

Complete Novelette

Twice in ten minutes drawn guns threatened death to Denison if he did not deliver the Eyes of Durga. The first time a stranger saved him. But nothing could save him a second time, for Denison had never even heard of the Eyes of Durga.



By
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The Eyes of Durga

Chapter I Close to Death

DENISON decided he was going to have company. The woman's figure had passed and repassed before the ground glass of the office door time and again. She was patrolling the corridor outside, it seemed, and had at last decided to come in. He could see the outline of her against the light in the hallway, past the lettering on the door which announced to passers, "Spartan Investigating Company."

They were a division of the Spartan Insurance Company and handled nothing but that company's matters—were, in fact, on the tenth floor of the Spartan Building. Denison was a new man and had been given the night shift. He was alone now.

The door knob turned diffidently, the door opened, and the woman came in. Denison grinned appreciatively, she was a beautiful work of art—tall for a woman, perhaps five feet seven, her face an oval of cucumber-creamed whiteness, lips and cheeks properly reddened, eyelashes mascaraed to a nicety of

perfection. Her body, delightfully contoured, was encased in a tailored suit that was a miracle of fashion.

She smiled charmingly and said, with an enticing hint of accent, "You ar-re een charge?"

Denison got up from behind the desk and said, "Yes, ma'am. Can I help you?"

"Yes," she answered. She opened her hand bag and took out a little gun-metal revolver which she pointed at Denison unwaveringly. The smile vanished. Her eyes had suddenly become dangerous. She spoke low, almost whispered: "If you have the eyes of Durga, you will give them to me, pleas-se! If you do not have them, it is too bad, for I shall kill you!"

Denison said, "What do you want someone eye's eyes for—your own are pretty enough."

She liked that. He could tell by the momentary twitch of her lips. But she held the gun steady. "Do not jest. You are close to death." She held out the other hand in an imperious gesture. "Give me the eyes of Durga!"

"If I knew what you were talking about—"

"Don't lie! You must have them! I have waited for Zadukian to come here for a half-hour. I must have missed him. He must have been here before I came, and given them to you. I want them!"

Denison was growing impatient. He never liked to stay quiescent under the muzzle of a gun—no matter how enticing its owner was. He took a step toward her. "Listen, now—"

He stopped. Her finger had contracted around the trigger. There was no panic in her eyes. He knew she would shoot.

Suddenly there came the hurried clicking of a pair of excited feet on the tiles of the corridor outside. The woman became breathless. "It must be Zadukian!" Her eyes glinted. They darted around the office and lighted on a door at the left. "Where does that

lead?" she demanded.

Denison was amused. This was getting interesting. "That's the door to one of the inner offices."

She ran across to it, the gun swinging in a slow arc to keep him covered. "I will hide. But I will leave the door open a crack. Be careful—I shall keep this gun trained on you all the time!"

She slipped behind the door.

DENISON frowned. The footsteps outside had arrived at the corridor door. They slowed, stopped. There was a shadow on the ground glass, then the door opened.

A short, fat man in a wrinkled gray business suit came in. His hat was far back on his head. There was sweat on his brow. His small, piggish eyes were restless, frightened. His collar was slightly wilted, and the knot of his tie a little askew.

He stopped, undecided, fat hands at his sides, the fingers working nervously. "You—you the boss?" he demanded jerkily.

Denison nodded. "I'm in charge at night. What can I do for you?" Out of the corner of his eye he tried to glimpse the door at his right behind which the woman hid.

The fat man came up close to the desk. "The eyes of Durga—your company has them insured—no?"

Denison said, "I wouldn't know about that. I'm a new man here."

The visitor gestured impatiently. "Yes, yes. I know you insure them. You pay rewards when stolen articles are returned?"

Denison nodded. "Yes."

The fat man blew out his breath noisily and leaned across the desk. "How much you pay—to get back the eyes of Durga?"

"Who the hell is Durga—and what would I want her eyes for?"

The fat man slapped the desk angrily with the palm of his hand. "Fool! This is no time to

joke. The eyes of Durga are insured with your company for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. They are of the Masterson collection a part. Tonight they were stolen. How much will you pay to get them back?"

Denison said: "We haven't been notified of the robbery. But if what you say is true, I can get you five thousand."

"And no questions asked?"

