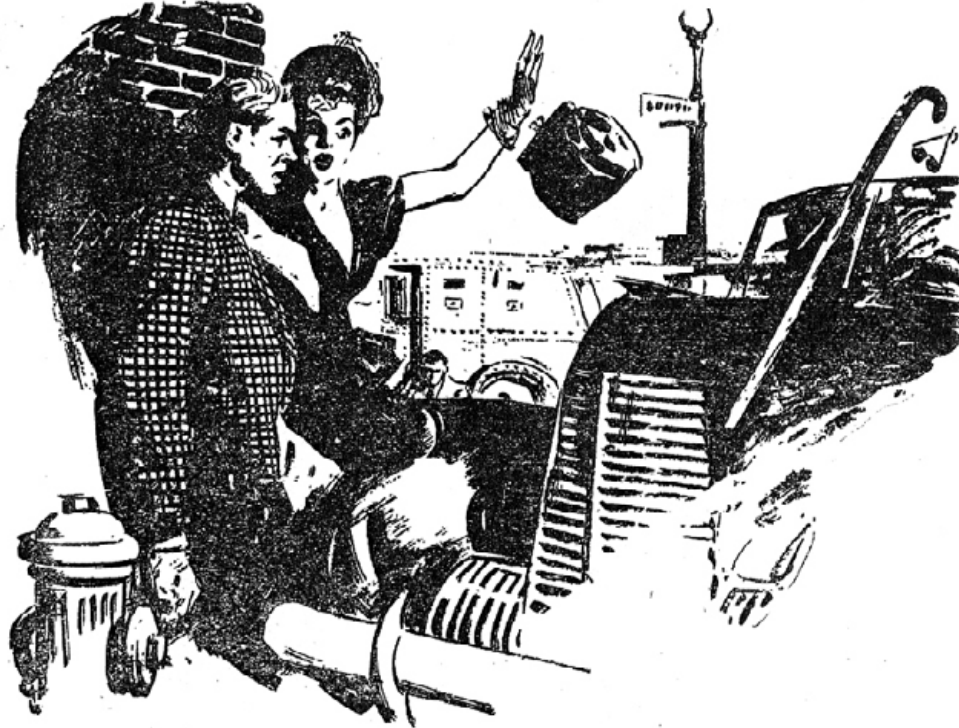


Armored Car Rendezvous

By Lawrence DeFoy



To spot the fingerman who had delivered his wartime buddy to a sudden grave, Paul Evans hopped a ride on the dead man's armored car. But when crime's rendezvous was reached Paul found himself collecting for the ride in tommy-gun carfare.

THE purchasing agent was out for the afternoon so I decided to go back to my hotel. I was strolling past the Tri-State National Bank in the warm spring sunshine when I heard, "Lootenant Evans! I'll be a dirty name if it ain't!"

I looked around. The city was new to me—the whole territory was new. I was certain there must be some mistake, even though the thunderous voice was vaguely familiar.

A thick-shouldered man in a grey uniform was bounding down the worn brownstone steps. Under his visored cap peeped unforgettable carrotty hair, and his florid face was one huge grin.

My own jaw dropped. "Pink Nolan, you old jungle rat! Is this *your* Springfield?" We pumped hands, standing there in the middle of the sidewalk. People smiled sympathetically and walked out around us.

"Surest thing y'know!"

"But—why the rig and the gun?" I queried, slapping the leather holster.

"This?" Pink jerked a thumb toward a battleship-grey armored car behind me. *Acme Protective Bureau* was lettered just below a small gun-turret on the side.

"My job, you remember. My gosh, we talked about it enough in them lousy foxholes on Guadal. Talked about everything, trying to keep from going

crazy!”

“That’s right. Now I remember,” I said.

“Yeah. And that reminds me. I’m on dooty now, not supposed to go gabbin’ with anybody. We gotta get together, though. Look, how’s about coming out to the place for dinner? I’ll phone the wife and—You can make it, can’t you?”

“Pink, just try and keep me away. You know, all this time I’ve been wondering if Jerry’s as pretty as those photos you used to show me nine times a day.”

“She’s a real looker, Loot, wait’ll you see.” Pink puffed up like a pouter pigeon. “Come out about six, huh?”

“You bet,” I said. “But maybe we’d better drop the titles, Sergeant. Your wife might get the idea we’re still Marines.”

