THE FIGURE IN THE PHOTOGRAPH

KEVIN SULLIVAN

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

First published in Great Britain by Allison & Busby in 2020.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

First Edition

ISBN 978-0-7490-2531-1

Typeset in 11.5/16.5 pt Adobe Garamond Pro by Allison & Busby Ltd.

The paper used for this Allison & Busby publication has been produced from trees that have been legally sourced from well-managed and credibly certified forests.

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

CALEDONIAN RAILWAY
Board of Trade (Railway Department),
8 Richmond Terrace, Whitehall, London, SW,
8th August 1898

Sir,

I have the honour to report for the information of the Board of Trade, in compliance with the Order of the 24th March, the result of my enquiry into the incident that occurred at 6.10 a.m. on the 24th March, near Eglinton Street station, Glasgow, on the Caledonian Railway industrial branch line.

A six-wheeled tender, and two four-wheeled carriage beds (unladen), without brake carriage collided with a pedestrian near the junction south of Cathcart Road, where the industrial line crosses the main road ex. Laurieston.

The pedestrian was severely injured as a result of direct contact with the forward wheels on the left side of the tender, and suffered the loss of the right leg and left arm below the elbow. Although help was summoned, death occurred within ten minutes of the incident. A post-mortem found that death was caused by loss of blood.

The constable on traffic duty witnessed the incident and filed a report which was subsequently notarised and has been corroborated by statements given under oath by two independent witnesses. No commercial or criminal liability has been raised.

I have &c.,

H. A. Lancaster, Lieut.-Col., RE

The Assistant Secretary

Railway Department, Board of Trade

CHAPTER ONE

Santiago de Cuba

One week before Christmas in 1897, we entered a hamlet on the way to Cárdenas. Not even a stray dog barked. We noted the silence as we began to move among the houses and shacks. We stopped – but too late. Armed men emerged onto the road, in front of us and behind us. One of them ordered us to dismount. He asked us where we were coming from and where we were going and what our business was. He was about forty, of average height, dressed in black boots, white cotton trousers and a white shirt that might have been washed recently. His grey hair was cropped; he was clean-shaven and his pale face struck me as being scholarly. I guessed he was the commander.

My father explained that we had been commissioned by William Collins, Sons & Co of Glasgow, London and New York to make a record of Cuba's most distinguished buildings.

The commander actually laughed. 'Photographers!'

He asked if we were armed. My father said we were not.

Another man inspected the packs on the horses.

No one was in uniform.

'No weapons,' the man rifling through our saddlebags said.

The commander looked ahead at the village and then, bringing his gaze round to meet ours, he said, 'Follow me.'

We walked behind his horse. My father glanced at me and I glanced at him.

'I am sorry, Juan!' he whispered.

'No, no, it will be fine,' I said.

Behind us our horses neighed in protest at being led by unfamiliar hands. I looked round and saw the beasts surrounded by men bearing carbines and machetes. None of them spoke.

We entered a street made of one-storey mud and thatch houses. There were cooking pots and bits of furniture in the drain that ran down the middle of the street. We had to pick our way through clothes and debris on the packed earth.

At the end of the street was a walled garden about ten yards by ten yards. On three sides the walls were too high to see over; they were thickly covered by creepers from which bright pink blossoms sprouted. The fourth wall was lower, and beyond it I could see fields. Eight human figures lay on the earth along one wall. At first, I thought they were sacks of maize.

They had been bound hand and foot. Each corpse faced skyward.

The commander moved towards the bodies and we followed, putting our hands and then our shirts over our faces to fend off the smell. I looked down at the bodies, first the feet and then the cotton trousers and shirts and finally the faces. Some had pus and other viscous substances coming out of their mouths; some had

punctures in their heads; others had punctures in their chests.

'I want you to photograph them,' the commander said.

My father was silent.

'Why?' I asked.

I did not consider if it was prudent to speak. I was simply baffled.

'Because I want people to understand what happens to criminals in Cuba.'

We didn't know which side the dead had been on and which side the living.

My father's voice didn't waver when he said, 'Juan, the Kessler.'

My father was not a cold-blooded man, but neither was he without common sense. Perhaps if they had ordered us to bury the bodies or perform some such task we would have complied less easily. But making photographs offered the slight prospect of safe passage. We set to work.