"No questions asked."

The little man said eagerly: "All right. You come at twelve tonight to Number 1118 Worthing Avenue in the Bronx, Apartment 4D. Bring the money. I will have them for you."

"Hold on a minute," Denison exclaimed. "Where do you get that stuff? How am I gonna get five grand this late at night? And how do I know they've been stolen at all—these eyes of whosis? And if they have been stolen, how do I know you can deliver?"

"I will prove to you," the other said simply. He drew from his pocket a long, glittering, platinum bar. There were a dozen small diamonds in it, but at either end there was an unfilled space. The prongs had been bent back and two stones removed. "That is the setting."

"I'll have to call my boss," said Denison.

"Call now—I will wait. But remember, I must have the money tonight. Tomorrow I will be far away!"

Denison was about to reach for the phone, but the woman's voice cut at him from the inner doorway. "You weel call no one!" He stopped with his hand at the instrument.

The little man had gone a pasty white. He trembled. "Nina!" he gasped. The fear of death was on him.

The woman, Nina, said softly, dangerously: "So, my friend, Zadukian, you are what they call a twice-crosser! Give me now the eyes of Durga—quick!"

Zadukian swallowed hard and spread his

hands in a pleading gesture. "Don't shoot, Nina. They are not here. I was afraid to bring them."

Slowly Denison's hand slipped up to his shoulder holster. He got his gun out. The woman's eyes were blazing at Zadukian; for the moment she had forgotten Denison. She turned to him, startled, as he covered her now. Her gun wavered. It was trained on the fat man.

Denison said: "Put the gun away, Nina. We'll just talk this over sensibly and find out what it's all about."

She smiled at him, changing her mood instantly. "Would you shoot a woman, Mr. Detective?"

"I would," Denison assured her. "I can get you in the wrist from here. It'll hurt like hell."

She eyed him a moment, then she lowered her gun. "I believe you mean it. You ar-re not a gentleman!"

Denison grinned. "Nope, not if it means getting shot at!" Suddenly Zadukian went into a blur of motion. A gun appeared in his hand. He was looking murderously at the woman.

DENISON acted fast. He swung his open left hand down across the desk in a chopping blow. It caught Zadukian's wrist and slammed it down on the glass top. The gun exploded and a bullet crashed into the ground glass of the corridor door.

The fat man uttered a yelp, and then a scream of fear. Denison gasped. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the woman had raised her gun and was coldly drawing a bead on Zadukian.

Denison shouted, "Stop it, you!" He yanked at Zadukian's hand. The fat man's body followed the hand across the desk just as her gun barked. The bullet missed Zadukian's head by inches. Denison's action had saved him.

Denison swung around the desk and

grappled with the woman. She raised her right hand and tried to slash him over the head with the barrel of her gun. Her white, even teeth were bared in a vicious little snarl.

Denison caught her wrist, twisted it behind her with his arm around her waist, and held her tight. She stopped fighting and relaxed, her head against his chest.

He grunted. "Can't fool me, girlie. If I let you go, you'll start shooting again. Drop the gun."

She lifted her head with a jerk and raised her free hand to his face and raked his cheek with her long nails. He had his gun in his right hand and could do nothing about it. He swore, twisted at her left wrist, which he held imprisoned behind her back, until she gasped and let her revolver drop.

He swung her away from him, stooped and picked up the revolver. "If you weren't such a little killer," he said, "it would be a pleasure to hold on to you?"

She stood erect, panting. Her suit was slightly disarranged. She smiled at him, started to say, "I like the way you—" Then she stopped and gasped. Her gaze roved the office.

Denison swore. Zadukian was gone! On the desk the platinum bar glittered under the electric light.

CHAPTER II TRIGGER FINGERS

AND then the telephone rang. Denison sighed, bolstered his gun, and said, "Well, I'm glad he's gone. Now there won't be any shooting for a while.

The woman asked, "What ar-re you going to do with me?"

"Wait'll I answer the phone."

She nodded and slumped into a chair. Now that the fat man had disappeared, the fight seemed to have left her.

Denison picked up the platinum bar from

the desk, pocketed it, and lifted the French phone.

"Hello!" a voice barked into his ear. "Spartan?"

"Right," said Denison.

"Who's this talking?"

"Ed Denison."

