

DEATH BUYS



PALL of clouds draped the night, staining the late darkness darker still with presaged rain. Tim Clanton looked at the clock in his suburban service station, saw that the hands stood at ten-thirty, and set about the task of closing up.

He had scarcely switched off both neon signs that redly proclaimed "*Trojan Gasoline*" when a sleek black convertible drifted into the covered driveway and

stopped at the ethyl pump. It was an expensive car with its automatic top folded down, and Clanton eyed it admiringly as he approached it. You had to be in the big money to drive a rig like that, he told himself without envy. He noticed, too, that its windshield bore a "C" sticker.

"How many gallons?" he asked deferentially. Then he went a little pale as he got a good glance at the girl who sat gracefully under the steering wheel.

She smiled at him. "Hello, Tim. So



As he folded under the punch, his trigger finger worked on the trigger of the gun.

BLACK GAS

By **ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM**

this is where you've been hiding out!"

"Hiding out?" he repeated her words slowly, in a curiously dull voice. He studied her with eyes that were hungry, as if they had been long starved for the sight of her yellow hair, her carefully rouged cheeks, the petulant fullness of her mouth, and the symmetry of her fig-

ure. "I'm not hiding, Margie. I work here."

"Work?"

He nodded. "It's a decent job. An honest job."

"So you're going straight!" she said. There may have been a hint of mockery in her tone; he couldn't be positive. She



For years and years Tim had loved the girl, and now it seemed he was going to have a chance to show his love. But he had not counted enough on Margie's feminine indecisiveness, nor on the plans of Shifty Veracci

looked beyond him. "I guess they must trust you or they wouldn't leave you here alone."

"The cash register always balances. Yes, they trust me."

She smiled again. "Well, as long as nobody's watching, why don't you kiss me? Or am I poison?"

"Not poison, Margie. Just . . . dangerous."

"You didn't used to think so."

"That was three years ago, before I got sense. Before I had some brains beaten into my skull up at the Big House."

She made a coquettish gesture. "Still brooding over the rap you took, eh? You ought to forget it, Tim."

"I can't forget the way Shifty Veracci framed me to save his own lousy hide," Clanton answered quietly. Then he looked inside the convertible. "I suppose you're Veracci's moll now?"

"Not his moll. His wife. How'd you guess?"

He pointed to the registration certificate on the column of the steering wheel. "There's his name."

"You're quite a detective."

"No. Just observant."

Her eyes met his, boldly. "What else can you observe?"

"You've got a good car and expensive clothes. Veracci seems to be doing okay."

"Yes, he is." She paused. "Is that all you see?"

"What else am I supposed to see?" he countered.

"I asked you to kiss me. That should have meant something." She parted her crimson lips lazily.

He shook his head. "All it meant is you want to play and I'm not having any, thank you."

"Now wait a minute," she said, her voice suddenly crisp. "A girl's got to live. You went up for a stretch. Did you expect me to sit around and wait for you to get out of stir?" Her eyes narrowed

resentfully. "You didn't make any effort to look me up, after you got out."

"I didn't want to. I'm going straight. No more mob stuff. No more of the old connections. I learned my lesson. Let's let it stay that way."

She sighed faintly. "I guess I understand how you feel, Tim. I wish I could break clean. When I saw you and recognized you, it . . . it sort of stirred up an old memory, like poking at the ashes of a dead fire and finding one live coal still glowing." She laughed without mirth. "I had a sudden picture of getting away from all this and letting my hair go back to brown and . . . and maybe driving an old battered Model A instead of this classy heap, and living in a cottage. . . ."

"Are you screwy, Margie?"

"Sure. Screwy enough to realize money and jewelry and swell clothes won't buy love."

"Meaning you don't love Veracci?"

She made a bitter mouth. "No woman loves a guy who beats her. Not even if he gives her diamonds the next minute."

"I can show you the bruises."

ANGER swelled in Tim Clanton. "Where is he? Take me to him. I've owed him something for a long time—for what he did to me. I was willing to forget that, though. Willing to bury it and steer clear of him. But this is something else."

"Tim! Then y-you do love me?"

"I always have," he admitted reluctantly. "I suppose I always will. But this is something else. Shifty Veracci's slapped you around. He's got to be taught he mustn't do that. Take me to him, Margie."

