum Leader seized it from the exploiters and gave it to the workers."

"I've got it. What time?"

"Five A.M."

"Will the fish be up that early?"

Perez chuckled. "I am informed that they will be. *Hasta luego*, Señor Wilson."

"*Hasta luego*."

At five o'clock Wilson was standing on the in-board cement dock of the Worker's Recreational Club looking at the graceful outlines of a thirty-eight-foot motor launch moored stern-in at berth twelve. In the first light of dawn a wiry sailor dressed in soiled white ducks was squatting barefooted in the stern cockpit, plating a length of manila line. "*Buenos*, señor." He glanced at Wilson, his blue eyes contrasting vividly with a deeply tanned, weathered face.

"I am Señor Wilson. I am to fish with Señor Perez this morning."

"We are ready, señor. I am Pedro. I am sure that Señor Perez will come on deck soon after we are under way. He came aboard last night and is sleeping in the large cabin. Señor Rodriguez is with us also. He is having coffee below."

Wilson climbed down a short ladder and stepping on to the stern gunwale of the boat, jumped into the cockpit, ducking under the frame of metal pipes which supported the heavy canvas awning covering the stern.

"I shall tell the lieutenant on the bridge that you are aboard, señor. We shall get underway at once."

"The lieutenant?"

"All motor-powered boats over three meters are under the control of the navy. We have Lieutenant Morales. Don't worry, he is a good fisherman. He will not foul your lines."

Wilson nodded and sat down on a deck chair. "Can I have some coffee? I overlooked getting a portable bed like Perez. I think it will wake me up."

"Of course, señor."

Wilson sat sipping the strong, sweet cup of coffee as Pedro, returning from the bridge, threw off the stern lines at Lieutenant Morales' signal. With a deep growl of its twin diesel engines the boat began to move away from its berth. It progressed slowly down a line of impressive-looking motor launches, its polished brass and mahogany gleaming in the first rays of the rising sun, until it reached the channel leading to the open sea.

As the sun rose clear of the horizon across the massive sea wall that protected the boat slips, Wilson could see the ornate carmel-and-white outline of the old Biltmore Club House illuminated in its golden light. The launch began to pitch slightly in the land swells as they cleared the narrow entrance through the breakwater, rounded the channel buoy, and headed seaward from the white surf which was breaking on the rocks and shallows on both sides of the channel. The diesel exhausts, captured under the canvas awnings, hung acridly and Wilson edged along the narrow catwalk beside the cabin and stood forward of the cabin on the small bow deck. A fresh breeze tipped with salt spray ruffled his hair. He looked up at the figure of Morales on the bridge. He was a harmless-looking, fresh-faced young naval officer in an olive drab uniform. Morales pushed a glass pane open and called from behind the wheel, "Welcome aboard, Señor Wilson. You should have good fishing today."

Wilson nodded. "It looks like a nice day, Lieutenant." He lit a cigarette with difficulty in the wind and turned toward the horizon, a sharp knife edge where the deep blue of the water met the lighter blue

of the morning sky. The boat headed seaward for about a mile and then turned eastward along the coast. For a short time the white and pastel buildings of Havana's new eastern suburbs were visible, then the shoreline became a tangled mixture of palms and mangroves.

Wilson moved back toward the more spacious stern. The change of course had dissipated the fumes. Rodriguez had emerged from the cabin and was sitting stiffly in a chair in a black business suit. He nodded at Wilson over a copy of *Hoy* and continued with his reading. Pedro was baiting with minnows two fourteen-foot bamboo poles.

"They look a little small for marlin, eh, Señor Wilson?" Pablo Perez's big voice boomed out behind him. He was just emerging from the cabin, yawning hugely, his hands thrust in the pockets of a red flannel dressing gown.

"Unless we are looking for small marlin."

Perez laughed. "No, we look for the biggest fish we can find. But to catch a fish, a big, fine, fish, we need good bait, Señor Wilson. You agree?"

