

# NO QUARTER

Erle Stanley Gardner

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# No Quarter

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "Sand Blast," "White Rings," etc.

*Jax Bowman and Jim Grood, avengers, fight a confidence man  
with his own weapons*

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# CHAPTER I.

## CONFIDENCE MAN.

Rhoda Marchand, who drew a salary of three hundred dollars a month because of her extraordinary ability in clipping and classifying crime news, snipped the scissors along the edge of the newspaper column and took the article she had clipped into Jax Bowman's private office.

Jax Bowman regarded her with a slightly quizzical expression.

"Have you got something unusual, Rhoda?" he asked.

"Naturally," she told him, "or I wouldn't have come to you personally with it."

Bowman lowered his eyes to the clipping, but Rhoda Marchand didn't extend it to him at once. Her voice was rapid, nervous and high-pitched.

"You're paying me an excellent salary," she said, "to clip crime news out of newspapers. I cover newspapers of all the large cities. I classify them according to modes of operation. Whenever I find clippings that seem to indicate some gang of criminals has become too powerful for the police and is operating from city to city, using about the same methods, I call those clippings to your attention."

Jax Bowman's voice was suddenly hard.

"And you draw," he said, "a very handsome salary, as secretarial salaries go, for your work. Do I understand that you are dissatisfied?"

"No," she said, "I wanted to ask you some questions."

"I believe," he told her, his tone cold and formal, "that you wished to see me about a clipping?"

"Yes," she said, "a newspaper clipping from the *Times Picayune* in New Orleans. It deals with the breaking up of a criminal ring that had successfully baffled the police of San Francisco, Denver and Kansas City. The police don't know exactly how the criminal ring was broken up, but they do know that two men figured in it. Both of these men wore masks, and there were white rings around the eye-holes of the masks. A Negro servant got a glimpse of the two men."

Bowman's face was absolutely without expression. His voice said coldly, "Most interesting, Rhoda, and I presume you want to ask me about where it should be filed?"

"No, I don't," she said, "I wanted to tell you that the criminal ring that was broken up was the one concerning which I gave you clippings from the San Francisco, Denver and Kansas City newspapers."

"Yes?" said Bowman in the rising inflexion of a question.

"Yes, and immediately afterwards you and Mr. Grood left the city on an unexplained trip."

Bowman said nothing.

"It is, of course," Rhoda Marchand said, "too weirdly spectacular to warrant serious consideration—this talk of two master minds who are invading the underworld, wearing black masks with white rings around the eyes. Nevertheless, this is the fifth clipping that I've seen which has mentioned the possibility that such men are preying on the organized underworld."

"And you wish to ask me about it?"

"I wanted to tell you," she said, "that I was saving these clippings. I also wanted to let you know that when I took this job I couldn't understand why a multi-millionaire, with the extensive business interests that you had, and the suite of offices in other buildings, should have bothered to open up this office, in which your name doesn't appear on the door. I wondered what the association between you and 'Big Jim' Grood was. It's not often that a multi-millionaire forms a business association with an ex-police officer whose sole business qualifications are those relating to the underworld."

Bowman reached in the drawer of his desk for a check-book.

"I presume that you're about to tell me," he said, "that you wish to resign, is that it?"

"No," she said, her eyes staring steadily into him, "I was about to tell you that if you ever wanted to use me for any activities outside of the office, I too could wear a mask with white rings around the eye-holes."

Jax Bowman closed the drawer. His finger-tips drummed silently upon the top of the desk.

"I think, Miss Marchand," he said, "we won't discuss the matter any further. You are giving excellent satisfaction in your present position, and your present work is comparatively safe."

"Very well," she told him, "I simply wanted you to know that it wouldn't be necessary to pull your punches, as far as I'm concerned."

Jax Bowman's face softened.

"Good girl," he said. "And would you mind asking Jim Grood to step in here for a moment, please?"

Miss Marchand got to her feet, flashed Jax Bowman a smile.

"Some day," she said, "I think you're going to need my assistance outside of the office. I think you'll need a girl who can think straight and who can shoot straight. When you do, please remember that I put in my application for the job."

Jax Bowman nodded.

"Your salary," he said, "has been raised fifty dollars a month, and I think we understand each other perfectly."

"I'll tell Mr. Grood to step in," she said, "and, thank you."



Her manner highly efficient, she closed the door of the office behind her.

Jax Bowman sat perfectly still, staring at the door through which she had disappeared. He didn't turn until the door opened, to frame the figure of Big Jim Grood.

"Rhoda told me you wanted to see me," Jim Grood said.

Jax Bowman nodded, indicated a chair.

Big Jim Grood had a cauliflower ear. The knuckles of his hands had been reinforced with bony deposits, until, when he doubled up his fist, it seemed like some ungainly battering ram. His shoulders were broad. His neck was thick. His eyes held the aggressive stare of one who has long been accustomed to putting other men on the defensive.

Jax Bowman nodded his head toward the door through which Rhoda Marchand had departed.

"She knows," he said.

Big Jim Grood stretched out his massive legs, stared at the broad-toed shoes.

"Yes," he said, "she would. She's clever, that girl. What's she going to do about it—anything?"

"She wanted to help," Bowman told him.

Grood slowly nodded and said, "Yes, she would."

Bowman fingered the clipping on his desk thoughtfully. He raised his eyes to regard Big Jim Grood.

Bowman was in the early thirties. His skin was bronzed from exposure to sunlight. There was a disconcerting steadiness about his eyes, a keen appraisal which seemed to strip aside all subterfuge and penetrate to the very soul. His motions were as quick and swiftly efficient as those of a bird hopping about on the ground, picking up insects. He radiated power and vitality—not the type of radiant energy that is scattered from the so-called human dynamos, but a focus power as dazzlingly concentrated as the spot of sunlight which is gathered by a big reading glass.

No one knew the extent of his fortune. Perhaps Bowman himself didn't know. His money matters were delegated to subordinates who occupied several floors in a skyscraper office building in a different part of the city.

"Jim," he said, "we've got to find that woman."

Big Jim Grood said casually, "What woman?"

His tone was just a bit too casual, his expression just a little too innocent.

Jax Bowman's keen eyes stared steadily at the face of his big confederate.

"Rita Coleman Crane," he said. "The woman who was a tool of that New Orleans gang; who thought there was a stain on her record, and who vanished into the underworld. Her connection with the affair was innocent. She risked her life, when she realized what she had been doing, to rectify the wrong she had unwittingly done."

Big Jim Grood nodded.

Jax Bowman repeated in that tone of steady insistence which secured such surprising results, and made big financial giants bow to his will with the docile obedience of servants. "We've got to find her."