The Kessler was our tallest tripod, equipped with a hinge and screw that could hold the camera at a perpendicular angle. This way, a photograph of the victims could be taken from above. It required the camera operator to stand on ladders.

'That wall has timber halfway up,' my father said.

The wall adjacent to where the bodies lay had a trellis attached to wooden beams that had been placed among the bricks. The beams offered a makeshift platform on which my father could balance and operate the camera.

Our horses had been brought to the edge of the garden. I set up the tripod and my father brought the Eclipse, our standard portrait camera.

The dead were barefoot; three had beards, all had moustaches, except for the boy at the end, who looked about fourteen. The

oldest was perhaps sixty. I guessed that the figure next to the boy, a middle-aged man with cropped grey hair, had been the leader. I might have been quite wrong, yet this group in death appeared to have a kind of hierarchy. One face looked at the blue sky with authority and that was the grey-haired man next to the boy. I wondered if they were father and son. And then I became angry, for the silence around us was the silence of eternity and none of these figures would ever explain or protest or teach or persuade or rob or serve or farm or mend again. My father and I made a portrait of something evil.

And we did this with all the skill and attention to detail that was part of our profession.

They took us to one of the houses and we developed the plates there: three images altogether.

'What are you going to do with these?' I asked the commander, who arrived as the photographs were drying.

I asked him because I wanted to hear his voice. I thought I would be able to tell from his voice if they intended to kill us.

'We'll make sure that people see them,' he said.

Soon after this, they allowed us to continue our journey to Cárdenas.

As we crossed the island, chaos grew and killings multiplied.

The army herded peasants into hamlets to separate them from guerrillas, but the hamlets were more squalid than the worst city slums. Thousands died from typhus and dysentery. The guerrillas burned crops because the planters were allied to the *peninsulares* – and, of course, when the crops were burned it was the peasants who suffered.

* * *

Near El Cristo in the west, we photographed Euphemia and Robert McClellan. Mrs McClellan grinned. Her husband said, 'Effie, a wee bit of gravitas if you please!'

'Och!' she replied.

My father pursed his lips in his amiable way, though the sitters may have missed this as his thick black moustache largely obscured his mouth. He peered again into the viewfinder. His expression was concentrated but good-humoured, as always.

'Are you ready, Señor Camarón?' Mrs McClellan asked in good Castilian. 'My husband wants me to look glum and I can only manage that for a few more seconds!'

When she said this she began to giggle and this caused her husband to begin smiling, and to look away from the camera.

'Effie,' he said, 'Señor Camarón has been very patient, but we have already taken up too much of his time.'

Urgently and earnestly, my father said, 'No, no please, do not think it! We have more time, and Mrs McClellan has a lovely smile!'

It was no more than a statement of fact. My father's habit was to speak truthfully and without calculation.

Mr McClellan composed his features and Mrs McClellan looked at the camera first with mock seriousness and then with an expectant expression. She was no longer laughing, but her eyebrows rose very slightly so that the principal thing that anyone looking at her portrait might have noted was her cheerfulness. My father pressed the shutter.

'Done!' said Mrs McClellan. 'Now, please eat with us. It's well past lunchtime!'

We sat at a table on the edge of a little courtyard that separated the McClellans' residence from their clinic and dispensary.

To me, these people seemed remarkable, very steady and determined. But there was an additional aspect of character that placed them, I thought, at a remove from the planters and officers and merchants we customarily photographed. We had spent much of the morning with Robert and Effie, preparing the backdrop for their portrait and setting up the camera in their dining room. Whatever they did, whether serving coffee or posing for the portrait or discussing their work, they did as though for the first time. They were by turns amused, exasperated and surprised. They provoked and encouraged each other. I thought of two lion cubs meowing and scratching and turning somersaults.

The day became very still. As we drank tea on the veranda and ate pastries and spoke about the war, the silence in the yard and beyond grew more oppressive until Robert said, 'Who's this?'

He spoke easily but he could not keep from his voice a tiny barbed undertone of apprehension.

We looked through the trees to a stretch of plantation and followed the eddying progress of figures moving through the cane. They followed a zigzag path, which we picked out clearly as the tops of the sugar stalks swayed one way and then another.

Two men came out into the open and hurried towards us.

'Who is it?' Effie asked, peering towards a man and a boy. Her voice was less laden with concern than her husband's, but it was not the same voice with which she had joked when they were being photographed.

'Alejandro Reyes from the *huerta*,' Robert said. He stood and moved to the top of the veranda steps.