“Well, ain’t we?” Pink demanded. He gave me his home address. “See you later. I gotta get back to work.”

I felt good, walking on around the corner. You don’t meet old friends in every strange city, and Pink Nolan was something more than a friend. . . .

ALMOST without volition my thoughts went back to those weird, unforgettable days and nights when the shrieks of jungle birds mingled with those of taunting Japs, and the staccato hammering of intermittent machine-guns riveted through both. Odd, how realistic it was, after all this time. I could hear—

I stopped, whirled. It was real! The shrieks were from tires and human throats—the gun *ha-ha-ha-ha-ed* balefully.

I was running back to the corner. People came spilling around it, yelling. Windows of office buildings slammed open. A motor roared, and a large, low-slung sedan came shooting into the street, cutting across the sidewalk. I barely had time to flatten against the foundation of a

building when splinters of granite were whipped from the wall above me. Nearby a running woman went down, stumbling, her mouth wide in terror.

Then the car was gone, rubber treads howling around another corner. I twisted in time to catch a quick glimpse of a white, blurred face, peering out the rear window—the face of a boy or a woman, rather than of a man.

The space before the bank was deserted save for bodies sprawled here and there. Two were struggling to sit up, but Pink and another uniformed man lay motionless near the gaping rear doors of the armored truck. A third, whose leather puttees tagged him as the driver, slumped with a smoking pistol on the running board. He seemed to be whistling tiredly through prominent teeth.

I went down on my knees beside Pink, cursing a fate that sent a man halfway around the world in battle, then allowed him to be shot down in the gutters of his own hometown. Nolan had taken a burst in the chest. I had seen too many sucking wounds to be optimistic. His face was now putty-colored, his eyes were open but unseeing.

“Gun—gun,” he gasped, blood flecking his lips. “Gun . . . miss . . .” The carroty head lolled back toward the pavement.

My throat was too full for swearing. Why, I’d been talking to Pink not five minutes ago! Probably Death was even then riding the streets in the long, low sedan.

The memory of the car brought back a measure of clarity and I looked around. Heads were protruding here, bodies beginning to edge into sight there. Far-off whistles kept shrilling. Farther yet, sirens rose to hectic howls. A babble of voices began coming closer and closer—until the monstrous clangor of a gong high up on

the wall of the bank drowned them out.

What had Pink been trying to say? The “gun missed?” Obviously it hadn’t, if he was talking about the bandits’ machine-gun. But Pink, dying, wouldn’t be concerned about that, would he? A .38 service revolver teetered on the edge of the curb and I reached for it automatically.

His gun misfired! That was what Pink Nolan was trying to say. Pink had been a Marine, among whom care and use of weapons is a fetish. Naturally, to have a gun misfire at the crucial moment would weigh on his mind.

I thumbed out the cylinder. The empty chamber, which Pink normally carried under the hammer, was three turns down! The gun had missed not once, but thrice!

Then I looked closer. There were no firing pin dents on the caps. Sudden anger gripped and shook me so that I could scarcely breathe. What kind of an outfit had Pink been working for—to arm him with a gun having a defective firing pin?

OLD LUKE MARCOURT’S wavy white hair was the softest thing about him. There was nothing lax about his ash-tough big frame, his deep-set eyes which brooded, as he stood by the cemetery gate, over the mourners returning to their various cars.

“So you want Nolan’s job? Well, since you gave up your own, I suppose I can’t say no. But I still don’t get what you hope to find out. Believe me, Evans. Pink’s death hits me as hard as it does you. But it’s one of those things, after all. Apt to happen to any of my boys anytime.”

I kept my mouth shut. I couldn’t tell him I was sure they’d try again, sometime, somewhere. I couldn’t tell him Pink Nolan was murdered, that someone on the inside had tampered with his gun. Marcourt was on the inside himself.

“It’s what they’re hired for, you know.

Damn bad luck Nolan got hold of a bad gun, but—”

“And that his helper had to faint—right at the critical moment.” My irony was pretty raw, but I was still furious.

Marcourt looked embarrassed. “Yeah, that was bad, too. But old Long John Nehrbass had that bum ticker—not dangerous, just weak. Maybe I should’ve pulled him off armored-car duty. Naturally, if you don’t want him with you, Evans . . .”

So you were sorry for him? I thought. “Let him stay,” I said aloud. “I want the whole setup just as it was.”

