

Chen made a little gesture with his hands. "It is the means of exchange in this imperfect world. We could hardly bribe you in ruples or in yen."

"Hardly."

Chen walked with him up stone stairs to the ground level. He opened the small door into the booth. "You will find that your lady love is waiting," he whispered.

Wilson bent forward and slipped into the booth. The door shut behind him. He heard a bolt shoot home. "Hello again," he said to the girl beside him.

"Hello." She returned his gaze without embarrassment.

"Miss me?"

She laughed at this, showing white, even teeth.

"I understand from Chen that we still have a date," Wilson said.

"If you wish."

"O.K., let's get out of here and find someplace where the liquor is more reliable."

The curtains of the booth were pushed back and they walked through the China Club to the street. The lights of the amusement park twinkled in the darkness. The low rumble of the roller coaster and the voices of the crowd drifted across the avenue.

"Let's have some fun," Wilson said, taking her arm.

They entered the brightly lighted gates of the amusement park and walked hand in hand by the concessions. They stood and watched a fire eater demonstrate his skill, while a barker shouted his almost unintelligible pitch, urging them to see the entire performance. Nearby, there was the steady crack of small-caliber rifles at a shooting gallery, and beyond, the entrance to the roller coaster outlined in small blinking white and yellow lights.

"Let's take a ride," Wilson shouted, gesturing to the roller coaster.

The girl looked up at the huge wooden scaffolding with its plunging track and sharp curves and drew back. "Oh, no!"

"Sure, you'll like it," Wilson said and taking her

by the arm, he pulled her toward the ticket booth.

They sat in the front row of a car with three rows of seats. There were no other customers when it was time to start and they had the car to themselves. It moved forward with a slight jerk and then was pulled steadily up the first high incline from which it would begin its free run around the track, which descended in dips and curves to the ground level. They rose slowly above the amusement park until they could see the ocean nearby, its darkness punctuated only by the red and white lights of navigational buoys, and the brighter white lights of Miramar and Vedado strung along the coast until they blended with the glow of the city in the distance.

The girl beside him was shivering uncontrollably. "I am afraid," she whimpered. "I am afraid."

He put his arm around her as they topped the rise. They seemed to hang there for a moment in the soft night. The sounds of laughter and a murmur of voices, blended with the music of a callopie, rose from the amusement park below them, split from time to time by the high crack of the shooting gallery rifles. The girl jerked, moved violently in his arms, and slumped forward, blood from a wound in her forehead streaming down her face. Wilson stared at her uncomprehendingly as the car plunged downward into its first rapid descent. The limp body beside him nearly slipped from his grasp and for a moment he thought it would pitch over the end of the car into the crowd below. He held her tightly with one arm and clung to the car with

the other. The car reached the bottom of the first decline and slowed slightly as it rocked noisily over its uneven steel rails. He took his free hand and raised the girl's hanging head. She was dead, with a gaping bullet wound above her right eye.

The car swung around a curve, throwing the body against him, and plunged downward again, the wind whipping wildly the black hair of the hanging head. On the next level stretch Wilson laid the body lengthwise at his feet and crawled back to the rear row of seats. There was another shallower dip in the track and the car began to lose speed. As it rattled toward the end of its run, Wilson inspected himself for blood. There was some on his hands but none on his clothing. He wiped his hands on a handkerchief and held it in a doubled-up fist until he could safely dispose of it.

The car came to a halt and Wilson sprang out of his seat. A swarthy man in a faded and patched wine-colored uniform smiled at him at the exit gate. "Good ride, señor?"

Wilson nodded. "I'll never forget it," he muttered thickly.

SEVENTEEN

HE walked to the entrance of the amusement park as rapidly as he could without attracting attention. To the left of the entrance was a rank of taxis. He was opening the rear door of the first taxi in the line when a hand firmly gripped his shoulder.

"Come with me, Señor Wilson," a deep, authoritative voice said. It was Captain Muñoz. Wilson meekly followed the army officer to an olive-drab sedan. Muñoz told the driver to take them to the Vedado Hotel. As they swung into traffic, the captain turned his head and coolly appraised Wilson.

"You do not make my job easy for me, Señor Wilson. You play hide and seek with me. You are very foolish. Tonight you nearly lost your life."

Wilson wet his lips and ran a shaky hand through his hair. "That I know."