Effie got up too.

Reyes clattered up the steps and onto the veranda and said, 'Señora McClellan.' (He said *Mac*Lel*lan*, stressing the first and

last syllables.) 'Ana Encarni in Las Rosillas is in labour but something is wrong.'

Reyes glanced at us and made a perfunctory bow. Then he twirled his hat between his fingers. Effie went into the house.

Robert turned to us and said, 'Perhaps you can go ahead and make use of the pantry? I'll be back shortly.'

When we had arrived to take a portrait of the McClellans – a gift from prominent townspeople to show the two outsiders that the medical service they provided to the poor of the district was acknowledged and appreciated by the local rich – Robert had shown us the basins and working surface in the little pantry and we had indicated that this would be a suitable place in which to develop the photographs.

Effie returned. She had put on boots and she carried a carpetbag in her left hand and a leather satchel in her right. 'We'll be back before long!' she told us, speaking over her shoulder as she skipped down the steps. The others – her husband, Reyes and the boy – followed her as she plunged into the plantation. The tops of the sugar cane swithered away from us.

My father took the three plates from the camera in the parlour and I went ahead to the pantry and selected enamel trays that would serve our purpose. It was a small room, and when my father joined me there we had barely enough space to move our hands and arms. But we had done this work so often together that we didn't get in each other's way. My father taught me how to develop photographs almost at the same time that he taught me how to read and write.

When the plates were laid out on the working surface and the sodium sulphate and emulsifier had been added to the water, my father closed the door and I separated the negatives

from the plates and immersed them in the developing fluid. We worked by the light of an oil lamp that burned through a blue wax filter. In such a small developing space the smell quickly became pervasive. We could not have stayed in this chemical and airless atmosphere for more than a few minutes. I worked quickly, but I was not careless or inattentive. Quite the opposite. In our strange enclosed room by the blue light, separated by a kind of cauterising darkness from the war-torn island beyond, we were wholly absorbed in bringing life to paper.

And life did come. A million facets of the same image sprouted on the page.

Since the trays were not quite large enough to accommodate the entire surface of the paper, the edges were slightly raised, which meant that the outer parts of the image adhered to the paper first. The shapes and shadows moved inward, from the painting on the wall behind the two figures and the edge of the large sideboard, across two bamboo stems on the yellow paper of the backdrop frieze, neatly framing Robert on the right and Effie on the left. I watched the figures appear and marvelled at my father's skill. He had not simply photographed two Europeans in Cuba. He had photographed Robert and Effie McClellan. He had captured their vivacity, their moral purpose. They *looked* like missionaries.

Effie's black hair had been arranged in the Gibson fashion, drawn up loosely and collected at the back. It was profuse and elegantly unruly – like the woman herself, I thought. Robert wore a light linen suit with no watch chain on his waistcoat. His hair had begun to thin but his moustache was as thick and luxuriant as any native-born Cuban.

When the photograph was taken, I had attended to the

expression in Effie's eyes, which was humorous and expectant. I had thought Robert more formal and reserved, but now I saw that his own expression was particular. He had not drawn himself up to strike a pose. He looked *content* – something that few sitters ever managed to achieve.

When we came out of the darkroom even the heavy tropical air seemed fresh. We went to the veranda to wait.

Robert arrived more than an hour later.

'I'm very sorry,' he said, bounding up the steps two at a time. 'We didn't mean to abandon you!'

My father began to protest, earnestly and honestly, that we hadn't felt in the least abandoned but that we should now be on our way.

'That's the other thing,' Robert said. 'It seems there's been trouble between here and the town.' He pulled over a wicker seat and sat between us. 'I think you should really stay with us tonight. It isn't safe on the road now that it's late. We have plenty of room.'

My father glanced out to the yard. He wasn't alarmed by the unspecified 'trouble', just inconvenienced. He looked at me.

'That's very kind of you,' I told Robert, 'but we would be imposing.'

'Och no!' he said, with a sort of friendly indignation. 'Besides, Effie would never let me hear the end of it if I let you go!'

Robert left us again after an hour and soon afterwards returned together with his wife.

She called up to us cheerfully as she crossed the yard in the dark. 'Thank you for staying! I hope you will be comfortable.'

At dinner I found it impossible not to raise the subject of the afternoon's emergency. Neither of them had spoken of it.

'The birth was successful?' I asked.