Marcourt shook his head. “You don’t figure these hoods’ll try again, do you? Even if they get away from the police and the deposit insurance investigators—”

I had been watching a slight, quick-stepping man in a camel’s hair coat passing down the row of parked cars, thinking he was dressed rather jauntily for a funeral. Just then he turned to look back over his shoulder at the door of a cream-colored convertible. I grabbed the old man’s arm. Those boyish features!

“Who’s that? The bird down near the end of the line?”

Old Luke’s hawk eyes flicked around. He frowned. “Candy Horn. Minor office holder over at City Hall. Hmmm, wonder what he’s doing here? Nolan hated his guts.”

“Candy?” I said.

“They used to call him the Candy Kid. Baby-faced glad-hander with a smooth line of chatter. Maybe he hopes to pick up a few votes out of this.” Luke’s voice dropped suddenly. “Here’s Mrs. Nolan coming. Get my car door open, will you?”

Geraldine Nolan was approaching unseeingly, but with her chin high. She looked more pathetic than if she were shedding the tears I felt to be close to her clear blue eyes. Pink had been right, his

wife was far more beautiful than shown in the cracked, begrimed photos he had carried in his camouflaged jumper pocket. Even now she was vibrant with life.

"This way, my dear," Marcourt said gently, guiding her toward the polished black limousine. "Oh—uh—this is Mr. Paul Evans, another good friend of your husband's."

I bowed, but her blank eyes swept over my face without stopping. I wished I could do something, say something, to ease that taut, animal hurt. She got into the car and Marcourt followed her. He hesitated, seating himself, then jerked his chin at me.

"You better come along with us, Evans. There may be some things . . . All right with you, my dear?"

Mrs. Nolan's head turned and she saw me, standing in the door. "Please," she invited. "I've just remembered. You're Lieutenant Evans who saved Pink's life once, aren't you? In the South Pacific?"

I got in, awkward as a schoolboy. "It was the other way around," I said simply. "He was the kind of man you appreciate under fire—brave and efficient and, above all, dependable."

"The police said you talked to him just before . . ."

"Yes, I did."

"About what?" Her lips were parted slightly, her whole body tense. She waited to hear of her dead husband's last words, his last conversation.

I wasn't much good. "Very little. He said he was on duty and couldn't talk, but he wanted me to come to dinner—said he'd phone you—" I stopped, appalled.

For at last the tears came, like a torrent. And it wasn't to old Luke Marcourt she turned, oddly enough. She buried her lace against my shoulder. I held her close, as a brother might, glad for her relief but angry at myself for causing it.

THE job wasn't difficult. In the first few days I learned the simple routine. We transported bank, jewelry wholesalers', and private estates' valuables in the rear compartment of the truck; sitting guard, en route, in bucket seats under the turrets or on the hardwood locker top, occasionally peering from the bulletproof windows which closed the narrow slots.

I was assigned much of Pink Nolan's equipment, a fact that pleased me. I had the worn Sam Browne and holster, the repaired .38 police positive, his pad of receipts and carbons. The other armament was general. On big jobs Nehrbass and I each got sawed-off riot guns. Bucky Newsome, the toothy, good-natured driver, was assigned a Thompson submachine-gun for the stops which was kept in the locker other times.

Long John Nehrbass, Pink's former helper, who had a sourpuss that hated the world, tangled with me the very first day.

"I hear ya been makin' cracks about me to the boss."

I looked him over. He sat with his feet on a pile of coin sacks and his back against the inch-thick, case-hardened armor which was the truck's side panels. The gunport between us and the cab, where Bucky was driving, was shuttered. There was nothing to prevent me from telling him off in the way I felt he deserved. On the other hand, this lean, sneering character with the "weak heart" was a lead I wanted to follow to the end.

"I don't know what you mean by cracks," I said. "I asked about you when I took over Nolan's job, naturally."

"You figgered my passing out was a phony, don't tell me!" Nehrbass had a habit of never looking directly toward you when he talked, but looked up out of the corners of his eyes.

"Marcourt would know more about that than I would, Nehrbass. Don't holler before you're hit. We've got to work together, you know, for awhile."

"Yeah? I can always transfer, don't forget."

"Not very handily," I said. "The whole bureau will suspect you've gone yellow." It was all I could do to hold back a sneering, "You haven't, have you?"