Her lower lip was tremulous. "No. It wouldn't do any good. I mean I c-can't have you fighting my battles. Besides, he's out of town tonight." With a sudden gesture she extended her arms, pleadingly. "Tim, t-take me away!"

"Huh?"

"Let's go away together. To some other town. Somewhere as far as we can travel, where he won't ever find us. Tonight's our chance, while he's away. Tim . . . will you?"

Clanton fought a battle with himself, inwardly and silently. He wanted to refuse; to handle things the open way. "A divorce—" he started to say.

"No, darling. Shifty wouldn't stand for that. You know the sort of man he is. He'd fight it, and—and maybe he'd win. I'm afraid of him, Tim. You don't know how afraid."

"Afraid to divorce him and afraid not to, eh?"

"Y-yes. Running away is the only way out. There's nothing we can do except that."

Clanton nodded. "All right. If that's the way it's got to be, that's how it will be." He went back into the service station to lock up the cash register, turn off the lights, and padlock the door. Then he climbed heavily into Margie's convertible. "Let's go pack."

IN HER penthouse apartment she mixed a drink for him, then left him alone while she went into her boudoir to toss a helter-skelter assortment of clothing into two Gladstones. In the midst of this indiscriminate packing she returned, took his emptied glass to the kitchenette and presently reappeared with a fresh highball.

He accepted it gravely. "You didn't have to use a clean glass. And I'm not sure I need a second drink."

"Not even to k-keep your courage up?" she asked him. Her tone was gay, but the gaiety seemed forced.

"You're all I need for courage, Margie." He took her in his arms, then. He did what she had asked him to do back at the service station. He kissed her gently. The kiss sent a strange spate of

emotion through him, nostalgic, laden with the yearning of three long years. But somehow the thrilling warmth of her mouth upon his own made him oddly uneasy—almost unsatisfied. It was as if he sensed a lack, an emptiness, a dark void where there should have been fervor. *I wonder why*, he reflected. *I wonder why her kiss seems to hold danger instead of love?*

He dismissed the feeling; watched her as she went again into her boudoir. After a while she came back to him, carrying her two hastily-packed bags. He took them, and together they quietly left the apartment.

"We'll use the convertible," she announced. "You drive, Tim. Drive fast—and far!"

Clanton objected. "Veracci could trace us if we use that car. A train will be better. Or a bus."

"We can switch tomorrow. Right now the convertible will mean speed. Speed's what I want, darling. Speed!"

"Okay," he surrendered, helping her into the machine. Then he slid under the wheel and headed into the darkness of the night; into the gathering storm. Bye and bye he began to feel the sleek power of the motor, the silken purring energy that made him master of distance. You didn't really drive a car like this; you merely sat there and let its mechanism become a part of you, so that you felt a sensation of triumph over time and the miles. . . .

"Tim!"

"Yes, Margie?" he answered. Her voice had almost startled him; it had been almost an hour since either had spoken to the other. He reduced his pressure on the throttle. "What is it, sweet?"

She shivered. "I—I'm scared."

"Scared? Of what?"

"Of shifty. We can't go through with this, Tim. He'd . . . never rest until he found us. And then he might . . . k-kill

you. And me." She clutched his arm. "Turn around, Tim. Take me back."

"Back? Back to Veracci?"

"Yes. I—I've made a mistake. We can't run away from—from reality. I want to go home, Tim."

He scowled. "You want to go home to your diamonds and soft living, is that it?"

"You—you're not being fair." Then she squared her shoulders. "All right. Think what you like. Maybe I *have* decided I couldn't stand a cheap cottage and a battered Model A. Does it matter what my reasons are? I want to go back."

Clanton drew up at the side of the highway. "Better think it over thoroughly, Margie. If we go back, it's for good. I mean there won't be another time like this."

"No. I suppose there won't. Take me home, Tim. And then p-put me out of your thoughts. Forever."

HE MADE a U-turn, wordlessly obedient, wondering why he felt no particular regret. Maybe Margie was right; maybe this wouldn't have worked out. Queerly enough, he experienced a feeling of relief as he aimed the convertible back toward the city. Tomorrow he would resume his service station job, and in retrospect tonight's incident would seem no more than a remembered dream. A dream with no repercussions, no regrets . . . and no fears, he told himself.

At the apartment house he relinquished the wheel. "Want me to carry your bags upstairs?"