"Who was shooting at you?"

"I guess that it was the underground. I didn't report to Maria's bar last night as I said I would."

Muñoz remained silent. He lit a cigarette and carefully snapped his lighter shut. They rode a few minutes in silence. "I am taking you to your hotel. I suggest that you stay there. If you have to leave for any reason, call room service and ask for Pepe. Someone will drop by and see what your problem is. Otherwise, don't try to leave the floor. We want to see you leave Cuba alive. Do you still have your alarm device?"

"Yes, but it wouldn't have done me much good on that roller coaster."

"You should not have been on that roller coaster or in either of the two bars. When you left Army Headquarters you should have returned directly to your hotel."

"I know it."

The driver swung into the curbing outside the hotel. "I shall see you to your room, Señor Wilson," Muñoz said grimly.

When Muñoz had left, Wilson sat down heavily on the bed. He reached over to a night table and poured a half glass of rum. A vision of the girl's vacant, blood-spattered face returned to him. He shuddered, swallowed the rest of the rum, and walked into the bathroom to take a shower.

After a night of restless dreams and nightmares, he had breakfast brought to his room and tried to concentrate on reading a paperback Western adventure story he had bought in the Montreal airport. About ten-thirty in the morning his telephone shrilled.

"Señor Wilson?" A familiar, silky voice asked.

"This is Wilson."

"This is Señor Cano."

"Cano? Oh, yeah, Cano."

"I should like to continue our business discussion."

"All right."

206

"Can you lunch with me today at the American Club? Señor Rodriguez will join us."

Wilson wet his lips and made an effort at light-heartedness. "Great. I never like to miss the Rodriguez wit."

"About one o'clock, Señor Wilson."

"One will be fine."

He telephoned room service.

"I'd like to speak with Pepe."

"Pepe?"

"Pepe."

"Pepe who?"

"You have more than one Pepe?"

"Señor, we do not have even one Pepe."

"Well, for Christ's sake, ask around."

"Just a moment, señor." There was a crash of dishes in the background and several loud voices.

"Yes, Señor Wilson?" A voice cut in on the line.

"Who is this?"

"Pepe."

"I'd like to see you."

"Yes. Just a moment."

Ten minutes later there was a knock on Wilson's door and the G-2 lieutenant entered. Wilson glowered at him. "That 'Pepe' thing was a mixed-up mess."

The lieutenant shrugged. "It will work better next time. The operator was supposed to cut out your call. He put it through to the kitchens."

"Cano wants to lunch with me at the American Club. Can I go?"

"Yes. We monitored the conversation. Take the taxi-cab the soldier in front of the hotel indicates. It will wait for you at the American Club and will bring you back here."

"O.K."

Shortly before one o'clock Wilson emerged into

207

the glare of the sunlight on the steps of the hotel. A soldier nearby saluted and indicated a taxi forward of the taxi rank. Feeling very exposed, Wilson hurried to it and slumped in a corner of the rear seat. The driver did not wait for instructions but accelerated away from the hotel with a clashing of worn gears.

Cano and Rodriguez were waiting for Wilson in the barroom of the American Club. Cano arose from the table and extended his hand. "*Qué tal*, Señor Wilson, please sit down. You know Señor Rodriguez, of course."

Rodriguez did not rise and merely nodded gloomily at Wilson.

"We are having sherry, Señor Wilson." Cano smiled at him.

"I'll have a real stiff belt of scotch."

The waiter brought his drink.

"How have you been, Señor Wilson?"

"Busy."

A silence fell and Cano, discomfited, looked at Rodriguez. "Señor Rodriguez would like to complete the spare-parts sale. He feels that we have considered the matter long enough."

Wilson drained his glass and beckoned to the waiter for a refill. "Maybe Señor Rodriguez would like to tell me how he feels."

Rodriguez cleared his throat and spoke in a flat, reedy voice. "We want the spare parts, Señor Wilson. The prices are high. I assume that you did not come to Havana to give us an ultimatum on prices. That is not the Western way of doing business. You must intend to reduce your asking price. I am a blunt, direct man. I cannot bargain. Will you accept a figure based on your prices less a twenty per cent discount?"

"I'll think it over."

"When can you give us your answer?"

"I'm thinking now. I'll give you my answer before we leave here." He glanced at Cano. "Mind if I have another scotch?"