"This is Detective Sergeant Rice, Homicide Bureau. I don't think I know you."

"I'm a new man here. Used to be in business for myself in Chicago."

"All right. Better send a representative up here to Raymond Masterson's house—Fifth Avenue and Sixty-eighth. It seems some stuff you insure has been stolen."

"Did you say—Homicide Bureau?" Denison demanded.

"That's right. There's been murder here besides robbery. Masterson's been killed!"

Denison exclaimed, "The hell you say!" Then: "Okay, Rice, thanks for calling. The boss will appreciate it. We'll have someone up there right away."

He hung up and looked at Nina. "Well, lady, it's murder!"

She shrugged. "Masterson was a fool. He kept the eyes of Durga in a wall safe. They had to kill him."

"You're in a tough spot, lady," Denison said. "Open up and maybe I'll be able to help you."

"I deed not keel Masterson," she said matter-of-factly.

"Who did—Zadukian?"

She shook her head scornfully. "He has no—what you call—guts."

"Well, who did?"

She was silent, eyeing him appraisingly. Then suddenly she leaned forward in her chair. "I like you, Mr. Detective. You would make a gr-rand lover; and I could make you happy—so happy!" Her eyes were black, misty, promising. "Let us go together to this address in the Bronx that Zadukian gave you. We will

together take from him the eyes of Durga, and we will go away together. I know where I can get much money for them—a hundred thousand dollars! You and I will spend it together—on the Riviera!” She breathed the last throatily, hungrily.

Denison grinned. “That’s a good act, lady. You missed your vocation.”

She snapped at him, “Fool! Men have—”

She was interrupted by the telephone. Denison picked it up, still grinning.

It was Zadukian. “That woman—” he demanded, “—she is still there?”

“Yes,” Denison answered guardedly.

“Be careful. She is dangerous.”

“I know it. Thanks for your interest. Is that what you called for?”

“I wish to be sure that you come tonight to Worthing Street. You will bring the reward?”

“Yes.”

“But come alone; No police. You promise it?”

“Yes.”

“If you bring police, you do not get the eyes of Durga.”

“You can take my word for it”

Zadukian hung up. Denison clicked down the hook and dialed a private number. It rang for two minutes before he got a sleepy “Hello.”

“This is Denison, boss,” he said. “The eyes of Durga—whatever they are—have been stolen. Masterson, their owner, is murdered. I’ve got a wild woman here in the office, who wanted to shoot up the place. And I’ve just promised five thousand reward to get those damn’ eyes back—have an appointment for twelve o’clock. Okay so far?”

Bannister, the boss, growled at the other end. “Sure! Go up to ten if you have to. We got them covered for a hundred and fifty grand! Who’s the woman?”

“I don’t know yet. I don’t seem to know anything. What the hell are these here eyes of

Durga?”

“They’re a pair of matched rubies that came from a Hindu shrine once—the shrine of some goddess named Durga.”

“All right,” Denison said. “Now I know. Where can I get the five grand?”

“I’ve got cash here. I’ll meet you with it in a half-hour at Masterson’s house. Who has charge over there?”

“A guy named Rice. He’s the one that called up.”

“Rice is okay. But watch your tongue up there. If he gets wise to your appointment, he’s liable to gum the works.”

Denison was about to answer when he heard a startled exclamation from the woman. He looked up, eyes narrowed. Two men had just slipped in from the corridor, with drawn guns.

One of them grinned wickedly at Nina, the other covered Denison and clipped out, “Drop the phone!”

Denison calmly held on and spoke into the mouthpiece. “Two guys with guns. One is tall and cross-eyed, the other is a little runt with two broken teeth in front—”

THE tall man cursed and sprang across the room. He brought the barrel of his gun down on Denison’s head. Denison jerked aside and the barrel raked his cheek. He dropped the phone and sat still, looking into the hole of the muzzle. He could hear Bannister’s frantic voice coming out of the instrument on the desk. “Denison! What’s happened? Denison! Denison!”

The tall man motioned toward the phone. “Tell him it’s a joke!”

Denison looked at the bleak eyes that stared unwinkingly at him over the gun. He shrugged, picked up the phone and said, “It’s a joke.”

The tall man tore the phone from his fingers and slammed it down in the cradle.