Effie sighed. 'It was difficult.' She looked down at her potatoes and then she added, 'God's will be done.'

They were both more subdued than they had been earlier in the day, but the conversation at dinner was lively nonetheless. Inevitably, we arrived at the subject of independence.

'Of course it's high time,' Robert said. 'And the Americans will help.'

My father was genuinely puzzled. 'Spain is *already* helping.'

'But the Cubans don't want Spain's help.' Robert was firm.

My father shook his head. 'I haven't met any of these people, the ones who are always said to want separation.' He put his hands out in front of him, palms up. 'That's the truth. The people we meet just want things to be normal again.'

'But normal isn't good enough. Normal is . . .' Robert stopped and glanced at his wife and then continued, 'Normal is the absence of roads and schools and hospitals.'

'We believe,' Effie said, 'that Cubans will benefit from progress, from modern discoveries, modern inventions.'

'But why must these things come from *America*?' My tone was unguarded, perhaps even indignant.

'It doesn't *have* to be America,' Effie said. 'And in this case I think we can agree that the modernisers are Cubans themselves.'

'They've all spent time in the United States,' I said, 'and they receive money from there.'

'That's true,' Robert said, 'and it's logical. The United States has harnessed the energy of its industry and its agriculture for the sake of progress. That's what can happen in Cuba too!'

I wondered in what way Spanish industry had not been harnessed. 'I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to suggest . . .' But I

wasn't at all sure what it was I didn't mean to suggest.

'Ana Encarni in Las Rosillas lost her baby,' Effie said in a tone that was suddenly rather hard. 'We arrived too late. Perhaps something could have been done if it hadn't taken us an hour to reach the *huerta*, or if there was a proper hospital in the town, or if a telegraph line had been carried up into the hills as was promised many years ago. I think these tragedies must end. If the Cubans can run their own affairs better than they have been run until now, then I believe they should have an opportunity to do so.'

'Is it far from here?' I asked. 'The *huerta*?'

'Not far,' Robert said, 'but the track was washed away in the springtime and now it's necessary to go down by the river and then climb up past the *cortijo romero*.' He chuckled. 'If you are in the medical line you have to learn the highways and byways. I think we know every house within fifteen miles of here.'

Effie smiled. 'It has been our privilege to discover a universe in our little corner of God's earth.'

'There are more kinds of personality than there are illnesses,' Robert said.

'I suppose a doctor must be alert,' my father remarked, 'to every shade of emotion.'

Robert nodded. 'I once knew a physician who was so utterly focused on the *science* of illness – the organisms that can be seen beneath a microscope – that when his own child became ill with polio fever he failed to recognise the symptoms!'

'That was a sad case,' Effie said. 'But little could have been done, even if he had diagnosed the infection.'

Robert looked into the middle distance. 'It's the man's reaction afterwards that I find most intriguing. He poured all his energy into the study of polio. I don't think he understood his family any

better, but he certainly became an expert on the disease. I hear he's made great strides. They speak of a vaccine soon.'

'And the child?' I asked. 'The doctor's child?'

'Crippled, but otherwise a full recovery.' Robert said. He shook his head slightly. 'Medicine cannot cure all the ills of humanity, but it can help along the way.' Then he added thoughtfully, 'But the best medicine is *empathy*.'

We considered this for several moments. Then Effie said to me in a gentle voice, 'I'm sorry, Juan, I was strident when I spoke of Cuba and Spain. I didn't mean to offend you.'

I raised a hand and replied with some feeling, 'But I'm not at all offended, I respect your opinion, Mrs McClellan!'

She smiled and changed the subject. 'Photography is a very modern art. Isn't it?'

Her cheerfulness seemed to me to illuminate the world around her.

'Have you always specialised in portraits?' Robert asked my father.

'To tell the truth, we *don't* specialise in portraits! We do it because there's a demand.' He looked at Robert and then at Effie and then at me before he added, 'But it's something we do to the very highest standard . . .'

Robert was immediately tactful. 'Your work bears that out, Señor Camarón.'

They had been pleased when we showed them the finished portraits.

When my father explained the commission from William Collins to photograph the island's buildings, Effie was enthusiastic. 'I've a brother in Scotland who's done similar work,' she said. 'He was asked to make photographs of the

oldest parts of Glasgow before the buildings were demolished to make way for improvements.'