Cano spread his hands. "Not at all, Señor Wilson. By all means."

Rodriguez sipped his sherry and looked at Wilson from under hooded eyes. They went into a luncheon characterized by long silences. Only Cano tried to make conversation. Wilson was preoccupied with his thoughts. Rodriguez, saturnine, was waiting for Wilson to make his decision.

Over a cup of coffee Wilson lit a cigar. "I tell you what I will do. The spare parts are yours at fifteen per cent off the list price."

Rodriguez looked up at a corner of the room for a moment and then nodded. "We agree."

There was another silence.

"Where do we go from here?" Wilson asked.

"We shall draw up a contract," Rodriguez answered.

"You will take delivery in Toronto?"

"I see no objection to that, subject to inspection and valid export licenses."

"Cash in dollars."

"Yes."

"I tried to leave Cuba the other day and was stopped. I have to return to Toronto to complete the details of the sale. What about that?"

Rodriguez put his fingertips together. "You are a Canadian, Señor Wilson. Naturally we have no objection if you wish to return to your country."

"I wished to return the other day and I was stopped at the airport."

"That must have been the army G-2. They have your parole. You will have to speak with them."

"Will you intercede?"

For the first time in Wilson's acquaintance with him Rodriguez broke into a smile. It sent strange muscular spasms across his face and revealed that he had bad teeth. "I don't think my intercession with G-2 would be helpful," he said dryly.

Wilson pushed out his cigar. "Well, let's leave it at that. We've got a deal if I can get out of the country to complete it." He arose and they walked toward the club entrance.

Cano turned to him as they stepped into the street. "I shall prepare the sales contract, Señor Wilson, and you shall hear from me."

"O.K."

Cano shook hands and joined Rodriguez, who was already moving toward their waiting automobile. A hot blast of air struck Wilson and threw him back against the exterior wall of the club. His right arm crumpled under the impact and a wave of excruciating pain flooded over him. He was dimly aware of an acrid smell and of the bodies of Cano and Rodriguez on the sidewalk, then he was engulfed in darkness.

He regained consciousness in a hospital bed. The murmur of voices at his bedside slowly became intelligible and his eyes fluttered open. Paco Gomez was looking at him soberly. Gomez turned to a man in a white smock standing at the foot of the bed. "He is regaining consciousness, Doctor."

"Yes. He should be all right now."

Wilson tried to speak, but his tongue felt very thick and unresponsive.

"Don't try to speak, Señor Wilson," the doctor said. "You are still under the effects of a sedative. In a few minutes you will be more alert." The doctor made a little gesture to Gomez and left the room.

Gomez sat down on a straight chair and watched Wilson. His expression was somber. After about five minutes Wilson said in a slurred voice, "What in hell happened, Paco?"

"Someone lobbed a grenade at you and your friends."

Wilson was silent a moment with his eyes closed. "What happened to me?"

"A badly fractured right arm, some facial cuts, and the effects of blast and shock. You'll be O.K."

"I didn't hear a thing."

"That is usually the way it is when you're close."

You feel the blast, but you don't hear the noise."

"What about Cano and Rodriguez?"

"They are both dead."

Wilson spoke after an interval. "That's funny."

We'd just agreed on a deal for those damn spare parts. Gomez did not reply and a nurse appeared with a cup of soup for Wilson. He sipped it and began to feel better. For the first time he became aware of the patches on his face and that his right arm and shoulder were in a cast.

"Who do you think did it, Paco?"

"I have no idea."

"Was it for me?"

"I wonder."

"Wilson shifted painfully in the bed. "How long do I stay here?"

"Let me work that out. Don't worry about it."

"I'm not. This is better than that hotel room."

There was another long silence. Gomez broke it. "Jack, you had one hell of a lot of money on you when you were brought in here. What was it for?"

"Money?"

"Over six thousand U.S. dollars, not counting your travelers checks."

"Well, that's a long story, Paco."

"I've got the time. Let me hear it."

"I'm not sure I should get you involved."

Gomez made a gesture of impatience. "Don't give me that, Chico. I am involved. I will tell you something few people know. I am the head of the Cuban Army Intelligence Service, G-2."

Wilson opened his eyes a little wider, searching Gomez's face. A discomfited look spread across his face.

"The big man himself. And I couldn't be told until now?"

