

13: CHERCHEZ THE MAN

ALL THE NEXT DAY, Carl lived under the prod of a strange premonition. The air seemed heavy and surcharged, as if a storm were brewing, yet the sky was azure and the sun beat down hotly. He kept looking for the stumble-bum in every crowd. When he walked along the streets, his spine kept prickling, and once he whirled suddenly, under the overwhelming conviction that someone was aiming a gun at him. A woman a few feet behind gave him a startled glance. A boy called, "Shine, Mister?" Carl bit his lips and walked on.

But something had registered in his brain, and his subconscious was warning him, without disclosing the reason. He tried to pick his mind apart. A jumbled series of pictures swam across his memory and gave him no answer.

Poldi rocking with laughter as the stumble-bum drove off. Sis flirting with Aaron. Sis's eyes, wide and frightened, Aaron's dark as gun muzzles. Ollie casually taking Benning's portrait from an easel and saying, "Disregard it." Benning wrenching open the drawer containing his gun. Linda dancing. The stumble-bum whispering into the mouthpiece of a telephone. White's totem-pole face glaring sullenly. Crowder tugging at a leash and straining for the chance to get at Carl. Masterson, green-eyed and lipless, tossing a half dollar. Heads Carl dies, tails he lives. And weaving through all of it, the image of Gabrielle, now laughing, now frightened, now weeping inconsolably, like a widow.

Carl went about his business, performing the errands he'd set out to perform, and continually harried by the feeling that he ought to be somewhere else, that something was happening. He recalled the phrase that had come to him last night at the cabaret. Death in his bones. While Sis sang sweetly, in a clear, piping voice.

Late in the afternoon he strode into the hotel lobby and marched to the telephone switchboard. The professional southerner at the board lifted her saucer eyes at Carl and drawled, "Yes, Mr. Man. Anything you-all wanted?"

"I-all," said Carl stiffly, "will be in the bar for a little while, and if any calls come, then you-all just send in a boy to carry me-all to the nearest phone."

"Mr. Man," she said, "you do say the funniest things."

Aaron was sitting in the bar and staring disconsolately at his drink. When he saw Carl, he brightened momentarily. Then he kicked at a chair. "Two double scotches," he ordered. "And whatever this gentleman wants." He leaned back gloomily. "Sit down, Carl — where in hell have you been?"

"I just came from headquarters. Been going over reports with Crowder and they boil down to one thing. He hasn't found Pritchard. And he hasn't found the stumble-bum." Carl grimaced. "The rest of the day I've been avoiding Gabrielle."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Nothing. Except a suspicious na-

ture."

"What's she suspicious about?"

"She found rouge on my collar and it wasn't her brand. She thinks I'm making what-do-you-call-it with La Linda. Whoopee or something."

"Are you?"

"Don't be a damn fool. Do I look as if I could turn cartwheels?"

"Any guy who can't explain a little rouge on his collar oughtn't to be allowed a marriage license."

"I explained it all right, and then she found out I waited for Benning to leave this morning before I went upstairs to visit Linda. So Bree decided to get mad or jealous or something. There were a couple of other suspicious circumstances, but hell! The only reason I waited for Benning to go was that he tried to pull a gun on me last night, when he found La Linda kissing —" Carl broke off and reached for his drink. "It was so damn innocent, but as soon as I try to explain it, it sounds all wrong. Why did I wait for Benning to go? Because of the gun. Why was I afraid of a gun? Because he tried to use it last night. Why did he try to use it? Because she kissed me. Why did she kiss me? To get him jealous. Why would he be so jealous because of a kiss? Because she didn't have any clothes on. You see how wrong it would sound if I told the truth, don't you? So I lied and Bree got suspicious."

"Carl, how did the clothes come off?"

"You have a dirty mind," said Carl.

"So have you, or you wouldn't have gone back."

"I went back because of the portrait. Ollie called me this morning to say Linda had claimed it, paid the balance due and gone off with it. So I went to see Linda, and she explained that she'd

ordered it anonymously so she wouldn't have to take it if she didn't like it. Otherwise, as a friend she'd have felt obligated. She'd taken an old photograph of him — the only one she could find — and sent it to Ollie. She has the portrait in her dressing room now."