"Funny, ain't you?" he snarled.

The little man had come up close to the woman. "Look who we got here, Gratz," he said in a deep voice that sounded queer coming from such a small man. "Little Nina's playin' wit' the bulls now!" He put out a hand and patted her shoulder.

She squirmed in her chair, her hands tightly clenched.

Gratz growled, "Stow it, Bliss. We got business." Then to Denison, "Get up, you, and come over here!"

Denison got up and came around the desk. He touched his finger to the gash in his cheek, left by the gun barrel.

"I owe you for this," he said quietly.

The big man slapped him in the face with a gloved hand. "You'll owe me more yet!" He said to the other, "Come over here and fan him, Bliss."

Bliss came around in back of him and ran expert hands over his person. Gratz moved back so that he covered both Denison and the woman.

Bliss got Denison's gun from the shoulder holster, and the woman's gun from the left-hand pocket. From his right-hand pocket he took out the platinum bar. "Got it!" he exclaimed. "This is the setting. He must have the rubies, too!"

He searched thoroughly, feeling in the lining of Denison's coat, in the lining of his, tie, under his garters. He apparently knew all the places to look. Finally he said: "They're not on him, Gratz. He must have hid them some place in the room. We'll have to tear it apart."

"No time," said Gratz. "That guy at the other end of the phone wasn't fooled. There'll be cops here any minute." He poked his gun into Denison's chest. "Talk, guy! Or get rubbed out!" His jaw jutted. "You know how a guy feels with a slug in his lungs?"

Denison said, "I haven't got them."

"You have. We saw Zadukian come out of here. You have the setting. He must've turned them over to you for the reward."

"No, he didn't," said Denison. "And besides that, you can go to hell. You're not doing any killing now. I gave your description over the wire just now. They'd pick you up in half an hour!"

Gratz leered at him. "It don't matter, guy, we're wanted for murder anyway! Now—talk!"

Denison was silent.

"All right, guy, I'm giving it to you. We'll make the woman talk. Here goes!"

Denison lunged sideways. At the same time his hand flashed up and struck at Gratz's gun wrist. The gun exploded and Denison felt a flash of hot pain across his ribs. He staggered back. The gun had been deflected enough for the bullet to just graze his side.

Gratz snarled. He swung the gun into line again. Denison felt a little dizzy. He wanted to dive in at the big gunman but his legs wavered. A forty-five will do that to a man, even if it only tickles his ribs. He saw death in Gratz's trigger finger.

And it was the woman who saved him.

Suddenly she called out shrilly, "Gratz! Don't shoot! He has not the rubies! Zadukian deed not bring them!"

Gratz stopped, looked at her. Bliss said, "Get through, Gratz. The cops'll be here!"

AND from the street, ten floors below, they heard the thin, shrill scream of a police siren.

"The radio cars!" Gratz exclaimed. "Let's get out of here. Grab that dame, Bliss. We'll take her!"

Bliss seized the woman about the waist. She struggled, scratched, kicked. Bliss raised his fist and brought it down on the side of her head. She gasped, slumped in his arms. He raised her and carried her out over his shoulder.

Gratz backed out after him, his eyes and the muzzle of his gun boring at Denison. Denison supported himself weakly, both hands behind him on the desk, gathering strength. He knew that Gratz wasn't going to leave him behind alive—knew it from Gratz's face.

He saw the ridges of muscle tighten along the tall gunman's jaw. He saw the gun stop wavering and settle, with the sight along his chest. And he dived—dived a split second before the gun roared and the window behind him was shattered.

He struck Gratz below the knees. Gratz stumbled backward out of the doorway. Denison dropped behind the wall, out of sight from the corridor. He heard Bliss call, "Come on, Gratz. To hell with him. We got to run down ten flights!"

He poked his head out of the doorway and saw the two of them, Bliss still carrying the woman, hurrying through the door with the red light above it at the end of the hall. Gratz turned and saw him, and fired once more. He pulled his head in and heard the slug bury itself in the woodwork.

He had struck Gratz with his shoulder. It hurt badly. His side burned, too. He cursed when he tried to stand up.

After a moment or two he made it, looked cautiously out again. The others had disappeared. He staggered out into the corridor. The indicator on the elevator shaft showed that a cage was racing up. The indicator reached ten, and the door banged open. Two policemen barged out, guns drawn.