"Sure."

"We need live bait that appeals to the marlin, so first we try to catch a few bonefish, pargo or small tuna. That is what these poles are for." He walked over to a revolving chair bolted to the deck at the stern end of the boat. "This is the throne from which we catch the marlin with the heavier pole, the stronger line, and a stout reel. It is called a fighting chair."

Wilson nodded toward Rodriguez with a touch of irritation. "Is he going to fish in that outfit?"

"No. No, my friend, Rodriguez is a dedicated man. He has no relaxation. His work is everything to him. I insisted that he at least come along for the air. He will no doubt plunge one hand into a briefcase soon and do a normal days work while we enjoy ourselves."

Perez spoke to the sailor. "Let us have some sandwiches and coffee. I am hungry."

Pedro nodded and said before entering the cabin for the food, "Here are the poles, Señor Perez. They are ready."

Perez kept one pole and handed the other pole to Wilson. "Let us try our luck." He spoke into a speaking tube connected with the bridge and the boat slowed to trolling speed. Within a few minutes Perez had landed a five-pound pargo. Wilson had hooked a good-sized fish when his line whipped, shuddered, and then hung slack. When he pulled it in, only the head of a pargo remained on the hook.

"A barracuda," Perez said, grinning wolfishly. "It is a hard life being the bait, eh, Señor Wilson? The bigger fish with the bigger teeth just eat the small fish up."

It took about a half-hour to catch enough fish for marlin bait. Pedro, having brought on deck a tray of coffee and sandwiches, squatted on the deck and began to work on the bait. On Perez's order the boat picked up speed and changed course to seaward. "We shall now go out to the Gulf Stream where the marlin run, Señor Wilson."

The sun became hot and the wind died down. They moved over a glassy-smooth sea which in the intense light reflected a painful glitter. "We have nearly an hour until we reach the fishing area, Señor Wilson. Let us sit under the awning with Señor Rodriguez." Perez reached into a large metal chest filled with ice. "Would you like a *cerveza*?" He handed a frosted bottle to Wilson. "Rodriguez?" Rodriguez shook his head with a tiny, thin-lipped smile and nodding to both of them, went up to the bridge.

Wilson looked after Rodriguez with interest. "You know, I don't think he even sweats."

"I believe not. He is an extraordinary man in many ways. I don't know what I would do without him."

"What is he? Your shadow?"

Perez threw back his head and laughed. "I would need someone somewhat bigger for that, wouldn't I? No, Señor Wilson he is merely a dedicated colleague, somewhat lacking in the social graces and perhaps a little too intense, whom I would like to encourage to relax. Alas, he doesn't seem to know how."

"This is some boat. Is it yours?"

"Of course not. As a senior official in the bureaucracy I can sometimes use it. It belongs to the state."

"And is it run by the navy?"

"Yes, a most efficient organization." Perez smiled at Wilson. "You should be particularly interested in this boat."

"Why?"

Perez heaved himself out of his chair. "Can you read upside down?"

"Sure, if I have to."

"Then look over the stern."

Wilson leaned out over the stern. He was aware of the shadow of Perez behind him. The wash of the twin screws threw a mist up into his face. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand. On the stern was painted "El Capitán Jack Wilson."

He straightened up, pleased and confused. "Well, I'll be damned."

"We have named these auxiliaries after some of the heroes of the revolution. I thought you might be pleased to do a little fishing from the one named for you."

"Well, thanks. I am pleased. I didn't think anyone still gave a damn."

"On the contrary, *amigo*. On the contrary."

They moved steadily seaward until the shoreline disappeared from view and only an accumulation of white clouds above the faint smudge of hilltops on the horizon suggested the presence of land. The sailor squatted on his haunches, carefully baiting with a fish the great hook on each line that would be put down for the marlin. He strung the fish on the hook head-down and then carefully tied the fish to the hook with a strong, light fishing line. From an old bulk coffee tin he extracted several sardines and strung them on the still-exposed portions of the hook. He looked up at the watching Wilson and grinned, showing a gold tooth in his lower jaw. "This will make a hungry fish strike, señor."