"No. I'll manage. Good night, Tim."

He corrected her. "Good-bye," he said, and stalked off. Rain began to fall before he gained the next intersection. He paid no heed to it.

He paid no heed to anything until he reached his rooming house and went upstairs. Then, as he opened the door of his cheap hall bedroom, he found plenty to occupy his attention. Somebody

was in that room, waiting for him; somebody with a gun.

THE gun was a police positive .38 in the capable fist of Detective Sergeant James Kronniger. "Hold still, pal," Kronniger said gruffly.

Tim Clanton stiffened. "What the hell is this?"

"You know damned well what it is. A pinch. I thought you promised me you'd go straight? That was the agreement when I got you that service station job."

"Straight?" Clanton parroted, dazed. "Good God, how could I go any straighter than I've been going?"

The plainclothes officer sneered sourly, as if he had a flavor in his mouth that he disliked. "I suppose you're going to deny you cracked the main downtown office of the rationing board this evening, eh, Clanton? You're going to tell me you didn't steal a whole carload of gasoline coupons, A, B, and C books to be sold on the black market. I guess you're going to deny you shot a cop when he tried to nab you coming out?"

"You're crazy," Clanton said. His voice didn't sound like his own. It had a strained, taut timbre. "I didn't—"

Kronniger waved his revolver disgustfully. "No use beating your gums to me, Clanton. Your fingerprints are all over the rationing joint. You petered the vault, glommed the ticket books. Then this patrolman spotted you making your lam."

"That's a lie," Clanton spoke deliberately through clenched teeth. "A rotten lousy lie."

The detective ignored him. "The flat-foot ordered you to halt. You started running. He fired a shot at you. Then you turned and let him have it in the guts."

"No. No, Kronniger. That's all wrong."

"We got to the cop just before he died."

He told us all about it. You wore a mask, he said. He thought he'd hit you with one of his slugs, but I guess he was wrong; you don't seem to be packing a bullet around in your hide. Anyhow, he said a masked man drilled him; and when we checked for dabs inside the layout, we found plenty of them. Yours, Clanton. Your prints."

"They couldn't have been mine. I—"

"Save it. Let's go. It's a murder rap this time."

Clanton felt the sweat forming on his

The weapon roared as he closed in and a bullet ploughed into the ceiling.



forehead and running in little cold trickles down his face. "Listen, Kronniger. It must be a mistake. I've got an alibi."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I was with—"

"All right, spill it."

"No, I can't. I don't dare. The woman I was with is married. Her husband beats her. If he ever found out she and I were eloping tonight, he'd—he might—"

Kronniger shook his head. Too thin, fella."

"Well, wait. Maybe I can establish my alibi without using the girl's name. How about a rent receipt for a tourist cabin? Here, in my pocket. Get it yourself. Reach in. I'm not packing a gat." He held his hands up while the detective stretched forth delving fingers.

AND then, as Kronniger fumbled in the pocket, Tim Clanton twisted sidewise. His left fist knocked Kronniger's .38 upward. The weapon roared, firing a pellet at the ceiling. Then Clanton whipped over his right fist, smashing it against the astonished point of Kronniger's lantern jaw.

Kronniger collapsed.

Clanton hit him again as he fell. "Sorry, Kronniger," he muttered, knowing that the man couldn't hear the apology.

He raced toward the room's single window, realizing there were probably more cops downstairs and knowing that he did not dare chance running into them. He slipped through the window, down to the roof of a small side porch immediately below. He crept silently to the edge, peered downward, saw nobody. Panting, he lowered himself until he dangled by his hands from the porch roof. Then he dropped.

He landed on his feet; took the jar on relaxed knees and fell sprawling. He was up again in an instant; and pelting toward the street.

Something moved, ahead of him. He thought he discerned a metallic glitter, as of light striking a badge on a copper's tunic. Shivering, Clanton reversed his direction and darted toward the rear yard behind the rooming house; leaped over a fence and noiselessly raced along an unimpeded alleyway.

At the mouth of the alley he emerged to find nobody in sight. He slouched out

into the open, forcing himself to walk slowly. He couldn't risk haste; it might call attention to him and invite pursuit. He moved forward, counterfeiting a casual manner; felt his heart hammering when he reached the next intersection. Thus far his luck had held.