"It's not the sort of thing a guy goes around bragging about, even to old friends. It's a tricky enough job as it is."

Wilson wiped his face on the sleeve of his hospital-issue nightgown. "Well, five thousand dollars of the money the Russians gave me as a bribe to inform them about the spare-parts deal. The rest of it is mine."

"You have earned a thousand dollars in Cuba?"

"No, I brought it in."

"You didn't declare it on arrival. That's a violation of exchange regulations."

"I didn't know that."

Gomez lit a cigar. He rolled it between his lips, then bit down and looked levelly at Wilson. "Chico," he said, an edge of irritation in his voice, "I am speaking as the head of Cuban Army Intelligence, not as your friend. You understand that I have my job to do. I wasn't born yesterday, either. All of that money was here in Cuba before you even entered the country. We have checked the serial numbers. We watch our dollars damn closely. Now tell me the straight story."

Wilson's eyes shifted and fell. "Some Chinese picked me up last night and gave me the five thousand dollars to involve the Russians in a bribery attempt. I

was to report this to G-2. The thousand dollars was for my trouble."

"For your trouble? You took a bribe."

"Well, sort of."

"Sort of? Did you or didn't you?"

"Well, yes. I took a bribe."

"I'm going to have to impound that money, Chico."

"All of it?"

"Are you offering me a bribe now?"

"No."

"Then I'm impounding all of it."

There was an interval. "Are you feeling more alert, Chico?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry to be hard on you, *amigo*, but you don't seem to know how to stay out of trouble."

"Yeah, I guess that you are right."

"Are you a CIA agent?"

Wilson looked at Gomez aghast. "God, no! What gave you that idea?"

"Just checking the angles. It's always a possibility. You have heard of the CIA?"

"Yes."

"I am glad that you aren't connected with it. That means a death sentence in Cuba."

"So help me God, Paco. I am a Canadian businessman. I wouldn't know how to be a CIA agent."

Gomez relit his cigar which had gone out. Wilson laid back on his pillow, exhausted, a thin film of cold perspiration on his brow. Gomez studied him. "Major Rafael wants to talk to you about the munitions. He'll be along any minute."

Wilson sighed. "Does he have to come now? I feel pretty rocky."

"Yes, he does. The matter is urgent."

"Will you help me, Paco?"

"Help you with what?"

"Help me with the munitions deal. I am so dizzy and this damn arm hurts so much that I am afraid that I won't make sense to Rafael."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Just listen to what I say. Interrupt or contradict me if you think that you should. I don't want to say something foolish or promise something I can't deliver. I'm still feeling the sedatives they gave to me."

"Do you want me to use my influence with Major Rafael?"

"Yes. Influence him to keep it short and sweet."

"O.K. I'll listen. If you sound foolish, I'll interrupt."

"Thanks, Paco."

There was another interval. Gomez pushed out his cigar in an ashtray and then spoke into the silence. "Chico, lately you've been getting into more trouble than you can handle. You are becoming a bit of a problem. Can I say something to you, friend to friend?"

"Sure."

"Most of your problems occur because you are a womanizer and you drink too much."

Wilson flushed and then laughed weakly. "I've never told a woman the time of day and I only drink what I can handle." He shifted uneasily on his pillow. "I never thought I would see the day when a Cuban would criticize a pal for liking women."

"Cubans understand women, Chico. You don't. You think that every time a woman falls into bed with you, she does it because she wants you as badly as you want her. You should remember one thing, *amigo*: the woman never lived who couldn't take it or leave it alone. So why do they take it? Because they want something else from you. The best of them want marriage, children, security, someone to look after. Others want

jewels, money, furs, dresses, all of the things you can buy with your bankroll. The worst of them are the ones who dangle it in front of you because some other man tells them to do it, for blackmail, information, betrayal. That's the kind you seem to know best. As long as you think you are *macho*, the big irresistible he-man, you are a sucker for women. When a Cuban is *macho*, he knows what the price for a woman, any woman, is going to be and he knows that he can afford to pay it. It's never free, Chico. You haven't learned that yet. That's why in my book you may be a security risk."

"If I'm a security risk, what did I spill?"

"Nothing, yet, but you've got me worried, old buddy."

Wilson didn't answer. His head throbbed and the pain in his arm was gradually becoming more intense as the effect of the sedatives wore off. He cleared his dry throat. "I'm sorry if I let you down, old pal."