Wilson nodded and examined the heavy rod. "I just hope I can hold him."

"You will, señor. You have the strength." The sailor squeezed the muscle of Wilson's upper arm with a gnarled hand. "*Muy macho*."

Perez answered a call from Morales on the bridge and turned to Wilson. "We are in the Gulf Stream, Señor Wilson. Let us put our lines down. We shall troll and when there is a strike, you take the pole and slip into the fighting chair."

The boat slowed and, changing direction, began a slow trolling run on a westward course. The sailor threw the baited lines over the side and payed out the lines between his fingers. "We shall try seventy-five fathoms, señor."

Perez nodded. "We steam westward against the current of the Gulf Stream, Señor Wilson. The best marlin are caught that way."

The boat moved slowly over the water. Occasionally a flying fish would break the glassy surface and sail through the air for about forty feet, its outstretched

fins silver in the sunlight, to fall into the water again with a soft plop. One or two landed in the boat cockpit, flapping helplessly until Pedro threw them over the side. A school of dolphins swam by, edging near the boat curiously and then darting away. But there were no marlin.

Perez spoke into the silence. "It is rather tedious to wait, Señor Wilson. This is the true test of the fisherman."

"Thank you, Isaac Walton," Wilson said and grinned. "I would like a little action or a cool breeze. It's hot as hell out here."

The boat wallowed slightly in a gentle swell. The trailing line from Wilson's pole straightened almost imperceptibly. Wilson edged to a more erect posture in his deck chair. "Hey, I think I've got something going."

A definite pull came on the line.

"Let it run out, señor, if he wants it." Pedro breathed over Wilson's shoulder. "Take the fighting chair."

The line slowly ran out and then the tension on the line slackened. "Have I lost him?" Wilson asked, slipping into the harness on the chair and putting on the gloves the sailor handed to him.

"I don't think so, señor. That fish is playing with the bait. Soon he will decide whether or not to swallow it."

The line began to run out rapidly. "Put on the brake, señor," Pedro shouted. "Pull back! Again! Hook him good! Now slack off. You have set the hook, señor. Let him run with it now if he wants."

Wilson could feel the tremendous force on the end of the tight line. The fish was evidently plunging down, down into deep water. The line sang out again and several hundred feet away the surface of the water shattered with a great burst of spray and foam as a

huge blue-and-silver marlin projected himself from the water, arched in the air, and fell back again.

"It is a beauty," Perez called from under the awning. "I congratulate you."

Wilson, perspiring and breathless, did not bother to answer. Rodriguez emerged from the shadow of the cabin and watched the struggle impassively for a moment. Then he shrugged and returned to his reading.

The marlin broke the water again and again, then sounded into the depths. For over two hours Wilson fought with the marlin for line, reeling it in rapidly when the fish slackened in its struggles, and paying it out grudgingly when the fish moved off in renewed effort to lose the sharp hook in its insides. Wilson matched his resolve against the desperate efforts of the fish to free itself.

The sun was just past its zenith when the marlin began to circle the boat slowly, a foot or two beneath the surface.

"He is getting tired, señor. It will not be long."

"Get me a bottle of water," Wilson said.

The sailor went below decks and returned with a beer bottle full of water. Wilson tipped it to his parched and sunburned lips and drank several swallows. The marlin surfaced a hundred yards away and then floated quickly just below the surface.

"Reel in, señor. He is nearly finished."

Rodriguez and Perez left the shade of the awning and moved to the boat's gunwale to watch the final act of the drama. The marlin's back was out of the water. Wilson reeled in carefully, bringing him closer to the boat. "Get the gaff," he said to Pedro, grunting with effort as he slowly gained line. "We'll have him in a minute."