IT CONTINUED to hold. A clattering street-car rumbled past, and Clanton broke into a lope; caught it and flung himself aboard. He groped in his pocket, found a dime and handed it to the conductor. It was his last change—and he suddenly remembered that he had only two dollar bills in his wallet. Two dollars to get him out of the city, away from the law!

His mind was numb, dazed. How the hell could his fingerprints have been found in that OPA rationing office? He hadn't been anywhere near the place. It was axiomatic that fingerprints never lie; yet they had lied this time, and a policeman was dead, and Tim Clanton was now running away from the rap—trying to escape on just two dollars.

It couldn't be done. He knew this. And he knew he dared not go to the service station where he worked, open its cash register to steal its contents for a getaway. There would be cops at that station, staked out to nab him just in case he showed himself in the vicinity. . . .

"Margie!" he whispered to himself.

Sure. That was it. He would go to Margie and tell her what he was up against. He wouldn't ask her to corroborate his alibi; he had no wish to jeopardize her. But she had funds, and maybe she would loan him a hundred or so. He made for the trolley car's front exit; got off at the next stop. He started walking through the rain, oblivious to the cold wetness that soaked his clothes and squished in his cheap shoes.

At long last he came to the apartment house; entered a deserted lobby and used

the automatic elevator, unobserved. He stepped off at penthouse level, approached Margie's door and lifted his knuckles to knock.

He didn't knock.

Someone was in there with Margie. You could hear a man's low, tense voice: "Keep probing, hon. Gimme another whiskey and then keep digging until you—blazes, that hurts!"

"I'm being as easy as I can, darling." That was Margie talking, her tone throaty with concern. "I think we ought to have a doctor. The bullet's pretty deep in your thigh."

"Nix. You think I want some sawbones rattling on me? You know they got to report gunshot wounds. No. You keep probing with the knife until you dig out the slug. Then we'll sprinkle me with sulfa powder and put a bandage on. I'll be okay. Hell, this ain't the first time I ever lost a little blood."

Outside the door, Clanton stood frozen as he eavesdropped. He recognized that masculine voice. It was Shifty Veracci—Margie's husband. Veracci, who'd framed Tim Clanton to prison three years ago. Veracci, with a bullet in his thigh. . . .

"God!" Clanton whispered. The truth had suddenly dawned on him; he thought he understood, now, what had happened tonight. A seething fury ripped through him, shaking him like a fist. And as anger mounted, he hurled himself at the door; slammed his weight against it and burst it inward.

He went surging into the room.

LIKE a hurled missile he flashed across the threshold, seeing Shifty Veracci and the blonde Margie as if through a dull crimson haze—Margie had just finished bandaging her husband's leg; and now she swayed backward, a moan escaping her lips as she stared at the intruder. "Tim!" she choked.

Clanton snarled: "Yeah, me," and

launched himself at Veracci. "This is it, you rat."

"Hey—!" the chunky Italian ducked, limping on his bad leg. He tried to protect himself from a battering fist, but the fist slashed past his guard and caught him full on the mouth. A froth of oaths mingled with the blood that made an abrupt smear of his lips. He lurched, staggered. Clanton nailed him again, sending him against the wall.

Margie let out a wild wail. "Tim—don't! He's in no shape to fight! He's been shot!"

"Yes, I know." Clanton closed in on Veracci. "Who plugged you, Shifty? Talk before I break you in half with my bare hands. Come on, spill it."

"I—it was—an accident—"

"A cop shot you. Isn't that right?"

"How the hell did you know? What business is it of yours?"

Clanton hit him on the face, hard. "It's my business because you tried to use me for a fall guy. I get the whole setup now. You're the one who pettered the rationing board office and stole those gas coupons, aren't you? And you're the one who croaked the patrolman who tried to pinch you."

"That's nutty talk! Your fingerprints—"

"Thanks," Clanton said darkly. "You gave yourself away when you said that. How could you know about my fingerprints *unless you put them there yourself?*"

Veracci cringed. "Now wait a minute. Listen."

"No. *You* listen. The whole thing was a plant. Margie picked me up, fed me a cock-and-bull story about wanting to elope with me because you beat her, mistreated her. She made it convincing. I fell for it; came here while she got some bags packed. Meanwhile she gave me a drink; and later took the glass away, brought me a fresh highball in a clean

tumbler. I wondered about that at the time, but I was too dumb to understand what was going on."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you must have been hiding in the kitchenette. When Margie took away my first highball glass, she gave it to you. And it had my fingerprints on it. You sneaked out the back way, made gelatine impressions of my prints, transferred them to a rubber glove and wore that glove when you robbed the OPA office of those gas coupons. That's why the law found my dabs on the safe that I didn't pester."