'I hope the buildings we have documented will last for a long time yet,' my father said. 'Some of them have endured for centuries now.'

'But it must be difficult to do this work in present circumstances?' Robert spoke in a practical, businesslike way – he and Effie were engaged and energetic, but at the root of everything there was pragmatism.

'We have spent almost two years photographing churches and town halls and everything in between,' my father said. 'We have almost completed our work.'

Effie asked about our family. My father explained that he was born in Cuba. His family moved to Spain in 1870, when he was seventeen.

'The time of the first rebellion?' Robert asked.

My father nodded. 'We left soon afterwards . . . there was a question of . . . loyalty.'

'Your family were among the insurgents?'

'My father was a Freemason. A number of that confraternity led the fight against Spanish power.' He added with characteristic candour, '*They* were champions of the progressive ideas you have spoken of – though my father was not *entirely* progressive: he had not freed his slaves. In any case, we left with some urgency. I continued my studies in Madrid.'

Before he decamped from Cuba in the violent autumn of 1870, my grandfather had established a thriving plantation near Poblado de Ceuta, about ten kilometres east of Santiago. His brother, Miguel, made his peace with the authorities and took over the running of the property. On Miguel's death, shortly

before we returned to Cuba, the Hacienda de Ceuta devolved to my father, though his cousin in Santiago had acquired the legal right to manage the place.

'You have visited Scotland?' Robert asked. 'Your publisher is from Glasgow.'

'Juan was *born* in Scotland – but we returned to Spain when he was very young.'

Just the two of us had returned. My father's reticence about my mother was the only obdurate, the only *closed* thing about him. She was Scottish and an actress; he had met her at the variety theatre near the Congreso de los Diputados in Madrid. They fell in love.

In Scotland my mother left us.

'Do you remember Glasgow?' Effie asked me.

'I was very young.'

To my astonishment, my father said, 'You were fond of the river.'

'The boats,' Effie said.

'He loved to go across the narrow bridge where the small cutters are moored. We would stand in the middle and Juan would point to the cutters.'

'I don't remember.' To my great embarrassment my voice trailed away into a sort of whisper, as though my inability to recapture this vignette from a faraway city were a painful loss.

The following morning, soon after dawn, we set off. We wanted to photograph the church in El Cristo before continuing to Santiago.

The lower part of the eighteenth-century church tower in El Cristo was slanted; near the top there was a circular gallery: the building looked like a lighthouse that had been disfigured

by a powerful wave. My father worked methodically, as always, ensuring that the images conveyed the peculiarity of the structure, but without exaggeration.

He was entranced by buildings. He responded to a well-made facade as other men respond to a poem. When I was about eight years old, I remember in the Puerta Real in Granada my father stopped suddenly in the middle of the road; he was holding my hand; oblivious of the carts and carriages clattering by on either side of us, he said, 'Look at the pediments, Juan!' He pointed up at the facade of a new hotel. 'They are like handwriting!'

My father's general lack of commercial acumen meant that our material resources, which had once been adequate, were systematically depleted. When we sailed from Cádiz for Havana in 1896 our most valuable possessions were the Eclipse and Eastman cameras and the equipment that accompanied them.

Yet with each new departure my father assumed that our fortunes would take a turn for the better. Although he was inclined not to depend upon it – preferring instead to place his confidence in his own work – the plantation legacy promised to deliver us from material uncertainty. But this was not foremost in his thoughts. His life derived meaning from his work, and he believed that the publication of his portfolio on Cuba's architectural heritage would contribute in a significant way to a better understanding of the Spanish world.

When we travelled, he carried the Eclipse and the developing equipment and I carried the Eastman along with the tripods and screens. Our clothes filled a single valise and we each had a satchel with documents and a little money.

* * *

We rode down to Santiago the day the Americans landed at Daiquirí further to the east.

At noon we stopped and rested in the shade of some eucalyptus trees beside a grassy plateau where the narrow path had opened into something like a road. We caught our first sight of the town just after six when we crested a hill on the winding *sendero*. The bay stretched before us: spread around it were steeples and domes. The ocean glittered turquoise as the sun slipped to the west.

'Another hour, I think,' my father said in his hopeful way.

Soon after dark, we were in the townhouse of my father's cousin Paco and his wife, Eleanora. It would have been hard to find a married couple more different from the merry McClellans we had photographed just a day earlier.