The marlin in one last effort plunged down and away from the boat. The line snapped taut, but Wilson

only lost a few feet of line off the reel. Rodriguez leaned over the stern of the boat and inspected the line carefully. Then he reached into his coat pocket, took out a small gold penknife, and cut the line. The rod, released from its tension, snapped back out of Wilson's hands and landed on the deck behind him with a loud clatter. Wilson rocked violently in the chair and was nearly thrown to the deck. The marlin, with a slap of its tail, plunged into the ocean depths.

Wilson righted the chair and sat in it in shocked disbelief, looking at Rodriguez. Then his face flushed crimson and his bloodshot eyes blazed. "Now why in God's name did you do that?"

Rodriguez carefully snapped the knife shut and dropped it into his pocket. "I felt sorry for the fish."

Wilson got stiffly out of the chair and walked menacingly over to Rodriguez. "I ought to throw you over the side with the marlin. You'd make a good pair."

Perez, his face ashen white, cleared his throat with difficulty. "Señor Wilson, don't do anything hasty."

Rodriguez stepped quickly back from the gunwale. "If you are a true sportsman, Señor Wilson, you will not mind. After all, what would you do with a marlin? You had won your fight."

Wilson clenched and unclenched his fists, fighting for control of his emotions. "O.K.," he growled. "O.K." He turned his back on Rodriguez and walked over to Perez, who was mopping his face with a handkerchief. "Let's get back to Havana. We got nothing but tender hearts and cut lines out here."

Perez sat down heavily in a deck chair and spoke into the intercom to Morales. "Back to Havana, Lieutenant." After a few minutes Wilson and Rodriguez relaxed their rigid stances across the deck from one another and joined him. They helped themselves to beer out of the ice chest. Perez seemed utterly confused and

at a loss for words. He kept glancing at the impassive Rodriguez composedly drinking his beer in little sips. Wilson was sullenly slumped down in his chair, gazing at his beer bottle with unseeing eyes. Pedro had hurriedly left the stern area immediately after the line was cut.

Finally Perez made up his mind. "I am sorry that you lost your marlin, Señor Wilson. I know that it was a disappointment. However, Señor Rodriguez is not a sportsman. To him it seemed most cruel."

Wilson nodded, looking at Rodriguez. "I am sure there is a good reason for everything our doughty little pal does. Forget it, Señor Perez. I enjoyed the day. My only regret is that I intended to present the marlin mounted to the Workers Recreational Club. It is a great disappointment."

When Rodriguez looked up, an opaque, withdrawn look in his eyes, Wilson was soberly gazing out to sea.

like an unsuccessful prize fighter; you look a little more like a spare-parts salesman. Successful or unsuccessful, I can't say."

"I'm having my ups and downs. It went pretty well at the INRA building the other night. I saw this character, Pablo Perez and two other guys named Rodriguez and Castillo. They both played the great stone face. Perez did all of the talking. I gave them the list, told them that the prices were firm, and left. Perez said that he would think it over."

Gomez sipped his beer. "No effort to soften you up? Perez is slipping."

"He gave me the loyalty-to-the-revolution bit. I countered with a snappy, 'Business is business.' It was a draw. Yesterday he took me fishing."

Gomez looked interested. "Then you have something he wants. What did you go out on, the *Santa Clara III*?"

"It was named *El Capitán Jack Wilson*," Gomez burst out laughing. "Why the wily old bastard! He really went to a lot of trouble. Did you fall for it?"

"Almost. After a few hours at sea, I looked proudly again at my name on the stern. The salt water had nearly obliterated it. Poor paint. You could see *Santa Clara II* reasserting her own again."

"Did you catch anything?"

"That's a funny thing, Paco. This guy Rodriguez was along for no special reason. He didn't fish, just sat about reading, and when I was about to boat a marlin after a two hour fight, the son of a bitch cut the line. It's a wonder I didn't kill him."