Big Jim Grood stared thoughtfully at the light blue smoke which ribboned upward from the tip of his cigar.

"Did you," he asked, "ever hear of 'The Kiss and Cut Girl'?"

"Doubtless," said Jax Bowman, "Miss Marchand can tell us all we need to know about her. Who was she?"

"Her real name," Grood said, "is Evelyn Mayer. She was engaged to a man. No one knows exactly what happened on the night when the man came to her apartment to tell her something that he had tried to write and had been unable to put on paper. Some said that it was another woman who had been tricked into a fake marriage; some that it was the embezzlement of money from an old crippled woman who had given him funds to invest.

"Whatever it was, there was a quarrel, the sound of loud voices, then the thud of a blow followed by the scream of a woman.

"Those things were plainly heard by the occupants of the adjoining apartment. Two minutes later Evelyn Mayer calmly rang up police headquarters and said 'I've killed a man. Send officers to my apartment.' The officers came. They found her boy friend dead. Stabbed through the heart with a long, pointed pair of scissors. Evelyn Mayer had a black eye. There were some bruises on her body. It looked as though she had been kicked several times. She never took the witness stand, never made any explanations. The thing that was duck soup for the newspaper boys was the fact that she had kissed the man, probably as he lay dying. Lip stick was smeared over his dead lips. The mark of the woman's last kiss.

"The newspapers called her 'The Kiss and Cut Girl.' They always need some kind of a label for attractive women murderers."

"What about her?" asked Jax Bowman.

"Rita Coleman," Grood said, "who is now going under the name of Rita Coleman Crane, drove an automobile with too much champagne under her belt. A speeding car at an intersection crowded her to one side. She clipped the corner of a safety zone, lost control of her car and killed a child. She was wealthy. She turned part of her wealth over to the child's mother, the rest of it went to a number of children's hospitals.

She served a term in the penitentiary for manslaughter. When she got out, she disappeared."

Jax Bowman's voice was impatient.

"What's the connection?" he asked.

"When I checked back on the prison records," Grood said, "I found that Rita Crane and Evelyn Mayer were in the Big House at the same time. They struck up quite a friendship. The warden remembers it well. They were both unusual women.

"Evelyn Mayer got out first. She tried to beat the game for awhile, but couldn't do it. Criminal associations dragged her down. The last I heard of her, she was tangled up with Sam Belting. They call him 'Baloney' Belting. He's got a glib tongue. He was posing as a philanthropist, who was trying to give ex-convicts a chance to go straight, when she met him. He got her pretty well tangled up in his game before she found out what it was all about; then it was too late to extricate herself. Her criminal record was against her. She played along with him."

"What," asked Bowman, "is his game?"

"Rather a peculiar one," Grood said, frowning meditatively at the end of the cigar. "He works with a gang. He always relies on a pleasing personality to lay the foundation, but he hasn't got the patience to play a regular confidence man. When he's got his victim picked, he leads them into the hands of the gang. He's a killer at heart."

"He's done time?" asked Bowman, interested.

"No. About the only persons who can testify against a confidence man are his victims. Sam Belting's victims never testify."

"Why?" asked Jax Bowman.

"For the same reason," Grood said significantly, "that a mummy doesn't sing."

Jax Bowman pressed a business-like finger on a call button in the edge of his desk. Almost immediately the door to the outer office clicked open and Rhoda Marchand stood in the doorway, a figure of slim efficiency. Steady hazel eyes flashing a glance of alert inquiry.

"Look in your mode of operation file," Jax Bowman said, "and get anything dealing with bunco games worked with violence."

She frowned as though trying to recall some vague memory.

"Not very often," she said, as though thinking out loud, "do confidence men resort to violence. Not very often do stick-up men use a build-up. They're distinctive types of criminals. Let me see ... Yes, I think I have it."

She turned abruptly. From the outer office came the sound of steel filing cabinets being opened and closed with businesslike efficiency. Ten seconds later Miss Marchand entered the office with a brown manila jacket which she placed on Jax Bowman's desk.

Jax Bowman glanced at the type-written label which had been pasted on the top of the file. "Confidence games with violence."

He opened the jacket, took out some clippings which had been fastened together, turned through them with fingers that moved with the dextrous swiftness of a professional card dealer. His eyes slithered back and forth following the lines of the newspaper reports. His face settled into attentive interest.

"Not many clippings," Jim Grood said, rolling the cigar over to one corner of his mouth. "As Rhoda says, they're distinctively different crime types."

Jax Bowman's voice had the toneless quality of one who is trying to read and talk at the same time.

"A bunch of crimes centering around Southern California. Here's one about a year ago. The victim went across to Tijuana. He made a clean-up at the gambling tables at Agua Caliente, won about ten thousand dollars. He was last seen in the company of a very attractive, magnetic fellow with an iron-gray mustache. A man of about fifty-five, rather distinguished looking and well tailored. The body was found just outside of San Diego. There were two bullet holes—one

in the head and one in the heart, the one in the head had been fired from the rear. There were powder burns on the back of the head. The money was gone.

"Here's another one that happened in Hollywood. This man also had been to Tijuana. He'd won quite a bunch on the races, played a ten to one shot to the tune of two thousand dollars. He was last seen in the company of a well-dressed, distinguished looking stranger—a man who was inclined to weight, a chap about fifty-five with keen gray eyes and iron-gray mustache. The hotel clerk placed him as a banker, or wealthy broker. The two went out together. The man who had picked the winner in the horse race soaked up a lot of lead without dying, until after the ambulance had reached the spot where the shooting took place. He made a dying statement. There'd been a stickup. He thought his friend had been either killed or kidnaped. He died before he could give details. The officers never got a clue.

"Here's another winner at Agua Caliente; won fifteen thousand dollars from the gold table—that was before they clamped the lid down on gold. They had a table, you know, at which only gold coins were accepted in play, and all winnings were paid in gold. No one knows what happened to this man. He told his wife a prominent banker from the East had taken him in on the ground floor of a wonderful proposition. He went out to investigate. His body was found in the Imperial Valley—a hundred and some odd miles east of San Diego. He'd been shot once through the heart. There were powder burns on the vest."



Jax Bowman ceased speaking. Big Jim Grood nodded his head thoughtfully.

"That girl," he said, "is a wonder."

"What girl?" Bowman asked.

"Rhoda Marchand. She saw through the scheme where the police didn't. She filed them as 'Confidence Games with Violence.'"

"Confidence games," said Jax Bowman, in that peculiarly incisive voice of his, "with murder."

His finger pressed the button on the desk.