Eleanora exuded unhappiness. Her face was long and deeply lined and she looked away when I took her hand as Paco introduced us.

'This is the baby from the photograph,' Paco said, 'but he has certainly grown out of his nursery clothes!'

Eleanora quickly let go of my hand, still avoiding my gaze.

'I am honoured to meet you, Doña Eleanora,' I said.

'Have the horses been stabled?' she asked her husband. 'Did you put them by themselves? There's been tick fever in El Cristo.'

There were two other horses in the stables behind the house, a black mare and a grey stallion with a distinctive brown streak that followed the contour of the head like a cap. I was quite sure we had not brought tick fever or any other contagion with us.

Eleanora led us into a parlour. Since no one had offered to take our things, we carried them with us and placed them behind our seats at the table. A servant brought coffee.

'Things are very bad,' Paco said.

'You won't be able to visit the plantation,' Eleanora said, answering a question that my father hadn't asked.

Paco looked at us with evident commiseration. Although he was the same height as his wife he somehow managed to appear shorter. He had pale skin and pale blue eyes. He was nervous and apologetic, whereas his wife was nervous and unfriendly.

'And it's not clear what the situation will be even when the fighting is over,' Eleanora said. 'Your best course would be to head right back the way you came. There's still time to leave the city.'

'I would like to visit the plantation when it becomes possible,' my father said. He spoke very steadily, almost sadly. When he was disappointed by others, my father expressed sadness above all else. 'And Juan and I have work to do here in Santiago. We will photograph the cathedral and the principal buildings.'

Eleanora looked at him with suspicion. She was suspicious, I think, because the only motivation she recognised in anyone was the motivation that governed her own actions – self-interest. And she was contemptuous too. Perhaps she believed that if my father really did care about completing his documentation of Cuban architecture then he was a fool as well as a threat.

This woman's dislike for us was very deep.

'Everything is changing,' she said. 'There is a revolution in Cuba!'

We had been on the island for two years and had travelled from Havana over the course of seven months, so we may have had a deeper acquaintance with the nature and consequences of the upheaval than Doña Eleanora.

'The Spanish cannot hold out against the Americans.' Paco's tone conveyed a species of delicate regret. We were Spanish, while Eleanora and Paco were Cuban.

When we sailed from Cádiz two years earlier this distinction was not well understood, at least in Spain.

'They should have left long ago,' Eleanora said. 'Now we'll take charge of our *own* affairs. Others won't steal what rightly belongs to us.'

I understood, and I think my father understood, that Eleanora was not speaking about Spaniards in general but about two Spaniards in particular.

My father, though inclined to be accommodating, was sensible. 'We would like to stay with you,' he told Eleanora and then, turning to Paco, he added, 'I had understood from our correspondence that you would offer us the hospitality that one member of a family is entitled to expect from another.'

He waited.

'There is a room across the hall that you can have,' Eleanora said at last.

I feared that they were not going to offer us any food, but in this at least my pessimism was unfounded.

Over dinner, Paco spoke with enthusiasm about how things would change for the better when the Spanish left.

'With American capital we can start to mechanise. This is what I've always argued!'

'But you have *Spanish* capital,' I said. I was still smarting at the way we had been received and I did not think we would be with this disagreeable couple for very long – so I was inclined to be blunt.

'What would *you* know about that?' Eleanora asked.

Precisely nothing, as it happened. Either Eleanora had a sixth sense that allowed her to identify and exploit whatever weakness existed in other people, or she simply assumed ignorance, stupidity, culpability and a whole host of other failings and by this scattershot approach hit her target in due course. She had hit the target first time in this case.

'Better that you don't express opinions when you don't have the facts at your disposal,' she said.

'The Americans are nearer,' Paco said. His role seemed to be that of a fireman, running after his wife and dousing the flames she ignited. 'They understand us better. They understand our needs.'

'But you're Spanish!' I persisted.

'We are Cuban,' Paco said.

Just the saying of it seemed to make him grow. He gave the impression of a man who in the face of overwhelming difficulty had championed a sacred principle. Yet all he had done was state the obvious and invest it with a kind of metaphysical import.

'Then, my father is Cuban too,' I said. 'He was born here.'

Eleanor spoke with a kind of finality. 'But he chose to make his life elsewhere.'

I recognised that whatever criteria my father might not meet would be pressed into service in the matter of the right to inherit property.

'Well, I'm back here now,' he remarked amiably.