He grunted, at a loss. Then he thought of something else. "By rights, you ought to be my helper. I had this truck, then Pink comes back and gets it again. Now he's dead and you calmly step in and cut me out. Just watch it, pal, that's all."

It was an armed truce, of a sort. I was just as happy. If Long John Nehrbass was the inside man, I'd find out sooner or later. If he wasn't— Well, I didn't want to get into the habit of depending on him when the showdown came.

Another employee of the Acme Bureau—which included an audit section, a store detective agency, and an insurance claim investigating unit as well as the armored car service—who interested me for more reasons than the purely social and business was an ancient ex-patrolman by the name of Paddy Hanrahan. He was the office supply clerk, and custodian of the locked cabinets which contained all the armament.

"Ye'll turn in yer gats and shillelaghs every ayvnin' at five, mind," he instructed me. "Exceptin', o' course, thim nights yer workin', d'ye see?"

I had already learned that one night each week the truck was sent to pick up late receipts at the big department stores for deposit, and that currency transfers were occasionally made at night.

"And what do I do on those nights?" I asked, slipping a package of the old man's favorite tobacco across his desk. His faded, Killarney-blue eyes thanked me, but

his manner retained its severe importance.

"Thim nights I work late meself, o' course. The pistols must all be in their coop before I lock up."

I nodded, thinking. "Paddy, would it be possible to substitute one gun for another, either in your cabinet or when it was being turned in?"

Hanrahan snorted. "Not likely, me bhoy. Each man of ye's assigned a particoolar weapon, y'understand. The number o' that gun ye call out to me every mornin' when ye take it out, and agin every ayvnin' when ye turn it in. I check it off on me little list, d'ye see, and devil a substitute will I take."

"You always do that?"

The old Irishman grinned, showing snaggle teeth. "Well, now, there ye got me, lad. On thim late nights, when we're all a bit tired, and there's only the three of ye to be checked, I sometimes omit the ceremonies. That's betwixt you and me and the inkstand, now—if the boss was to find out . . ."

I felt my neck prickle with premonition. Was this a break? Pink's murder had occurred on a morning after a "late night!" But then I shrugged. The gun would be checked out by number in the morning, in any case.

I took the gun Paddy had slid across the desk, read off the number to him, then snapped out the revolving chamber. The firing pin had a glint of newness.

"The old pin was really broken off, you say?"

"I did," Paddy nodded. "Me bhoy, I know what yer thinkin', but I been repairin' sidearms too many years not to know a clean break when I see wan. No file marks on that pin."

I, too, lowered my voice. "I wasn't thinking of file marks, Paddy. A filed-down pin would be too obvious. This had to look like the accident you call it,

otherwise—" I broke off. I had been about to say, "Otherwise the inside man could be traced." But Paddy Hanrahan, wrinkled and benign as one of his leprechauns was also an inside man, an extremely logical suspect.

"Accident it must've been," the old clerk was sayin. "Oh, I know 'tain't usual—a firin' pin breakin' off at the croocial moment, mind. But it's been known to happen before, laddy. A flaw in the metal, belike, the snappin' o' the trigger on an empty cartridge after range practice . . . No, bhoy, if ye don't understand some o' the strangest things in the world kin go wrong wit' weapons, and thim used every day, ye don't know guns, that's all."

And if you think a professional gun-toter and Marine wouldn't notice a flaw that serious, you don't know Pink Nolan, old-timer, I thought. But all I said aloud was, "It's a pretty far-fetched coincidence, that 'accident'."

ONE other person I made it a point to see. Not because Candy Horn could possibly have fritzed the gun, but the memory of his resemblance to that blurred, boyish face in the rear of the bandits' car was crying to be matched.

I had to make a frontal approach. I found him in a small cubbyhole off the city clerk's office. His bright face and brighter raiment was out of place here as my neat grey uniform.

"I'm working for Acme," I said bluntly. "I took over Pink Nolan's job."

His eyes looked up at me frankly, but it seemed they were watchful, too. I couldn't get the idea out of my head that I had seen him before, and not too long ago. But there was nothing—absolutely nothing—to make me think it had been in the death-dealing gang car. He was no boy, close up; past thirty, I'd say.

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr.—er—Evans, is it? Naturally, we were all shocked that so horrible a crime could be committed in our fair city, but—"

"They tell me Pink hated you. Why?"