Rhoda Marchand appeared in the doorway.

"Get us," said Bowman, "two tickets by the first plane to Agua Caliente in Mexico."

Big Jim Grood lunged to his feet, crossed to a wall safe of latest design, spun the dials of the combination, pulled the door open, took out holstered automatics with extra clips of shells; took out also two jet black masks large enough to completely cover the upper portion of a man's face. Each of these masks had eye-holes that were circled with wide rings of white.

"Those crimes," he called over his shoulder, "are the work of 'Baloney' Belting, all right."

## **CHAPTER II.**

### **PLEASURE BEFORE BUSINESS.**

Bright sunlight beat down from a blue-black, cloudless sky. The shore line of the Pacific Ocean showed below as a shivering turquoise, separated from the shore line by a silver strand.

The big plane nosed downward. The shore line slipped away to the right. The succession of parched, brown hills stretched away to the left, until they rose abruptly into jagged, barren peaks, back of which lay desert. The sun glinted from the roofs of Tijuana.

The motors abruptly ceased their thrusting song of power. Agua Caliente showed for a moment between wing and fuselage. A magnificent array of buildings, glinting in sun-swept whites and tile reds. Jax Bowman turned to Big Jim Grood and nodded.

The two were the only passengers on the plane, and plans called for a very subtle bit of character acting, when the wheels of the plane touched the landing field.

The plane circled once, slid down on a sharp angle, a succession of jolts ran from the wheels through the wings and fuselage. The plane came to a stop. A lad in uniform opened a door. Jax Bowman and his companion stepped out into the dazzling sunlight, a sunlight so bright, an atmosphere so dry that the shadows seemed blotches of black, and the highlights as much a strain on the eye as the welding spot of an acetylene torch.

The pair were escorted to a car, and within the space of minutes, stood within the beautiful lobby at the Agua Caliente resort.

Gone was the swift purpose from the manner of Jax Bowman. Gone was the aggressive directness of Big Jim Grood. The two men looked and acted like Eastern millionaires out for a time of play, careless of expense. They made no inquiry whatever about prices, demanding only the best.

A Mexican boy showed them to their suite.

"Now," said Jax Bowman, "we've got to be careful not to appear too prosperous or respectable. The murder of a really prominent man would be investigated. What we've got to do is to act as though we'd made a clean-up in a bucket shop, and we're spending the money on the principle of easy come, easy go."

"Okay," Jim Grood said, "let's go. A couple of drinks of this excellent port, and I'll feel a lot more like acting the part."

The big resort is planned for play on a large and luxurious scale. The two men, who had upon occasion played such grim parts in the extermination of criminal gangs, caught the spirit of the surroundings. With happy smiles twisting their lips, they flung money right and left in a mad abandon of spending.

An unobtrusive Mexican gentleman, of faultless manners, brushed against Bowman and begged his pardon with profuse courtesy. Bowman's ready friendliness matched the other's courtesy. There were a few questions and then Bowman was telling the story of his life—a life of slick promotions, quick profits, periods of hectic enjoyment, then other promotions, each promotion one of those shady affairs which left investors holding the sack.

This time he hinted, with just a suggestion of reticence, that his activities had been unusually profitable, but that narrow-minded postal authorities had threatened an investigation, and so he had decided to take a "vacation."

The courteous Mexican gentleman was very much interested, but not particularly communicative. Soon he moved away, and, within the course of minutes, the management of the hotel had a code notation upon a card describing Jax Bowman; the sky was the limit so long as he paid cash. His credit was nil.

The house detective then moved on to Big Jim Grood.

The men enjoyed a lunch in a patio where everything was a riot of color, not the harsh colors that are hard on the eye and nerve, but a profusion of pastel shades that filled the eye with the rhythm of beauty just as the ear is filled with music. They took a siesta through the long afternoon, and by evening were ready to take a whirl at the gambling tables.

Their system was carefully agreed upon. They were, so far as possible, to keep bystanders from knowing whether they were winning or losing. They were to play after the manner of plungers, but never to be seen losing steadily. Chips were scattered over the roulette board so that it took quick mental arithmetic to tell whether the winnings exceeded the losses. They were scattered about sufficiently so that at almost every turn of the wheel there were some winnings. As soon as there were several consecutive turns of the wheel without winnings, they were to quit for a period, only to return for another whirl at the tiger after a short recess.

It was a system that worked perfectly. It is, moreover, the system used by professional gamblers who have reduced the art of chance-taking to an absolute science. "Win while you're hot, quit when you're cold. Ride your good luck to the limit. Plunge while you're winning. Make the most out of every winning streak. When you can't win, quit."

Back of every gambling device is what is known as the "hidden percentage"—a percentage which is founded upon psychology, rather than upon mechanics or mathematics; it is a phase of human psychology which makes it natural for a man to lose more than he wins. It is the tendency that makes a man, who is not a natural gambler, play conservatively

when he is enjoying a winning streak, sends him doggedly "fighting his luck" when he runs into a losing streak.

Jax Bowman got hot.

The whirring wheel almost invariably clicked the balls into pockets which corresponded with the numbers where Jax Bowman was making his very sizable bets.

The play grew rapid. It was almost impossible for any one to estimate the exact amount of Bowman's winnings, but even a casual observer could see that they were tremendous.

The management resorted to the device of changing *croupiers*, trying to break the run of luck by shattering that mysterious something which a good gambler can feel as plainly as he can feel the surge of warmth in his veins following the first two cocktails of the evening.

Jax Bowman continued to win.

Big Jim Grood, who had not been so fortunate, ceased playing altogether in order to watch his companion. Bowman changed his chips frequently, keeping the extent of his winnings concealed, crowding his luck to the limit, his bets constantly higher, his winnings constantly greater.

There followed a lull in the winning. The crowd of hangers-on, that had pushed about the table, eager to ride on the crest of Bowman's luck by placing their own bets on the squares which he had covered, gradually started making bets elsewhere, subtle acknowledgment of the fact that the player has exhausted his winning streak. The *croupier* settled down

to the welcome task of getting the chips back as Bowman's tide of fortune turned.

Bowman smiled urbanely, but his eyes were determined.

"I'm going to check out," he said.

There was the scurry of much activity. A suave manager appeared. Certainly the *señor* was not checking out from the hotel? His vacation had but just commenced. Bowman explained to him that he was not checking out of the hotel, merely temporarily cashing in his checks. The suave individual smiled courteously, assisted Bowman to transfer his checks into money.

There were various rumors circulated about the crowd as to the amount of that money. The amount did not shrink any as it passed from lip to lip in awed whispers.