Paco Gomez rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "How did Perez take it?"

"He looked all shook up. Scared maybe. Confused."

AT one o'clock the next day Wilson took a taxicab to La Florida Restaurant to meet Paco Gomez. He entered the famous restaurant in the heart of the old city through its paneled barroom. Gomez was standing at the magnificent mahogany bar with several other army officers. He saw Wilson come through the door and slipping an arm through his, guided him toward a small small table near the wall.

"Let's sit over here, Chico, where we can talk. I'll introduce you to these other fellows later."

Wilson ordered the frozen Daiquiri which had been invented at La Florida. Paco had carried his beer over from the bar.

"*Qué tal?*"

"Pretty good."

"Your face looks almost normal again and you have a real sunburn." He grinned. "You no longer look

Gomez nodded. "Rodriguez may have done it for Perez's benefit."

"Why? I'm the guy he sideswiped."

"I can't talk to you about the revolution, Chico. I will say this. Rodriguez is a type we have around here, an old-time Communist Party man, Moscow trained. They have their own objectives and instructions. I suppose they come from Fidel, but who knows for sure? You find them in all of the major ministries, just at section head or below. Responsibilities indefinite."

"Rodriguez works through Perez?"

Gomez rocked his head back and forth. "It's not that simple. He keeps an eye on Perez. It isn't clear in these relationships who the boss is—the bureaucrat or the party man. Perez would probably like to know, but he is afraid to try to find out. Rodriguez stays in the background. He likes the ambiguity, the uncertainty. Maybe he reports directly to Fidel. Maybe he doesn't. As long as no one is sure, he has a kind of undefined power. It's negative, perhaps, but it can destroy and it is real. He has to keep Perez guessing, off balance. That may be why he cut the line. Perez was probably up all night wondering why. He has a lot more to lose than a fish."

"Would you say that Perez is Rodriguez' front man?"

"It's not that easy. Perez is the cat with nine lives." Gomez touched the side of his nose with an index finger. "He is on life number seven, I think. He has managed to keep close to the top of the bureaucracy since Machado's time. That hasn't been easy. He is shrewd, intelligent, wily, and he'd sell out his own mother. He knows better than to aspire to the top jobs. They haven't the quality of permanence Perez craves. In his way, he has power too. Power because he knows how to land on his feet."

Wilson nodded slowly. "It's as clear as mud."

Paco ordered another round of drinks. "So, you wait for your buyer, whoever he is. There are worse things to do. You want Rita?"

"I might try again. I don't remember the last time."

"Where do you want her?"

Wilson thought a moment. "Tell her to meet me in the lobby of the Libre at ten o'clock tonight. I'll buy her a drink and we'll have a couple of dances. I may lay her and I may not. I suppose she does get off her back and dance?"

"She's a damn good dancer and a nice kid. Don't get her wrong. She's no whore. She's just nice to you because I told her to be nice to you."

"Sorry, Paco. I guess I'm a little on edge."

"It's O.K., Chico. Forget it. Just don't knock the merchandise."

"But it's O.K. if I knock it up?"

They both burst out in ribald laughter. "Sure, it's O.K., *amigo*," Paco gasped, wiping his eyes; "that's what it's all about."

Rita was sitting demurely on a settee near the file of mahogany plank stairs that rose from the lobby of the Libre in a graceful free-form curve to the mezzanine above. She had her dark, heavy hair up and wore a simple white dress. She looked beautiful and, as she smiled her greeting to Wilson, vulnerable. "It wouldn't have hurt you, you bastard," he thought, "to have picked her up at home and brought her here." He decided that he would take her home at the end of the evening whether he laid her or not. He grinned down at her, "*Qué tal*, Rita?"

"*Bien*. It is good to see you again, Señor Wilson."

"Jack. For God's sake—Jack. You'll make me feel like your father."