"H'ist 'em!" one of them rapped at Denison.

Denison yelled, "Cut it, sap! I'm a Spartan man. Those guys got away down the stairs!"

"Yeah? Hold him here, Jerry. I'll go see if he's right." He dashed for the stairway door.

"You damn' fool!" Denison called after him. "There's two of 'em with guns. Head them off. Take the elevator down!"

The cop who remained with him shoved him back with a hand on his chest. "Never mind, bo. We know our business! Let's go in that office an' see what's what."

Suddenly there came the sound of gunshots from the stairway. They both ran to the door, the cop cursing. They had to go down three flights before they saw the body of the policeman who had just left them. There was a hole in his head.

CHAPTER III THE ARMENIAN

THE cop who had come down with Denison was a young rookie. He looked sick. "God!" he whispered. "Grady's through! An' he was just tellin' me about his kids not five minutes ago in the car!"

Denison said bitterly, "If he had only listened to me! We could have headed them off."

"They'll be headed off all right," the cop said grimly. "There was another radio car with us. The crew is downstairs in the lobby."

Denison shook his head. "No good. There's a mezzanine on the second floor. It connects through with the next building. They go through that and come out on Fifth Avenue—in the clear."

"What'll we do?" asked the cop.

"Let me take Grady's gun. They got mine. I'll go down after them."

The cop shook his head. "No. I'll go. I'd like to get them in shooting distance!"

"A tall guy and a short guy," Denison told him. "One of 'em will be carrying a woman. Don't shoot her."

The cop went down the stairs. Denison waited beside Grady's body. Soon he heard people coming down. It was a precinct captain with a couple of plain-clothes men. With them was Bannister, Denison's boss.

The police captain swore when he saw

Grady's body.

"What's been happening here?" Bannister demanded. "I called headquarters after you hung up and told 'em to send the radio cars."

"Those two guys," Denison explained. "They started shooting."

"Know why?" one of the detectives asked.

"Nope. They barged in and started fireworks."

Bannister took Denison by the arm and led him up to their floor. "Were they connected with this Masterson business?"

"I'll say they were, boss. They wanted those damned eyes of Durga. Wouldn't believe I didn't have them."

He told Bannister everything that had happened. "This Zadukian," he finished, "seems to have the goods. Promised to deliver at Number 1118 Worthing Avenue, at midnight."

"If those two eggs that were here don't get to him first," Bannister took out a long manila envelope from his breast pocket. "There it is. Five grand in hundreds, twenties, and tens. Put it away and don't let these coppers get wise we're going for the stuff. They'd raid the place and scare him away."

Denison had just put the envelope in his pocket when the police captain appeared in the corridor. He looked gloomy.

"Let's go down to the lobby," he said. "We'll see what luck they had."

They got in the elevator. Bannister said: "Those guys know their way around. They wouldn't take the lobby. They must have gone through the connecting corridor and out on Fifth Avenue."

He was right. The policemen in the lobby hadn't seen anybody. One of the plain-clothes men who had gone around the corner belatedly said that a pedestrian had seen two men and a woman take a taxi only a minute or two before. He couldn't recall what kind of taxi it was.

Denison gave a close description of them, and the captain snapped to one of the men, "Phone down town. Get out an alarm."

Bannister said, "Can I take my man along now? I need him."

The police captain eyed him shrewdly. "You've got something up your sleeve, Bannister. Come across."

"I haven't, Lacey," Bannister assured him.

"Everybody knows you make deals with these guys. All you want is to get the stolen stuff back. I bet this is tied in with the Masterson job!"

"If it is, we'll find out soon enough. What do you say—does Denison come with me?"

"Go ahead," Lacey conceded. "But see that he's available when we need him." He put a big hand on Bannister's shoulder as they were about to leave. "Remember, Bannister—if you're holding anything out on me, God help you! A cop's been killed!"

THEY got in a taxi at the corner. Bannister told the driver, "Sixty-eighth and Fifth."

To Denison he said, looking at his wrist watch: "It's only ten-thirty. It shouldn't take more than a half-hour to get to the Bronx. We'll stop at Masterson's place and see what's what. Maybe we can get a line on those two hoods of yours. From what you tell me, they must be the ones who killed Masterson and got the rubies. If so, how the hell did this rat of a Zadukian get them? And where does the dame fit?"