The night was still young, and Jax Bowman, flushed with the pleasure of winning, strolled to the bar, had two drinks of mellow port and then walked beamingly through the lobby of the hotel.

A dark-eyed Spanish girl managed, with an indirect approach that seemed utterly innocent, to engage Bowman in conversation.

Big Jim Grood, standing across the lobby, shook his head in silent negation in response to Bowman's unspoken inquiry.

Bowman courteously terminated the conversation.

The evening closed without further event.

The next day was a repetition of the other—a day spent in relaxation, rest, basking in the brilliant sunshine, dressing for dinner and then a sojourn at the tables.

Bowman was not lucky.

A crowd of hangers-on watched his every play, gave muttered comments of approval when he won a bet. He was about to get hot. He was getting ready for another winning streak, and so on.

But Bowman rigidly confined his losses to two hundred and fifty dollars, made for the most part in small bets. Once or twice, when he would have a temporary winning streak, he would plunge by increasing the size of the bets, only to drop immediately to lower stakes when the winning streak failed.

When he had lost two hundred and fifty dollars he turned away from the tables.

The *croupiers* exchanged glances. This was the type of man who presented the most deadly menace to a gambling house, the man who would limit his losses to a fixed amount, but who was prepared to win everything that the bank had in sight.

Bowman strolled out into the tropical night, watched the blazing stars, the hills silhouetted against the sky. A woman's



low laugh sounded at his elbow.

"Pardon the intrusion," she said, "but I take it you don't understand Spanish?"

"No," Bowman said, "I don't. Why?"

"You should have heard the conversation after you left the tables," she said. "They were laying for you tonight. The fact that you took away your winnings of last night and have managed to hang on to them is causing quite a bit of consternation."

Bowman's laugh was contagious.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I gamble to win, or, perhaps I should say, I gamble for amusement, and I cannot derive amusement from being a sucker."

They both laughed lightly.

"You," asked Bowman, "have perhaps been fortunate at the tables?"

"Not I," she said. "I'm down here with my father. He is so afraid that I'll get what he calls the 'gambling fever' that he keeps a wary and watchful eye on me. In fact, he'd probably keenly disapprove if he knew that I had started a conversation with you without the formality of a conventional introduction."

Bowman laughed again, light-heartedly.

"You mean he's rather old fashioned?" he asked.

"Only so far as his daughter is concerned," she said. "Other people's daughters he likes to see right up to the minute, but he is strong for the conventions as far as his own household is concerned. Tell me, you don't think me forward, do you?"

"I think you wonderful," he answered, bowing.

"My name," she said, "is Evelyn Brokay and I'm lonesome as the devil down here. My dad has a few cronies he enjoys, and it leaves me pretty much isolated."

Bowman gave her his name, bowed low and acknowledged his pleasure, assured her that he felt any modern young woman had a right to pick her friends, regardless of the outworn formalities of conventional introductions, particularly at resorts where the very nature of the place was such that the less desirable class was excluded.

"If," she said, "my father should catch us talking together, he'd be displeased unless he thought we were old friends. You'd forgive a white lie, wouldn't you?"

Jax Bowman laughed.

"Forgive it," he said, "I'd welcome it!"

"I wonder," she said, "if you'd like to stroll—" She broke off with a gasp.

Bowman looked at her sharply. Her eyes were wide, startled, staring at a portly figure that came walking along the tiled balcony with purposeful insistence.

"That's father now," she whispered.

A masculine voice that was cold with displeasure said, "Evelyn, I thought you were in the Casino."

"I was, father," she said, "but I recognized an old acquaintance in Mr. Bowman. Permit me, father, to introduce Mr. Bowman. My father, Mr. Bowman.

"Mr. Bowman," she went on, "was on the President Hoover when I took my cruise to the Orient. It seems like old times to see him again. We were swapping reminiscences of the cruise."

The frown of austere disapproval faded from the man's face. His eyes twinkled with ready good nature. A well shaped mouth broke into an affable smile under a close-cropped iron-gray mustache. His hand shot out, gripped Bowman's hand with a cordial squeeze.

"I'm mighty glad to meet you, Mr. Bowman," he said, "very glad indeed for Evelyn's sake that she had found some friend here. I'm afraid I was a little short sighted in planning a trip down here without arranging company for her. Are you going to be here long?"

"I am leaving within a very short time," Bowman said, "although my plans are more or less indefinite. I'm on a vacation and I want to see something of the country. I thought some of going to Hollywood."

Brokay nodded, turned to Evelyn.

"Why don't you invite Mr. Bowman to spend a day or two with us in Hollywood," he said. "We'll be going back as soon as I've concluded this business deal, and you could drive him around and show him some of the sights. You might even be able to get him admitted to a studio where they were taking pictures."

She smiled at Jax Bowman.

"Oh," she said, "please come, we'd like it so much."

Bowman simulated embarrassment.

"Come on, young man," said Brokay in cordial insistence, "here in the West we don't take no for an answer when it's the question of giving hospitality. Don't be afraid we'll treat you with too much formality, because we won't. You'll just be home folks. My daughter and I live in the house with a housekeeper. I can assure you you'd be very welcome indeed."

"I have a friend with me," Bowman said lamely.

"Bring your friend, by all means," Brokay boomed. "Good heavens, man, give us a chance to show some of our Southern California hospitality. Say that you will."

The young woman squeezed his arm.

"Please," she breathed in an undertone.

"I'll make a conditional promise," Bowman said. "I will if business doesn't interfere."

"Fine," said the older man and turned away.

"Be seeing you later," he said. "I was just trying to find out where Evelyn had gone and I've got a very important conference on."

The young woman turned to Bowman as the distinguished, well tailored figure of the man with the iron-gray mustache moved through one of the light-flooded entrances to the lobby.

"Oh," she said, "what an awful mess! That's what comes of telling a white lie, but I'm afraid you've got to be a sport and keep up the deception. You see, my father might get very suspicious. I don't ordinarily deceive him. I don't know why I did it this time, but if he should feel you weren't an old friend—well, I'm afraid my allowance would be cut and my new motor car would go by the board."

Bowman laughed lightly.

"Well," he said, "if it's a question of helping you out by keeping up the deception, I can't imagine anything that would be more pleasant."

Her hand gave his arm a convulsive squeeze.

"Oh, you *dear!*" she exclaimed.

"That is, of course," Bowman qualified, "if business doesn't interfere."

"It won't," she said; "it can't."

And at that moment Big Jim Grood, strolling out into the night, caught sight of the girl's face where light from an open window streamed upon it, and nodded an emphatic assent.