Horn blushed rosily. "I don't know. Honestly I don't. I liked Pink, myself, even went to his funeral. But I can't think of any reason . . . Unless it was because of that little tiff we had when Mayor Miller was running for re-election, before the war. I was a party worker, of course, and somehow Nolan got it into his head that I forced Luke Marcourt to contribute. Really, the whole thing was ridiculous. I told Nolan that."

Hardly more ridiculous than the cock-and-bull story, I thought, looking down at his bland face. Still I couldn't stir up any definite recognition. The sudden thrill I'd had when I saw Horn looking back over his shoulder by the door of that expensive convertible was dead. But thinking of that expensive convertible . . .

I looked around. "This job can't pay too well," I said, with plenty of meaning in my words.

"No, indeed," he agreed easily. "But since I've a little money of my own, and have decided to make public service my career, it really doesn't matter at this stage of the game."

I couldn't get to first base. All I could hope, as I took my leave, was that—if he was involved with whoever had jimmied Pink's gun—I had appeared brash and stupid.

After that time began to drag. I began to drag with it; summer is no weather for riding in an armored car. Besides, I was continually fighting a losing battle against encroaching doubts. After all, what did I have to base my suspicions on, other than a knowledge of Pink Nolan's careful habits? My idea that the gang would try again—what was that but a theory that

when you get away with a good thing once, you try it again?

Everybody in the bureau was friendly enough, other than Long John Nehrbass, but I couldn't allow myself to thaw toward them. In my search for clues to the inside man, I couldn't afford to have my judgment clouded.

As things will, given time, the sharpness of my rage at the foul treachery of Pink's killing began to dull. And then there was Pink's widow. I had seen Jerry twice at the office, when she dropped in to arrange the compensation settlement. One day I called her and took her to lunch.

I was oddly glad to see her sorrow was fading. Radiantly alive and impulsive women like Jerry aren't meant to mourn overlong, and nobody with feeling likes to see a butterfly in a net.

"Pink used to say I was a balloon, and he was my anchor," she smiled, when I commented on her liveliness.

"How did you stay anchored when he was off in the South Pacific?" I asked, toying with my coffee.

I thought she looked troubled. "Not awfully well, Lieutenant—I mean, Mr. Evans—"

"Paul."

"Paul, then. But that's water over the dam. Let's talk about you. Tell me all about the job. Pink used to."

I told her, keeping back only my theories about her husband's death. They were beginning to look a little silly, anyway. She knew all about the work. It never occurred to her to wonder why I—a machine-tool sales representative—had taken it over.

I knew, even while I was talking shop, that I had fallen in love with Jerry Nolan. Searching back, I realized it was no new thing—I'd loved her ever since Pink had first shown me those crumpled, cracked photos of her. I had buried it then, not

even knowing I had done so. Now it was in the open. Did she guess? She was looking at me strangely. I couldn't say anything yet. Not now—less than five months after Pink's killing.

ABOUT a month later I got back to the office one afternoon to find Marcourt wanted me. It was three o'clock or so. As I hung my coat and holster belt in the deserted operatives' locker room, I suddenly felt fed up. I went toward Marcourt's office with the intention of telling him I was through.

Jerry was there. She smiled and said, "Hello, Paul."

Old Luke shot quizzical glances at us from under his furry eyebrows. "Late transfer tonight," he grunted around his cigar. "Shipment from the Union Trust for the Federal Reserve. Currency. Hundred grand or so. Want any more men?"

"What for?" I shrugged. "We'd only fall over them."

He nodded. "Okay, then, get to the side entrance to the bank at nine sharp. They should have it ready by then, they said. Your time's your own until then."

"I've just had a marvelous idea!" Jerry gasped. "The dinner's not out, after all. Couldn't Bucky and Long John pick up Paul at my house in the battleship-on-wheels? It'd only be a couple of blocks out of the way, Luke."

"What?" Marcourt growled. I looked puzzled.