Denison managed a grin. "Are you asking me or telling me? I feel dizzy—like a merry-go-round." He touched the gash in his cheek, took out a handkerchief and wiped it.

Bannister asked, "How's your side?"

"It hurts. But it isn't bad. It was just scraped—no fault of Gratz's. He did his best to make a good job of it."

"Can you keep going? I'd hate to have somebody else go up to the Bronx. Zadukian

would probably fly the coop. He knows you.”

“I’ll last,” Denison said.

At Masterson’s home, Detective Sergeant Rice shook hands with Denison at Bannister’s introduction.

“Where did Masterson get it?” Bannister asked him.

“Up in his bedroom. There’s a wall-safe there. They must have known the combination, because the safe was opened without soup. Masterson must have come in on them while they were working. He got stabbed in the throat.”

“Let’s take a look.”

Rice grumbled. “We’re always helping you guys out. And what do we get? You go and make deals behind our back. All you’re interested in is to recover the swag!”

Bannister patted him on the back. “I’ve always treated you square, haven’t I?”

“Oh, nuts!” Rice growled. “Come on up.”

They followed him upstairs and into Masterson’s bedroom.

“The body’s just been taken away,” Rice told them. “But if you’ve had supper recently, you’re better off not seeing it. There’s the wall safe. Everything left in it but the eyes of Durga. There were no other jewels. The rest are in a bigger safe downstairs. He kept some securities here, but they weren’t touched.”

Denison went over to the dresser on which were spread a number of papers that Rice had evidently been working on.

“Those are papers and things from the servants’ rooms,” the detective sergeant informed him. “I was just going over them.”

Denison picked up a flat little folder with a stiff cover.

“That’s a seaman’s book,” Rice said. “It belongs to Masterson’s valet, an Armenian named Karabajian. This is his day off—hasn’t been around since this morning. We’ll question him when he gets back.”

Denison opened the seaman’s book. A

photograph of Karabajian was pasted to the inside of the cover.

Rice came over and said: “Notice when he came to this country—1929, off the Greek steamer, Acropolis. He evidently jumped ship and stayed in this country illegally. He can be deported if we turn him over to the immigration people. Funny how guys get in trouble when there’s a murder. They think they’re okay, then plop — someone gets bumped and we go poking into their past life. Take this guy Karabajian. He could have stayed in this country for the rest of his life if Masterson hadn’t got bopped.”

Denison was listening to Rice’s disquisition with only one ear. For the picture of the valet, Karabajian, was an exact likeness of Zadukian!

THE telephone alongside the bed rang, and Rice went to answer the call.

Denison said to Bannister out of the corner of his mouth: “Take a look at this mug, boss. It’s Zadukian—the guy I’m going to meet at twelve o’clock!”

Bannister pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle. “Holy Mike! The valet! He was in on it, and it’s murder, Ed. If we trade with him, we’re accessories after the fact!”

Denison put the picture down. “He didn’t kill Masterson, boss. The dame told me he didn’t. It’s Gratz and Bliss who are the killers in that crowd.” He stroked the gash in his cheek. “I’d like to get my paws on that Gratz!”

Bannister said, “Sh-h!”

Rice was through with the phone. He hung up, looking grim, straight at Denison.

“So there was a little scrap over at your office,” he said.

Denison grinned uncomfortably.

“Yeah. I got this—and this.” He indicated his cheek and the rent in his coat where Gratz’s bullet had grazed him.

Rice nodded. “Yeah. You left in an awful

hurry."

Bannister protested. "Lacey said it was okay."

"Sure. That was Lacey on the phone just now. He's all in a sweat. Claims you talked him into letting Denison go when he should have taken him down town to look at pictures in the rogues' gallery. He's supposed to try to identify the two mugs that shot Grady."

"Hell!" Bannister exclaimed. "He should have thought of that before. We have to go now. We got an appointment."

"Sorry," Rice said amiably. "The chief inspector's on the scene over there and he bawled the sweat off Captain Lacey. So orders is, Denison stays here till a squad car picks him up."