Jax Bowman sighed.

"Well," he said, "I guess we'll have to follow the old axiom. If business interferes with pleasure, cut out the business."

## **CHAPTER III.**

### **THE BAIT.**

To the casual observer, the big house was typical of the Spanish type residences occupied by the more wealthy class of Los Angeles citizens.

But Jax Bowman and his partner were not casual observers. They unhesitatingly entered into situations where dangers menaced them and where their lives would be

forfeited to a single mistake. They noticed, therefore, those little things that would have been undetected by the average observer. There was no telephone connection. The iron wheels on the garage door were badly rusted. The rail on which the wheels moved was sufficiently encrusted with rust to show that the door had been closed for months. A grocery truck arriving, brought not those supplies which a housewife would order from day to day, but a complete assortment of the things required when setting up housekeeping—flour, sugar, salt, spices, dish mops, and bars of soap.

Jax Bowman, lounging on a window-seat, looked down from the window to the boxes which were being relayed on the shoulder of the delivery boy, and his alert eyes checked the various articles, which confirmed his impression that the house had been but recently leased as a furnished house.

But he said nothing.

Sam Brokay, perfect in the role of affable, hospitable host, kept up a running fire of conversation. His daughter, Evelyn, added her own comments from time to time, comments which invariably emphasized the intimacy which had existed between Bowman and herself during the cruise to the Orient.

It was evening before Bowman had a chance for a word with Big Jim Grood.

"A place," he said, "that they've rented furnished."

"Moved in some time to-day," Grood said. "They were turning on the electricity this afternoon, it wasn't on before

four o'clock."

"But," asked Bowman, "is this going to help us find Rita Coleman?"

Grood shrugged his massive shoulders.

"I think it is," he said, "but in any event, we're going to go through with it. These are ruthless criminals who have escaped the police."

"Surely," Bowman insisted, "the girl can't be mixed up in all this mess of murder?"

"You mean Evelyn Brokay?" asked the ex-cop.

"Yes."

"I don't think she is," Big Jim Grood said slowly. "She knows that it isn't on the up and up. She probably figures that there's a swindle in connection with it. She's willing to go that far. I doubt very much if she'd go any farther. They use her to trap their victims; when they've done that, she's sent away on some pretext or another."

"And yet you think she's in touch with Rita Coleman?"

"Probably."

"Then when she is suddenly called away that will be the signal?"

Grood nodded.



There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" called Jax Bowman.

"Evelyn," said a feminine voice.

Big Jim Grood flung wide the door.

Evelyn Brokay's eyes met theirs with steady candor.

"I'm awfully sorry," she said, "but I've just received a telegram. A girl who went to college with me is dangerously ill. She's been hurt in an automobile accident in San Francisco. She's calling for me, and I must go at once. It's not serious; but she's upset. I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am, but you won't leave until I get back, will you?"

She turned the full force of her eyes on Jax Bowman.

"Why—er—that is—" Bowman stammered, "I hardly know what to say. I am here because of my acquaintanceship with you, and..."

"Oh, bosh and nonsense!" she said. "Don't be like that. We can make your visit happy and entertaining. Father is very anxious that you should stay. Much as I want to ease the mind of my sick friend, I simply can't go unless you promise to stay on with father until I get back."

Jax Bowman gave his companion a purposeful glance.

"Under those circumstances," he said, "it would seem that there's no alternative but to be selfish and do the thing that I so much want to do."

She smiled her thanks.

"I'm taking a plane in an hour," she said, and gave him her hand.

When the farewells had been said, and Grood and Jax Bowman had an opportunity to compare notes, Bowman raised his eyebrows in silent inquiry.

"It's got me," Jim Grood said. "You'd certainly think she'd have sense enough to connect what happens."

"I have a hunch," Bowman remarked slowly, "that they're going to try out some kind of a confidence game. If they can get our money that way, all right, if they can't, they'll try violence."

"The man's a killer," Grood remarked. "And don't ever forget that a criminal seldom changes his method of operation."

Sam Brokay seemed in particularly high spirits.

"Wonderful day," he said. "Beautiful morning."

Bowman inspected the sun-gilded tops of the palm fronds and nodded acquiescence.

Brokay lowered his voice.

"Look here," he said, "it's none of my business, but I happened to notice that you made some rather heavy winnings there at Agua Caliente."

Bowman nodded.

"I came out pretty well," he said casually. "Oh, perhaps eight or ten thousand to the good."

"It happens," said Brokay, "that I've got a very peculiar business deal put up to me by a man in whom I have the greatest confidence. There's an opportunity for a person to invest a little capital and make a large amount of money, but it's not, strictly speaking, within the law. That is, it's not illegal, but it's a question of taking advantage of another man's ignorance. I'm frank to confess that I don't know just what to do about it."

"What is it?" Bowman inquired.

"Back in the mountainous country which borders the desert," Brokay went on, "there are some mines that are operated by individuals who go into the country and stay there for months.

"Back of Whitewater, in the desert, there's a particularly lone stretch of mountainous country known as the 'Lost Horse' territory. It's very wild, desert, mountain country.

There's a prospector who's been in there for over a year and who's suddenly made a strike. He's got, perhaps, thirty thousand dollars worth of gold at the old prices. At the new prices it's worth a great deal more than that."

Bowman let his face show guarded interest.

"Go on," he said.

"This man wants to sell out his mine and the gold he's gathered. My friend, who was doing some desert explorations for the purpose of finding ancient Indian relics, happened to stumble onto him. The man thinks gold is worth the old price that it has been standardized at for so many years."

Bowman frowned thoughtfully.

"You're going to buy him out?" he asked.

Brokay's laugh was contagious.

"I'm free to confess," he said, "that I am tempted. It happens that I need to make a little easy money."

"If," Bowman said eagerly, "my friend and I could get in on the deal, we'd certainly like to ride along. We could handle up to any amount you wanted to let us in on."

"Twenty thousand?" asked Brokay.

"I think so," Bowman said, "in fact, I feel quite certain we could swing that."

"It would, of course," Brokay remarked, "have to be in cash."

"That," said Bowman, "is easy. Neither my friend nor myself put any particular trust in banking institutions."

"Well," Brokay said, "we might take a look at it. I've got a fast car that can get us up there in no time at all, and it would be a pleasant trip and it would show you some of our Southern California desert country, if nothing else."

Bowman's acquiescence was eager.

"The trip," he said, "in itself, will be wonderful. Let's go."