"Was she wearing clothes this morning?" asked Aaron.

"Slacks."

Aaron said, "Oh," in a disappointed tone. Then he tackled the second double-scootch. "She and Benning aren't married, are they?" he asked.

"If they are, they're not bragging about it. But she practically prays in front of his portrait and claims she's sort of a slave of his, and the very next moment she pretends she hates him and he's holding her in durance vile."

"So she takes her clothes off," added Aaron.

"Benning should have realized there was nothing to it."

Aaron perked up. "For a professor of philosophy, you're doing pretty well."

"Psychology," corrected Carl.

"You're still doing all right."

"Some rouge on my collar," snorted Carl. "Hell!"

Aaron sighed as if he were worried. He leaned forward and said, "Carl, what do you make of Benning?"

"From what angle?"

"Sis. Is he the sort of guy she ought to work for? Is he going to make passes at her and are these singing lessons that he wants to finance on the level?" Aaron frowned and his eyes went dreamy. "She's so damn fine, so pure. Sometimes, when I look at her, I feel as if I were defiling her, just being in the same room. I'm old enough to be her father. I'm twice her age, Carl."

"Wait a while and she'll catch up."

Aaron shook the ice in his glass. "I'm no lily, Carl. I've been around plenty. A girl seventeen, and a man almost forty. It's ugly. The whole idea's wrong. There ought to be a law against it. But I'm hooked. I hate the idea of another man even looking at her. I hate like all hell the thought of a roomful of people staring while she stands in a spotlight and sings."

"You're certainly original," said Carl. "Nobody ever felt that way before. Do you always get original when you're drunk?"

"You don't understand," said Aaron. "Ah!"

"It's like hearing a beautiful woman swear. You want to get under the floor and hide."

"Bree swears something terrific. I taught her how, like a parrot. I like it."

"You have no soul."

"Have you?"

Aaron tackled his latest drink. "I don't know. I'm trying to find out."

"Nobody ever found his soul in a whisky bottle. *In vino veritas* was written by a drunkard trying to convince himself before he could face the world again."

"Whatever that means. I'm trying to do some straight thinking."

"Don't kid yourself, Aaron. If you tried to think straight, you could settle this with two questions."

"What?"

"Do you love her?" said Carl. "And does she love you?"

Aaron picked up his glass and hurled it at the floor. "Hey, bartender!" he yelled. "Bring me another scotch. My glass busted!"

"That was smart," said Carl. "But until you can smash the guy who's holding you down, instead of hitting

his face on a barroom floor, you'd better stay away from her."

"Thanks," said Aaron sarcastically. "That makes two epigrams. One about *vino* and this one about the face on the barroom floor. Hurray for epigrams! Hurray for Alpha Beta Bunk! Bartender, two more!"

"You're getting drunk," said Carl.

Aaron smiled quietly. "I can still think straight and my words don't blur, and in appreciation of your advice, I'm going to give you a little of the same."

"Well?"

"Pack up your bags and your very lovely wife, and get out of town before it's too late. The cards are stacked against you. The police are co-operating up to a point, but once you pass that point, they'll cut your throat. That's figurative. Literally, they'll beat the insides out of you. They'll either frame you or else throw your carcass over the state line and let the vultures finish the job. You're batting your head against a stone wall. You can't win. But you've got five thousand dollars, and if you disappear with it, I'll guarantee that nothing happens to you. And you can thank Sis for this."

"Aaron," said Carl. "We're neither of us the hard-headed realists we'd like to be. We'll both keep on pretending and describing fanciful little circles around a very pretty candle flame, we'll both get burnt and basically we'll both be proud of it."

"You can use words," sighed Aaron. "I just hate to see you dead."

"Thanks, but there's one factor you're leaving out. Before all these things happen to me, a guy by the name of Bettner is going to jump in and help."