"You see, Paul," she said, "I dropped in to invite you for that dinner Pink . . . never arranged. But this meany"—she reached over and rumped Luke's white hair—"said you had to work. But you don't have to work until later and—"

"Why can't you make it another night?" Marcourt said, jerking back in mock displeasure. "And leave my hair alone!"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Jerry looked at us. "I didn't, I guess, I'm so excited! I'm leaving on the midnight plane for Miami. Going to spend the winter with an old school chum down there. And I do so want to have that dinner, Paul, if—"

"Do what you like! Do what you like!" Marcourt snarled. He didn't fool me; I knew he loved Jerry like a daughter; that he, too, had been concerned for her sudden bereavement. "Just so the boys are on the job at nine, I don't give a—"

"It's almost right on the way," Jerry said, whirling around the office. "I'll go talk to Bucky myself. He'll do it for me." She flung open the door, blew Marcourt a kiss, smiled at me, saying, "About six-ish, all right?" and vanished.

Marcourt gave a fake cough. "Watch yourself," he said, not looking at me. "She's a great girl, but wild." Then he grinned up like an old satyr. "Me, I always liked 'em like that."

I didn't grin back. The old man snorted suddenly.

"Look here, Evans, why don't you loosen up? You don't trust me, do you?"

"I don't trust anybody in the bureau, Luke."

He scowled. "Why not?"

"Pink Nolan trusted all of you."

Marcourt took his cigar and flung it in the wastebasket. "Still got the bug biting you, huh? Evans, why don't you drop out? It's damn near six months, and—"

"You want me to quit?" I had forgotten I meant to quit when I came in here.

Marcourt nodded. "You're not doing any good for the morale of the rest of the boys, you know."

I went to the door. "All right, but mark my words, you're going to have another loss one of these days, Luke. Just like the last. I tried to have it focus on me, but . . ."

"Bosh! Oh, maybe we will have another raid, someday, but it'll be

coincidence. Nothing 'inside' about it!"

I shut the door solidly behind me and went back to the operatives' room. It was still deserted, but I had the idea someone had just been there. My locker was open, my coat and holster belt on a hook apparently the same as I left them. I unsnapped the leather flap and withdrew my gun.

The short hairs prickled at the nape of my neck with that premonitory chill. *It wasn't my gun!*

I knew it even before I glanced at the serial number. Everything told me—the weight, the balance, even the slight difference in the feel of the grip. I snapped out the cylinder; the firing pin was intact, as far as I could tell.

I began to get into my coat. Maybe the pin was set to break at the first shot, I didn't know. But one thing I did know—someone had learned about the Union Trust job, the biggest we'd had in months and a night job to boot. Things were breaking at last! The insider was showing his hand again!

I decided to go down to the NRA gallery for my gun-testing, rather than to the police range. And I went out of the bureau without even requisitioning extra .38 shells from Paddy. No one was going to learn from me that his sleight of hand had been discovered.

THE Nolan bungalow sat in a row of similar homes, squat, deep-porched and friendly. A few yellowed leaves spotted the pocket handkerchief of a front lawn. I went up the walk.

Jerry answered the first ring, eyes alight and cheeks flushed. "Right on the button, Paul. Hang your cap and harness on the hall tree, there. Everything's just about ready to come out of the oven, but we'll have time for one cocktail if we hurry. Will you mix it or shall I?"

I looked around the cozy entry, slipping the Sam Browne shoulder strap over my head. "Thanks, but I believe I'll take a raincheck, if you don't mind."

Jerry had been heading back past the polished staircase toward a bright kitchen. She turned abruptly, eyes shadowed. "None at all? Paul, you don't believe you'll have trouble?"

"Oh, no," I said. "Just that I'm plenty stimulated anyway, dining with you. I don't want to overdo it, Jerry."

She started to laugh, then broke off, watching me. I thought she was going to say something, but she turned away.

"Upstairs to the right, if you want to wash up," she called, clanging open the oven door in the kitchen.

My hands were still a little oily from cleaning and assembling the gun. I went up the stairs, noting how much the place looked like a doll's house. I couldn't picture the broad-shouldered Pink being at home here. There were two doors to the right, both closed. I grabbed the knob of one; it was locked. The other opened into the tile-and-chrome bathroom.

The dinner was a success, from the beef roast to the baked pudding. As in all things about her, Jerry had mastered the difficult art of cooking and serving attractively. I had a couple of bad moments when I recalled she was going away, perhaps out of my life for good. I wanted to talk to her about us, but something held me back. Instead we got to talking of the house, and I wondered if there wasn't someone to share it with.

"Oh, my brother George stays here occasionally, but he'd rather live in a big hotel downtown, where there's lots of life. He and Pink didn't get along well. I guess I got out of the habit of depending on him. I don't miss him."