## **CHAPTER IV.**

### **SHOWDOWN.**

The main paved highway running from Los Angeles to Yuma climbs through the pass between San Gorgonio, on the one hand, and San Jacinto on the other. As the road gains elevation, the orange orchards change to cherry orchards, to apple orchards and then, so abruptly as to be startling to the tourist who is unfamiliar with the desert country, the character of the soil changes. There are isolated patches of sagebrush and cacti. Another two or three miles and the

country is unmistakably desert. Vast, sandy, boulder-strewn stretches interspersed with varieties of sage and cacti.

Sam Brokay, at the wheel of the light, fast car, piloted it with deft skill along the pavement which stretched like a shimmering ribbon in the direct rays of the desert sun. Huge mountains rose in purple silhouettes against the blue-black of the sky. The tang of morning was still in the desert air, but there was a promise of intense heat.

"We turn off here," he said.

He slowed the car, turned to the left, started climbing over a dirt road which ran through a long, narrow cañon, climbed to a table-land, wound for miles along a barren stretch and then turned into a country that was wild, isolated and distinctive.

Great granite dikes had been flung hundreds of feet above the surface of the desert; this granite had been interspersed with veins of softer material that had decomposed when exposed to the weather, causing huge squares, thousands of tons in weight, to detach themselves from the main body of rock, to balance precariously upon a corner, or to tumble down into the desert.

Between these granite dikes were stretches of sandy desert. Joshua palms, yucca, sage, cholla cactus, prickly-pear and greasewood furnished a dense growth. The winding road twisted and turned along the base of the granite dikes, cutting through narrow defiles.

Brokay slowed the car, looked for some landmark which was so faint as to be indistinguishable to Bowman and Grood. The car turned abruptly and started fighting its way through the sandy desert.

"It's up in here a few miles," Brokay said.

The car began to heat up; twice they stopped to let the radiator cool. Mile after mile the wheels churned into the sandy labyrinth.

Big Jim Grood nudged his companion. Both men held their right hands near the lapels of their coats.

There was a faint wisp of smoke. A camp loomed suddenly against the dark trunk of a Joshua palm. A burro, standing in a dejected attitude, raised his head and aroused sufficient energy to cock one ear toward the approaching automobile. A man clad in ragged garments, with a white beard straggling down his face, sun-bleached eyes staring from under bushy eyebrows, appeared in the door of the tent. A gun was strapped about his waist. His clothes were glazed with dirt.

Brokay brought the car to a stop.

"Hello, dad," he said.

The man acknowledged the salutation.

"Whatcha doing in here?" asked Brokay.

"Prospectin'. Whatchu doin'?"

"Came in to look for some Indian relics," Brokay said.

"Country's lousy with 'em," the old prospector remarked, giving his pants a hitch, tightening the rope that served as a belt.

"Getting anything?" asked Brokay.

"Gettin' enough to retire on," the prospector said. "I'm going to sell out soon as I can find somebody that wants to buy ... Say, there was a fellow in here a couple of days ago that was looking for Indian relics too. The country must be getting popular. I ain't seen a human soul for nine months, and now two automobile loads come within a week."

"That's the way it goes," said Brokay, yawning. "Gosh, I envy you. I'd sure like to have a mine in here myself."

"Well, I've got one that's for sale," the prospector said.

Brokay's face lit.

"Now there," he said, "would be an idea. We could trade positions. You take our automobile and we'll take your mine."

"Heh, heh, heh!" cackled the old prospector. "You ain't seen nothing yet. I got thirty thousand dollars worth of gold."

Brokay's laugh was scornful and skeptical.

"Don't tell me," he said, "that there's any such amount of gold as that in this country."



The prospector looked around shrewdly and suspiciously, then jerked his head toward Brokay's two companions.

"These boys all right?" he asked.

"Sure," Brokay said, "they're partners of mine. They'd come in with me on any kind of a deal I made."

"Come in here and take a look," the prospector invited.

Jax Bowman's hand was on his gun as he stooped to enter the little tent, but there was no blast of gunfire to greet him. Instead, the prospector, in utter simplicity, opened a chest and disclosed a hoard of yellow metal in the form of ingots, stacked as though they had been cord-wood.

"How'd you melt it up?" asked Brokay.

"Oh, I've got a blow-torch and a crucible. I've got lots of time and it's easier to carry that way."

"How pure is it?"

"Darn near pure. That's the way it's been running. I had some assayed. That was before I made the big strike."

"Is there much more in the mine?" asked Brokay.

The old prospector squinted his eyes.

"I'm going to be frank with you, buddy," he said. "What I struck was a pocket. There's fair wages picking around in the mine, and, of course, maybe you can strike another pocket. But I made my stake out of it and I'm going to get out. The only trouble is, I don't know how I'm going to get it out. I don't want to leave it here while I go and get a car somewhere, and there's too much to be packed on the burro. I might get it on his back, but it would bust out of anything I've got to hold it in, and then, when I hit the highway, I'd be at the mercy of all those bandits that prowl around in automobiles."

"How much is there there?"

"Oh, around thirty thousand dollars," said the prospector. "Enough to give me a good time for quite a spell."

Jax Bowman exchanged a significant glance with his companion.

"I think we'd like to come in on it with you," he said to Brokay.

"That's fine," said the affable man with the iron-gray mustache. "It sure looks good to me. Buddy, I think you've made a deal."

Brokay pulled a well filled wallet from his pocket. His face was wreathed in an affable smile. Bowman surreptitiously opened his pocket knife, suddenly bent over the chest and drew the point of the pocket knife across one of the yellow ingots.

The gilded surface crinkled under the sharp point of the scratching knife, disclosing the glint of lead.

The face of the prospector underwent a ludicrous transformation. The affable smile vanished entirely from the face of Sam Brokay.

Jax Bowman, his hand sliding under the lapel of his coat, stared steadily at the prospector. Big Jim Grood kept his eyes glued on Brokay.

"Skin-game," said Jax Bowman.

Brokay took a deep breath.

"Well, of all the nerve," he said. "My God, I should have known better! It was the build-up that got me. It was finding this old prospector out here in the desert, and all of that stuff that goes with it."

Jax Bowman nodded.

The prospector suddenly stepped out of character. He ran his hands over the white stubble and laughed.

"Well," he said, "I damn near put it over. I'll tell you what, you boys be sports and keep this to yourselves and I'll hook some other fellow. After all, it's a question of some one trying to skin me out of about half of my profits. I simply beat him to it."

Brokay's laugh was booming and hearty.

"Okay," he said, "no hard feelings. I guess when you come right down to it, we're as deep in the mud as he is in the mire. How about it, boys?"

Bowman nodded.