Gomez was studying him. "The time has come to get you out of Cuba, Chico. You're just breaking the crockery now. With Rodriguez, Cano, and Perez gone, Fidel is going to get really suspicious of this spare-parts deal of yours. He may order me to take you in for questioning at any time, and you know what that means. Or worse, he may turn it over to his political intelligence arm. They would take your entire personality apart before they were through."

"What do I do, Paco?" Wilson asked, wiping a palm across his forehead.

"Just do as I say. Play along on this military equipment deal with Rafael when he arrives. We have to get an exit clearance for you and the munitions sale is as good a pretext as any. It is better for Rafael to request it than for me to request it. They know that you are a friend of mine."

"O.K., Paco." Wilson shut his eyes again.

In a few minutes Wilson's heavy breathing indicated that he had fallen asleep. Gomez stood up, leaned over Wilson, and then left the room. He returned fifteen minutes later with Major Rafael. Walking to the bed, he shook Wilson by his uninjured shoulder. "Major Rafael is here, Wilson."

He opened his eyes slowly. "Rafael? Oh, yeah, sure."

Rafael sat down on the edge of the bed. "I will be brief, Señor Wilson. I know that you do not feel well. My sympathy on your accident. It was a senseless assault." He took a sheaf of papers from a briefcase. "We have our list ready. Do you feel able to look it over?"

Wilson held his eyes open with an effort. "Yeah, gimme." He looked listlessly down the columns of items. "Hell of a slug of munitions. Don't know what I can do, but I'll try."

"The Cuban military attaché in Canada will advise you on the technical problems. You understand that the list is highly classified and should be handled accordingly?"

"Yes."

"Do you vouch for this man's reliability, Major Gomez?" Rafael turned to his fellow officer.

"I wouldn't vouch for my own mother. Until today Señor Wilson has had a good reputation."

Rafael looked thoughtfully at the patient on the bed. "We shall arrange for your exit visa, Señor Wilson, so that you can begin procurement immediately. When will you feel able to depart?"

Gomez spoke for him. "He should leave as soon as possible, Rafael; otherwise, the judicial inquiry into today's bombing might keep him here for weeks. We'll get an affidavit from him on that subject before he goes."

Rafael nodded. "Very well, we'll ask for clear-

ance at once on an important state matter. I shall be in touch with you." He spoke to Gomez rather than to Wilson. Snapping his briefcase shut, he left the hospital room.

Gomez grunted at Wilson. "So far, so good."

Wilson closed his eyes, drifting into sleep again. Gomez stood looking out of the window for a few minutes, then he pressed a call bell. A uniformed soldier appeared instead of a nurse. Gomez took him out into the corridor and spoke in a whisper. "Has this floor been cleared?"

"Yes, sir."

"How about the elevator?"

"All ready, sir."

"Good. Now report back to your unit."

Gomez re-entered the bedroom. He spoke in firm tones from the foot of Wilson's bed. "Chico, you must get up and dress. We are going to get you out of Cuba right now."

Wilson's eyes fluttered open. "What's that?"

"Something's come up. You can't stay here any longer."

"What about Rafael?"

"If he arranges the clearance, we'll legalize the record later. Right now, you're leaving."

Wilson struggled to get up.

"I'll help you dress, Chico." Gomez assisted Wilson out of bed and steadied him on his feet. When he was dressed, he held his arm for a moment. "Can you walk, Jack?"

"Yeah. I can make it."

"Good. Now lean on me and let's walk to the door." They stood in the room's doorway, looking down the empty hospital corridor. Gomez spoke in a low tone, near his ear. "There is a service elevator in that alcove to the right about thirty paces down the corridor. It is unlit. Push the button and step in. No one will

see you. For another five minutes the floor staff will be at dinner. Take the elevator to the basement level. Walk out to the parking lot and get into my convertible. You know it. I'll be with you in a moment as soon as I can make a telephone call."

"Where are we going, Paco?" Wilson slumped against the door jamb.

"To my house. Tonight we'll move you out of Cuba." Gomez looked into Wilson's eyes. "Ready, pal?" "Ready."

"Then, quick! To the alcove and into the elevator before someone sees you."