"You're wrong, Carl. He's just done all he's going to; and now he's washing his hands."

"Pilate?"

"Sure. Only don't make the mistake of thinking you fit into the other half of that analogy."

"I'm only a psychologist with a jealous wife," said Carl. "Don't worry."

He heard his name chanted from the entrance of the barroom and he turned and signaled to the bellhop. The boy marched over and handed Carl a slip of paper.

"Message for you, Mr. Wayward. Party phoned and left a message."

Carl picked it up and then slapped his hand on the table and yelped, "Holy mackerel — it's happened!"

"What did?"

"My hunch — the break in the case — the explosion! Listen to this." Carl lifted the slip of paper and read excitedly. "If you want to see Dr. Pritchard, he's at his house this after-

noon.' And what do you think of that?"

"Sounds like a gag to me," said Aaron. "The hell with it."

"You mean —" Carl stopped and couldn't believe what he'd heard. "I'm going up there fast. I tell you, Aaron — this is it! Coming along?"

Aaron shrugged. "What for? I like it here. I might even enjoy another drink."

Carl crumpled the bit of paper and stuffed it in his pocket. "Aaron!" he said sharply.

Aaron deliberately sipped his drink and placed the glass carefully on the table. He wiped a small stain with his finger.

"So you think it's a trap," said Carl slowly. "The sort of business you were warning me about. Is that it?"

Aaron went through the pantomime of a man washing his hands. "Who knows?" he said. "I'm not psychic, am I?"

14: STRIKE TWO AND A HALF

RELUCTANTLY, like a condemned man on his last unwilling journey, Carl drove up St. Charles Avenue and glanced at the street signs. Each group of similar names marked the limits of one of the old plantations. The Greek muses, Euterpe, Calliope, Erato, Melpomene Streets. The numbered streets, First to Seventh. The Napoleonic group, Marengo and Jena and Austerlitz, and Napoleon himself who was a full-fledged avenue.

Why hadn't Aaron come along? That was what bothered Carl. He told off all the arguments to prove that he had nothing to worry about. He'd been upset all day and expecting the worst. Once, he'd wheeled on the street, and instead of the stumble-bum he'd seen a bootblack, and a woman carrying a package. Aaron's Pilate gesture had been merely a piece of drunken dramatics. He couldn't possibly know anything about Pritchard. Pritchard had fled the first day; if he had come back, he'd probably returned to confess. Carl would ring a door bell and be handed the case on a silver platter. Why would anyone bother harming Carl? He'd done nothing brilliant, made no accusations and dug up no startling evidence. As far as anybody knew, Carl was living in a dense fog of ignorance.

Still, why hadn't Aaron come along? Carl couldn't answer that one.

Driving up the broad, stately avenue with the azalea plots in the center and the row of mansions on either side, Carl tried to face the facts. Thus far,

he had managed a precarious balance between Masterson and Crowder on the one hand, and the criminal on the other. That no one had yet struck a blow at Carl was beside the point. He'd been warned. The phone call. The stumble-bum's curious behavior. Crowder. Aaron's flat statement, "I just hate to see you dead." And the worst of it was that Carl had no idea when the attack would come, or from whom. Or, even, why.

He had no gun and no means of defense. If he was walking into a trap, the trap would spring and there was nothing he could do about it. He could have called in the police, of course, but he didn't trust them. He preferred to take his chances. And as for turning back, it was unthinkable. This might be a genuine break and he had to play it that way. Caution, wariness, hope. They were his only weapons. And hope was the most important.

The house was on a side street. A sign in fancy lettering read, "Walter Pritchard, D.D.S." Carl parked and glanced at the phony brick colonial with its antique effect of peeling paint. The doorway was wedged in the steep triangle of a gable that didn't belong. In fact, nothing belonged, and least of all Carl. Like a doomed man, he walked up the flagstone path and rang the bell.

The man who opened the door was one of the saddest people Carl had ever seen. He was dressed in gray. Gray suit, gray shirt, gray tie. The grayness seemed even to tint his skin, as if he were a member of a new and different