"Well," the prospector said, "you slickers might just as well stick around for a while. I've been in here for more than two weeks on the build-up and growing this crop of stubble. My partner is out drumming me up suckers. I'm so damn lonesome for companionship I go out and talk to the burro. Stick around and I'll cook you up some desert chow."

"Are there," asked Bowman, "any prehistoric relics around here?"

"Lots of them," the man said. "You can find them around almost anywhere. Look in the crevices of the rock."

"Suppose we take a stroll," Bowman said, "and look the place over a bit."

Sam Brokay stretched and yawned.

"You fellows have got more energy than I have," he remarked. "This drive has sort of used me up. I'll stick around here."

Bowman and his companion moved toward the flap of the tent.

"Be sure to come back when you hear me pounding a piece of iron," the gold-brick man said. "I'll have a mighty fine chow."

Big Jim Grood turned to Bowman as they trudged out through the sand in the desert. He glanced surreptitiously over his shoulder, then lowered his voice.

"Why did you scrape the gold coating off of that brick?" he asked.

"Wanted to see what they'd do," Bowman remarked, chuckling.

"What they'll do," Grood said, "is plenty. They're going to kill us."

"Others have tried to kill us," Bowman reminded him, "and haven't got very far."

"We've never been up against a combination quite like this," Grood remarked thoughtfully. "These men have got brains. They've quite probably got other confederates that they're going to get in touch with. We'll be outnumbered four or five to one. We're out here in the middle of a wild, sandy desert that is admirably adapted for their purpose. They can dig two unmarked graves. We will simply be two more men who have disappeared after winning money at Agua Caliente. The details of the disappearance will never be known because we've been in their hands almost continuously since this thing started."

Bowman said thoughtfully, "We could make a detour, get to the automobile, try and reach the authorities from the nearest telephone."

Grood laughed, and there was no mirth in his laughter. "Not a chance on earth," he said. "Remember, these men are desperate. They're killers. They've got other murders on their consciences. They are planning future murders. They kill ruthlessly, giving no quarter."

Bowman's eyes were cold and hard as polished steel.

"Very well then," he said, "we'll give no quarter."

Without any conscious volition on their part, the pair were following an indistinct trail that led toward one of the huge granite walls.

Jim Grood stopped, sniffed the air.

"Cigar smoke," he said.

Cautiously, they started moving up-wind like two hunters stalking deer. They soon topped a little rise in the ground and looked down upon four men who were sprawled in the shade of the rocky wall, smoking and chatting.

At that moment there was the sound of a throbbing motor.

"Car coming," Bowman remarked.

Big Jim Grood gave him a significant glance.

Slowly, solemnly, as though it were some sacred ritual, the men took from the pockets of their coats the black masks with the white rings painted around the eyes. There was no need for conversation. Each knew that they were facing a showdown.

"Wait for the car," Bowman whispered.

There was a shrill, piercing whistle from the direction of the tent, a whistle twice repeated.

The effect upon the four men was magical. They jumped to their feet. The man who had been smoking a cigar tossed it away. A cigarette was ground beneath an impatient heel. The four men exchanged low words, then their hands slipped to holstered weapons, blued-steel glinted in the hot desert sunlight. Slowly, ominously, they started toward the tent.

Once more there came a whistled signal. One long and two short.

The men started to spread out.

The roaring motor of the approaching automobile could now be plainly distinguished.

Again came a whistle, sharp, shrill, menacing. This whistle sounded from a slightly different direction—much closer than the others.

"We're surrounded," Bowman said. "They're creeping up on us from behind."

The words had no sooner left his mouth than the hot desert air pulsed with the sharp crack of a weapon. A bullet whizzed past Bowman's ear, clipped a branch from a greasewood bush, and droned away like some angry hornet.

Bowman dropped to the ground. Big Jim Grood whirled and fired all in one motion.

A voice shouted from ahead of them, "Here they are, boys. Let's get 'em."

There was the sound of running steps.

Bowman raised to his knees.

"Hurt?" asked Grood.

"No, just getting down out of sight, but then we can't see anything either. Let's charge while we've got them separated."

"Let's go," the ex-cop said gleefully, his eyes lighting at the prospect of action.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two men topped a little rise, came crashing down through the sagebrush.

The four men had separated, then when they heard the sound of the shots, had concentrated on the point where the sounds indicated the location of their quarry. Now, as the two



men came charging down through the crackling sage, they flung up guns and hastily fired.

There is something about overwhelming numbers which, in itself, is a handicap. Each man becomes careless, depending unconsciously upon his companions; it is like the hunter who shoots into a flock of ducks, trusting to the very numbers to eliminate the necessity of aiming.

Jax Bowman and his companion had schooled themselves by long practice to wage efficient warfare.

As the two masked men appeared in the open, they were greeted with a veritable fusillade of shots. Bullets whistled around them like hail stones pelting on a roof, and all of the bullets were wild.

There was something peculiar in the psychological reactions engendered by the black masks with the huge white rings around the eyes—a something which had a tendency to strike momentary terror. Moreover, whispers had been seeping through the underworld of these mysterious masked men who made war upon criminals, asking and giving no quarter.

"It's the White Rings!" shouted one of the men, and the words were still hot upon his lips when a bullet spun him half around. He flung up his hands, gave a sobbing gasp and pitched forward upon the hot sand.

Newspaper accounts which had, perhaps, been somewhat exaggerated, claimed that these mysterious masked men never missed a shot; that they had trained themselves to shoot rapidly and with uncanny accuracy.

The two men, their faces expressionless because of the black masks with the weird white rings about the eyes, fired with unhurried efficiency. Two more men pitched to the sand, quivered and lay still. The last of the party started to run.

As well have thought to run from an oncoming avalanche, as from this strange pair who had pledged themselves to a grim warfare upon crime, asked no quarter and gave no quarter.

Big Jim Grood's gun spoke once.

Grood turned to his companion.

Slowly he removed his mask.

"We gave them," he said, "all of the odds."

Jax Bowman's mask remained in place.

"You forget," he said, "that we have another chore."

He pointed with his gun toward the place where the fake prospector maintained his tent.

Big Jim Grood thrust extra shells into the magazine clip of his automatic.

"Some one's coming," he said.

There was the sound of light, quick feet.

"A woman," said Grood.

Jax Bowman whisked off his mask, slipped the weapon into its holster a scant half second before Evelyn Brokay swung around a clump of greasewood, running with head down, elbows close to her sides, a nickel-plated revolver in her right hand.

Bowman's face was stern.

"Stop," he said.

She snapped her eyes to his. Instant relief flooded her face, tears were streaming from the eyes.

"Thank God," she said, "that you're safe! I never knew before."