Wilson walked down the corridor as fast as he could, weaving slightly from side to side as waves of dizziness and nausea swept over him. He reached the alcove. The ceiling light in the alcove was burnt out and he had trouble in the gloom finding the elevator button. He finally found it and pushed it with a forefinger. The elevator door slid open and with an involuntary glance over his shoulder, he hurriedly stepped into the darkness. Too late he realized that he was stepping into an empty shaft. His left arm groped frantically for something to seize and his right arm in its cast stirred uselessly. Then, at a grotesque angle, he plunged downward like a limp rag doll. There was an echoing thud as the body struck the bottom of the shaft six floors and two sublevels below.

At the door to the hospital room Gomez listened intently, his face an emotionless mask. He slowly and carefully lit a fresh cigar and blew out his match with a puff of smoke. Stepping back into the room, he took a portable tape recorder out of the night table beside Wilson's bed. He then re-emerged into the corridor and walked leisurely toward the main passenger elevators in the next wing. He did not look into the alcove as he passed.

THERE WAS A LONG SILENCE in the stark office at the CIA outside Washington. The air conditioning outlet hissed quietly. The man behind the desk had his head bowed in thought. Finally he cleared his throat. "Operation Chameleon," he said slowly without inflection. "Blown sky high."

"It was a good plan, chief," Dave said after a further interval. "Something twisted off. We have to realize that information from the Cuban underground isn't always reliable."

"Or Wilson mishandled it," Ernie interjected. "How did he get involved in gun running? That wasn't in the script. This Major Gomez has informed a press conference in Havana that Wilson signed a written confession that he was a CIA agent. Gomez also claims that Wilson tried to bribe him to approve an arms purchase. It sounds phony as hell to me. Where would that

pigeon get arms? And why would he try to bribe the head of the Cuban army G-2 of all persons?"

The man behind the desk looked thoughtful. "We can guess at many things, but we only know two facts. First, Wilson is dead. Second, that he is accused, but of the wrong thing." He tapped the file with a forefinger. "Now what does that mean? Was Gomez our boy? Did he lose his nerve at the last moment? Did Wilson get mixed up with Gomez and never contact our boy? Is our boy still waiting for the contact?" He laid the file to one side. "If so, he has a long wait ahead of him. Cuba is too hot to handle just now. We'll have to wait for the dust to settle."

"On the plus side," Ernie said, "our cover is intact. The trail begins and ends with Wilson. All of this stuff on Havana radio and at the UN about his being a CIA spy is just the usual Communist reflex action. They have no proof. Nobody believes that the letter is genuine but the Cubans. Frankly, I must admit that I'm damn glad that Wilson is dead. With brainwashing and a circus trial, he would have told the whole story."

"Not the whole story, only the part of the story he knew," Dave pointed out quickly. "We would have denied the whole thing, just as we are now doing. There is no trail back to us."

"Wilson being dead suits Gomez, too," the man behind the desk said dryly, stroking his heavy eyebrows between a thumb and forefinger. "There is only one uncontradicted story: Gomez's. That's a nice position to be in."

"It's made him the man of the hour in Cuba," Dave said and grinned. "Did you see the Havana television pictures they monitored at Key West? Gomez was right next to Fidel on the reviewing stand this week. Fidel managed to talk three hours on the subject of loyalty, with Gomez as the sterling example."

The man behind the desk picked up a sheet of

paper. "Would you like to hear what our Department of State Press Officer is going to say later today? Listen to this: 'The charge of the Castro Communist government that the United States tried to bribe a senior Cuban army officer in an effort to sell faulty and obsolete arms to Cuba is ridiculous on its face. First, the United States has no intention of selling arms, faulty, obsolete, or otherwise to Cuba. Second, we have never heard of the alleged agent, Canadian John Wilson, now conveniently dead. Third, we would hardly use a national of a friendly foreign power for what in the Cuban version would be a serious act of military sabotage. The marked currency allegedly used in the bribery is a self-serving device so obviously transparent as to be absurd. The signed letter of Wilson confessing that he was an agent of the Government of the United States is an equally obvious forgery. We must dismiss this story as another in the seemingly endless line of fabricated charges against the United States originating in Cuba for purposes of propaganda and to keep the Caribbean in a state of tension. It is distinguished only in that it shows even less imagination than some of the others.'"

"I don't know about the imagination," Dave drawled. "Somebody in Cuba must have been smoking Chinese opium on this deal."