Veracci's eyes were hot slits. "Smart punk."

"Smart enough to realize Margie took me for a ride in more ways than one. The automobile ride was to keep me from having a decent alibi while you burgled the ration board headquarters," Clanton retorted grimly. "But the jig's up now. That bullet she just pried out of your thigh will match the gun of the cop you killed. It will prove he plugged you—and that you, in turn drilled him."

Veracci snarled: "That's what you think, sucker," and drove his knee into Clanton's groin.

THE foul was as brutal as it was unexpected. Clanton doubled over, sickened. At the same instant, Veracci yanked a .32 automatic from a shoulder clip.

"No, Shifty!" That was Margie, her voice shrill with crafty warning. "Don't blast him. The noise will bring people. Don't!"

Veracci hesitated. "Yeah. Maybe you're right." And he clubbed his Colt viciously down on Clanton's head. Clanton sprawled to the rug, dazed, semi-conscious. Pain screamed through him in waves that washed surf-like over his senses and filled his ears with thunder.

Through the thunder he heard Veracci

saying: "We got to get rid of him. I know what. We'll put some of the gas coupons in his pocket, take him downstairs and dump him on the street; run over him with the convertible. He'll be too dead to spill what he knows when the cops pick him up."

"Better hurry," Margie said callously.

It was her calmness, her willingness to participate in a deliberate murder, that shocked Tim Clanton back to full awareness of his peril. Once he had been in love with this girl. As recently as tonight he had still cared for her. But now. . . .

He tightened his muscles; waited until Veracci was leaning over him to start dragging him. Then he rolled; smashed himself against the swarthy killer's legs. The impact wasn't particularly violent, but Veracci had a wounded thigh. That helped. For a split instant the murderer was off-balance.

Clanton came off the floor; grappled with him. "Now, by God!" he grated as he wrestled his enemy across the room.

They were evenly matched: Veracci with a bad leg, Clanton's reflexes dulled by that bash on the head a moment ago. Like two injured animals they were locked together, hammering, kicking, butting, clawing. Veracci tried to bring his automatic into play. And even as he raised it, Clanton buried a fist in his belly.

Gasping, nauseated, Veracci folded forward. He twitched all over—and the convulsive movement of his trigger finger brought a barking explosion from the gun in his hand. The report seemed to be split asunder by a scream.

It was Margie who screamed; but her outcry was not repeated. Veracci's wild bullet had caught her full in the chest. A stupid expression came into her eyes; distorted her red lips. She toppled, fell.

Veracci stared at her. "Margie!"

In that single instant of his inattention, he was lost. Tim Clanton swung on him,

connected, knocked him down. Then, with utter savagery, Clanton leaped with both feet onto the fallen man's face. . . .

THERE was a telephone in the far corner of the room. Clanton dialed it; obtained a connection with police headquarters. "Let me talk to Detective Sergeant Kronniger. Hello. Kronniger? This is Tiff Clanton."

"Clanton —? Why, you stinking son—"

"Hold it. I'm in Shifty Veracci's penthouse. Shifty just murdered his wife. Margie was her name. I think you'll find that the bullet in her breast matches the one that killed the cop on that gas-coupon burglary. In other words, Veracci's gun was responsible in both cases."

"What?"

"Moreover, Veracci's got a wounded

thigh. The slug will fit the dead cop's rod. And there's a batch of gasoline ration tickets in Veracci's apartment to prove he pulled that robbery."

"You must be crazy! Your fingerprints—"

Clanton smiled into the phone. "I've even got that figured out. There's a rubber glove in Veracci's pocket; a glove that's got my dabs on it. That was what he used to frame me. Come on over, Kronniger, and I'll show you."

"Damned right," Kronniger snapped. "I'm on my way."

Clanton rang off. He stirred Veracci with his toe. Veracci groaned, so Clanton kicked him on the head to quiet him. It was very effective indeed. Veracci grew silent, except for his stertorous breathing.

At least he breathed, though. That was more than you could say for Margie. . . .