She talked on about George—I got the impression he was a selfish and self-

sufficient sort—and about her friends and her schooldays. I studied the sapphire blueness of her eyes, only half hearing. I didn't hear the telephone interruption.

"Luke Marcourt," Jerry said, coming back from the front hall. "He said to tell you the bank will be ready sooner than they thought. Bucky'll getting here a little before eight instead of nine . . . "Oh, good grief!" she wailed, looking at the clock over the dining nook, "it's almost seven-thirty now!"

I insisted on helping with the dishes—clowning with one of her tiny aprons, although I didn't feel much like it—and we were just finishing up when I heard the blast of the armored car horn out front. Jerry went to the door with me, watching as I got into my Sam Browne, buckled it.

I tucked my cap under my arm and took both her hands in mine. "If I come—" I started to say. "If I come out of this," then changed it to, "If I come back before it's time for you to leave, may I see you to the plane, Jerry?"

She looked up at me; there was no more laughter in her eyes, only shadows.

"Of course, Paul," she said.

Bucky Newsome gave me a tough, friendly grin as I got into the cab with him. "Have a lovely dinnah?" he ribbed.

I started to answer in kind when I caught sight of something that changed the whole trend of my thoughts. As the truck swung away from the Nolan bungalow I just barely saw the open garage behind it and the rear of a cream-colored car!

My throat felt tight, dry. Behind me, through the steel walls, I could hear Long John knocking his pipe on a rivet. My hand went to the holster, settled on the butt of my gun.

My gun! Not the one that had been substituted in the operative's locker room that afternoon, but my own gun—formerly Pink's. I couldn't be mistaken, but I drew

it forth anyway, peered at the serial number under the dash lights.

"Matter?" Bucky asked, glancing at me curiously. "Get somebody else's cannon, Evans?"

I swallowed hard. "No," I said, and I was surprised to hear my voice so composed. "No, this is mine, all right."

Mine. I knew without looking that the tiny round knob of the firing pin didn't project under the hammer. The gun had been taken for the express purpose of breaking it off; in a vise, perhaps, or by smashing with blunt tools. My head was in a whirl as I shoved it back into the holster.

So it's Jerry, I told myself, over and over. It must be her. She was at the office this afternoon—knew about the shipment, knew about my gun in my locker. But even if others had the same chance then, none did tonight. None! Only Jerry . . . probably when she went to answer the phone. If she hadn't had that opportunity, she would have made one.

WE PARKED in the narrow street beside the Union Trust. One of the bank guards opened the side door for us, the door nearest the gaping vault where clerks were sweating under brilliant lights, checking, making up packets of currency, packing and locking wooden, rope-handled strong boxes. Long John carried a riot gun under one arm, and shifted it as we each seized one of the handles of those cases ready to go. I didn't even come to enough to tuck back the flap of my holster.

She was responsible for Pink's death! I realized groaning. That was the bitterest thought of all—and in the brief instant of its thinking, I passed from love to hate. Just as responsible as if she'd fired the burst that killed that defenseless, blindly devoted carrottop. I thought then my memory jerking backwards, "Maybe she did! She was in that car. It was her face I

saw at the rear window. Her's!

We carried out the cases and stacked them in the van, Bucky Newsome standing guard, opening and closing the doors for us. He was whistling some tune between his protruberant teeth and holding the submachine-gun cradled in his left arm.

Candy Horn's car in her garage, I lacerated myself. What's between them? Did Pink suspect? Was that why he hated Horn? Had Jerry been two-timing Pink all those months, he'd been yearning over those grimy photos? And did he find out when he got home? I hoped not. And, recalling Pink's pouter-pigeon chest when I last saw him, I didn't think he did.

We were half finished with the loading before my dazedness began to give way to sickening despair which in turn became reckless, cold fury. I became a killer, pure and simple, wanting nothing more than to meet up with Jerry's cutthroat gang—the sooner the better. If I came out of it I meant to go back to that sweet, homey little bungalow and take that white throat between my hands and—

There was a sudden glare of light in that gloomy side street, a blare of sound! A huge car came lancing down on us, tires screaming. I was caught in the cone of the headlights and dropped to one knee beside the steps, my hand slipping inside my shirt to where a flat automatic had been slung in my armpit for nearly six months.