The man behind the desk put the sheet of paper in the file folder and closed it. "That wraps it up, I think. It was a good try and it didn't cost much, under forty thousand dollars. It's worth that much to keep our hands in. Now," he added briskly, "let's get back to the Dominican matter."

Nine months later the Dominican matter was nearly completed, with ambiguous and inconclusive

results. Ernie and Dave were nearing the end of a long, meandering conference with the man behind the desk. The air was blue with tobacco smoke and heavy with the smell of stale coffee. The door opened and the secretary of the man behind the desk entered and laid a cable message on his desk. "I thought that you would want this right away." He picked it up. His brow furrowed for a moment and then cleared. A quizzical smile played about his lips.

"This is a surprise!" He looked at Ernie and Dave. "It's rather nice that you two happen to be here today. Let me read this to you. It's a cable from Zürich to a cover cable address known as Sailex, Toronto. 'Arranging order 78/3 subject deposit full stop Marbella.' Does that sound familiar?"

Ernie exploded. "Familiar? That's our 'go' signal for the Cuban operation! That means our boy is ready to knock down Fidel."

The man behind the desk stretched and rubbed the back of his neck. He then broke into a face-creasing, full smile. "Well, well, well. Our little plan seems to have some life in it—a mysterious message from outer space. Is it Gomez?"

Ernie nodded. "Who else?"

Dave thoughtfully scratched his ear. "I have often wondered why our boy wanted to see Wilson personally in Cuba. He already had the whole story from the one person he trusts, his sister. If he had any doubts, all he needed to do was to send the coded cable message and he would get one million dollars worth of reassurance.

"Is this the picture?" Dave continued. "Wilson contacts the sister of Gomez in Spain and Gomez decides to act on our offer. Wilson is the only connection between Gomez and us and the only person who can tie Gomez to his sister in Madrid and to the bank account.

So, Wilson must die. He is invited to Cuba to be killed. Before he is killed, he is tricked into signing a confession and is framed for bribery in a phony arms deal, thereby casting Gomez in the role of the ever-alert patriot who discovers a plot of the CIA. Two for the price of one. Does it fit?"

"It fits," Ernie said slowly. "I've learned since we last talked together that Gomez also has a tape recording proving that Wilson offered the bribe. Gomez also claims that Wilson fell down an elevator shaft in an attempt to avoid being apprehended and arrested. We didn't know the way in which they killed the poor bastard at first. Of course we all know that you can cut and splice a tape and make it say almost anything you want."

"It went over big with Fidel," Dave said. "That's all that mattered to Gomez. He had an audience of one."

Ernie grinned. "Bigger than you know. Yesterday Fidel, in addition to Gomez's G-2 duties, made him the new head of Cuba's elite security unit—primary duty—guarding Fidel." He erupted in a heaving chuckle. "So that's why we got the code message. The last piece in Gomez's plan fell into place!"

A silence fell in the room. At length the man behind the desk spoke. "Of course we don't know that this message came from Gomez. We can't be positive that he is our boy. But does it really matter? The person behind this could be called What's-his-name and we would still have to recognize him as a first rate mind. First rate. Good organization sense. Prudent. Ruthless. He might make it. He just might make it." He reflected a moment. "Ernie, what was it, a million?"

"Yes, to a numbered account in Zürich."

"Send it."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm thinking of that poor bastard Wilson," Dave murmured. "We owe him fifty thousand dollars."

"We have to remember that we never heard of Wilson," the man behind the desk spoke incisively. "It suits us quite as well as Gomez or whoever it is that we are dealing with that Wilson is dead."

Dave carefully lit a cigarette. "Did you think that our boy would knock off Wilson, Ernie?"

Ernie reached into his pocket for a package of chewing gum. He unwrapped a stick and put it in his mouth. "I must admit that the thought occurred to me."

"When?"

Ernie grinned. "That isn't a very friendly question, Dave boy, so I'll just make a statement instead of an answer. We have a cocked gun at Fide's head. All we do to pull the trigger is to deposit one million dollars to a numbered account in Switzerland. There is no way to relate the deposit to the firing of the gun. The last thread disappeared when Wilson fell down that elevator shaft. Personally, I like it fine."

The man behind the desk nodded. "So do I. It's been a 4.0 operation. Send the money, Ernie. Pull the trigger."