"Never knew what?" asked Big Jim Grood, in the solemn voice of a judge pronouncing a death sentence.

"What happened to the men that I contacted for them," she said. "I knew it was some form of swindle. I wasn't foolish enough to think that they didn't have some ulterior motive, but I thought it was a gambling game and that I was getting victims for that. It was only after I reached San Francisco that I found out."

"Found out what?" Bowman inquired.

"What happened to the men."

"Who told you?"

"Rita Coleman," she said. "It was she who wired me to come to her."

"Then the wire wasn't a fake?"

"No, the wire was genuine enough, only Rita wasn't sick. She wanted to warn me."

"And so?" asked Bowman.

"And so," she said, "I flew back, tried to reach you in time. I found that you'd left. I found a letter in Sam's study which contained a map with full directions for getting here."

"And, of course," Grood said, "Sam isn't your father?"

"Of course not," she said. "His name's not Brokay at all, no more than mine is. He is Sam Belting. They called him 'Baloney' Belting, a confidence man. I'm Evelyn Mayer. I served a term in the penitentiary."

She stared at them defiantly.

Jax Bowman nodded. "I know about it," he said. "And tell me about Rita."

"Rita," she said, "warned me. She's on the dodge herself. There was some crime in New Orleans that she was mixed up in. She..."

The girl swayed.

Jim Grood jumped forward.

"Look here," he said, "you're wounded."

She turned a white face to his, smiled with bloodless lips, took a staggering step toward him. The gun dropped from her hand. A tremulous sigh escaped her lips. She dropped to the hot desert sand.

"Wait a minute," Big Jim Grood said gruffly as Bowman scooped the girl into his arms. "You forget those other two who are between us and the highway. They've heard the shooting, and they're laying for us. They'll probably ambush us somewhere, and they're the ones who shot the girl when she came out to warn us. I thought I heard shooting back there toward the tent."

Bowman started toward the tent, carrying his burden nestled in his arms.

"We haven't got any time to waste," he said. "This girl has got to get to a doctor. Get her gun and bring it along."

Jim Grood scooped up the gun which the girl had carried.

"Shoot," Bowman said grimly, "and shoot to kill."

He started walking, striding through the desert in a direct line for the automobile, heedless of any danger which might lie in his path.

Jim Groot snapped open the gun which the girl had carried, gave a quick look at the cylinder, clicked it shut.

"There's just a chance," he said, "she may have come on the two men sneaking up on us. There are four exploded shells in this revolver."

Bowman broke into a staggering run, plunging through the hot sand.

"Keep your guns ready," he said.

The two men reached the place where the cars were parked. There were no more shots. Far overhead, in the blue vault of the sky, a black speck wheeled into a circle. The circle became a spiral. Another black speck far off toward the east swung into motion.

Groot pointed.

"Turkey buzzards," he said, "the scavengers of the desert."

Bowman merely nodded. With tender fingers he pulled away the girl's sodden garments.

"In the back," he said. "I think it missed the kidney. They must have shot her when she tried to warn us. Then she turned and had it out with them in a finish fight."

He held her tenderly in his arms, smoothed the hair back from the damp forehead.

"Poor little kid," he muttered. "If she pulls through, I'm going to see that she has all the breaks that money can give her."

Big Jim Grood swung himself in behind the steering wheel of the car.

"There's a doctor at Banning," he said. "Brace yourself."

Bowman braced his feet, cushioned the girl in his arms.

The car lurched forward, the wheels throwing up a great cloud of sand as the car skidded for the first turn.

Overhead, the lone vulture had now been joined by three more. They dropped down in purposeful spirals.

## **CHAPTER V.**

### **"NO REASON."**

Rhoda Marchand's snipping scissors became silent as the lock on the door of the outer office clicked back. The door opened. Jax Bowman and Big Jim Grood entered the room,

their faces flushed and angry red from exposure to the desert sun.

"You got my wire?" asked Jax Bowman.

"Yes, sir," she said, in that tone of crisp efficiency which was as distinctive as the sound of her snipping shears. "I got your telegram and secured the reservations. Two tickets around the world. The names were Rita Coleman and Evelyn Mayer. That's correct?"

"Correct," said Jax Bowman. "When do they sail?"

"At two o'clock this afternoon."

"Get me," Bowman said, "some flowers and some travelers' baskets of fruit, candy, books, and so forth."

Her swiftly flying pencil made a note.

"Yes, sir," she said.

Her fingers held up a newspaper clipping.

"In case you're interested," she said, "there's another newspaper clipping about the mysterious white rings again. An entire gang of criminals were wiped out in the desert northeast of Banning. Two of the criminals were escaped murderers. One was a desperate kidnaper that the police have been hunting for years. One had a long record of suspected swindles. Apparently there was a gun battle between the gang and two men and a girl. The police think the girl was wounded. A physician in Banning gave first-aid treatment



and then she disappeared in a chartered plane which the police have been unable to trace."

"How did they connect it with the white rings?" asked Jim Grood.

"There was a mask with white rings around the eyes found in the sand where one of the men had stooped to pick up the girl when she fell forward, wounded. Expert trackers have gone over the scene and advised what must have happened by studying the tracks in the sand."

Jax Bowman nodded.

"You may," he said, "put the clipping in on my desk."

"Do you want the other clippings of the white rings?" she inquired.

"No," he said, "I'll read that one, that's all."

Rhoda Marchand's face remained expressionless.

"Both of the young women who are to sail," she asked, "are—er—perfectly able to travel?"

Jax Bowman's face was unsmiling.

"Miss Mayer," he said, "has a temporary attack of acute rheumatism. It will be necessary for her to go aboard in a wheel chair, but I have every assurance that she'll recover from the attack and enjoy the cruise."

Miss Marchand reached a wrapped package from the drawer of her desk.

"Very well," she said, "I ordered this for you."

Jax Bowman held the package in his hand, looking at her questioningly.

"Some of the very best lotions," she said, "to remove the effects of sunburn."

"When did you order it?" asked Bowman.

"This morning," she said, "at nine o'clock."

"Was that," asked Big Jim Grood, "when you cut the clipping from the paper dealing with the strange deaths in the desert?"

Miss Marchand was a very efficient young woman. It could never be said of her that she didn't know her place, or that she failed to keep her own counsel. Her eyes were wide and innocent as she stared at Big Jim Grood.

"Why," she said, "I'm sure I can't remember, Mr. Grood. Is there any reason why I should?"

"No," said Jax Bowman with a smile twisting the corners of his mouth, "there is no reason whatever."

THE END

[The end of *No Quarter* by Erle Stanley Gardner]