"Get down, you fool!" I yelled at Long John. He was making for the rear of the armored truck—the fortress. Then I began to hear the shots, although none seemed directed at me. I saw Nehrbass go down, clutching at his chest. At first I thought it was another fainting spell—he was still protected from the swerving car when he fell—but I saw his hand wetting red.

The car was heading to cut us off from the truck. The rear doors were opening. *Where in hell's Bucky?* I thought. I held

my fire until the car was close, then sent three shots through the windshield. The driver's shadowy form jerked, then slumped. The car mounted the curb and smashed against a streetlight standard.

"Bucky!" I yelled, directing my fire at the sedan's open doors. A burst of laughing death came, then, but at me! Chips flew from the stone steps, dust blinded me. I felt a rap on my forehead and saw whirling lights. A warm, sticky trickle crossed the outside corner of my eye and I wiped at it, backhandedly.

"Damn you!" I cursed Bucky. That burst was no wild accident, no panic occurrence. Bucky was trying to kill me!

A bank guard was in the door, firing over my head at the sedan. The stuttering machine-gun ate across the plate glass and reached him. His partner dragged him back and slammed the grill-barred portal. Their first duty was to protect the bank.

Retreat cut off I was once more a jungle fighter, knowing I could survive only so long as I kept my head. Keeping in the shadow of a trash can, I slithered toward the car, firing carefully and picking off both the gunmen making crouched dashes for the armored car.

My clip was empty. I dropped it, shoved another into the butt and ran for the gang car. A small, white hand was reaching from the bottom of the open door. I kept going until I brought up against a front tire. "Gotta get outa here! Let's get outa here," a high-pitched voice cried from the interior.

Under the car I saw the gleam of Bucky's puttees crossing from the armored truck. Bucky had to get me—as he'd had to get Pink—regardless of the outcome of the raid.

"Damn you!" I choked again, heaving upright. The driver looked startled, seeing me come up so near to him. He died with that startled look on his toothy face and a

hole in his head.

The car rocked with a shifted weight. There came one more shot from it. Something caught me high on the side and spun me into the gutter. I propped on my elbow and aimed at the man in the light coat creeping out of the wrecked sedan. His head was in the dim glow reflected from the bent headlight and it turned just as I squeezed the trigger. I recognized her at the same instant my arm jerked with the shot.

"Jerry!" I cried . . . and cried into blackness . . .

I thought another white-capped nurse was coming into my room. Then I saw it was Marcourt. He came over to the high bed.

"Feeling better today, Evans? Good. You cleaned up on 'em, boy. Gang of the toughest thugs ever came down here from the big town. You were right, too, about the inside man. Bucky Newsome. He—"

"The hell he was," I interjected.

"No? What d'you mean?"

"Not the real inside man—she was a woman. Jerry Nolan. But I got her!"

"Jerry—" Marcourt put a broad palm on my forehead. "You all right, Evans? Don't feel feverish, do you?"

I tried to sit up, but I was stiffer than a mummy. "Dammit, don't tell me she got away, Luke. But she was wounded, the double-dealing cat! Find her, Luke, get her!"

For a few minutes I lay there wondering how I could have missed that final shot. True, I was wounded, too, but she was so close, spilling out of the back of that sedan.

Marcourt entered again. "I got her, boy! Here!"

This time I managed to get halfway up, but some imp seared my side with a hot poker. Standing beside Marcourt, pale

even in the pink haze of my pain-filled vision, was Jerry!

"Paul!" she said.

"But—I killed you—that gang car—"

Tears were running down her cheeks. "No, it was George. I heard him come downstairs after you left. He'd been in his room all the time. He'd heard everything, Paul! But I didn't dream— He drove away in his car. Later, I found a gun behind the hat rack in the front hall! I knew at once something terrible was happening, so I called Luke. We rushed to the bank as fast as we could . . ."

"And got there just too late," Marcourt said. "I wasn't going to mention it to you, boy, but Jerry's brother was dead. He was the fingerman for that crew of hoods, working with Bucky Newsome. He looked a lot like Jerry, maybe that's why—"

"George?" I asked. "George who?"

"Horn. You know—Candy Horn. You asked me who he was once." Marcourt looked puzzled.

"Why doesn't somebody tell me these things?" I said. Then, "Jerry—darling, I'm sorry. I'm—"

She came closer and put a trembling finger to my lips.