Bannister was red in the face. "But listen—"

"Don't argue with me," Rice grinned. "Argue with the chief inspector. I gotta follow orders. Anyway, why get hot? It won't take long down town—a couple of hours. He'll be out by one or two o'clock." He grimaced at Denison. "You ought to be glad you ain't held as a material witness!"

Bannister stormed. "This is outrageous. Let me take him with me now. I'll guarantee to bring him back by twelve-thirty."

Rice shook his head. "Want me to get suspended or something? Nix! Come on downstairs till the squad-car comes." He thwacked Bannister on the back. "Take it like a good sport."

"It's unconstitutional!" Bannister blazed. "It's interfering with the rights of a citizen. I'll get him out on a writ!"

"Take it easy," Rice soothed, as he herded them down the stairs. "I'll begin to suspect you got a deal on to get back the rubies." He stopped short on the steps. "Hell! I bet that's what it is! You two have an appointment to pick up the rubies tonight! Well, you'll just stick around, boys—the two of you."

Bannister controlled himself with difficulty. Down in the hallway he buttonholed the detective sergeant. "I've treated you fair in the past, Rice," he cajoled. "Don't cross me in this. It's important"

Rice shook his head. "No, sir. We got to get Grady's killers. I don't care if it costs your damn' company a million dollars!"

Denison was standing behind Rice. He winked at Bannister, then put his hand to his side and groaned.

Rice turned around.

Denison groaned again. "God, my side! That bullet must have nicked a rib! I feel weak!" He closed his eyes, clutched at Rice's sleeve, and allowed his body to sink down to the floor.

Bannister cried, "He's fainted!"

Rice said, "What the hell! We didn't have to argue. He couldn't go with you anyway."

Bannister knelt and cradled Denison's head under his arm. "He must be hurt worse than he thought. Better get some water."

Rice hurried to the back of the house, toward the kitchen. As soon as he had disappeared, Denison squirmed to his feet. "Gimme your gun," he said to Bannister. "I'm on my way. Hold the bloodhound back."

Bannister gave him his gun. "Good boy. Go ahead. I'll handle Rice. I know how to talk to these boys."

DENISON sneaked out the front door. The uniformed patrolman outside the door looked at him, said, "It's a nice night, ain't it?"

"If it don't snow," said Denison.

He started up the street, trying to keep himself from running.

And then he got a break.

A cab slowed up alongside the curb, the driver evidently looking at house numbers. Denison reached for the door, opened it, started to get in.

The driver said, "Wait a minute, mister. Sorry, but I can't take you. I'm here on police business."

Denison got in and closed the door. "Drive uptown," he ordered. "You can tell me all about it on the way. I'm in a hurry!"

"But I was told to ask for Captain Lacey. They said at headquarters that he'd be here, at the Masterson home."

Denison flashed his shield. "Take a look, bo. I'm Lacey. Get started!"

The driver turned his head, saw the glint of the shield. "Okay, cap!" He stepped on the gas. "Suits me."

Denison looked out of the rear window and saw Rice dash out of the house and stand at the curb looking after them. It was too dark to distinguish the numbers on the license plates, and Denison felt reasonably safe.

"Where'll I take you, captain?" the driver inquired.

"Drive up the east side toward the Bronx. Now tell me what it's all about."

"Well," the driver said, "I had my radio tuned in for the short wave, and I heard that headquarters wanted information about three people who took a cab on Fifth Avenue about a half-hour ago—two men and a woman—in connection with a cop gettin' killed. So I called up headquarters, an' they told me to shoot right up to the Masterson home, that you were on your way over there."

They made a left turn, then another left turn, and sped up Madison Avenue.

Denison's pulse raced. "What about those three people?" he demanded impatiently.

"Well, I'm the guy that rode them. And what's more, captain, I know where they went!"

"THIS is where I dropped 'em," said the cab driver. He had pulled up before a shabby rooming house in the West One Hundred and Thirties, off Seventh Avenue.

"They went in there, the three of them. The woman didn't seem so happy about it, either."

"All right," said Denison. "Wait for me."

He climbed the tall stoop and rang a dirty bell. After a while the door was opened by a lean woman with bleary eyes. She wore a torn, cheap house dress.

"Yes?" she asked, as if she didn't care what he wanted.

Denison pushed the door open and walked into the hallway.

The woman shrilled at him. "Sa-ay—"

Denison closed the door and faced her. He flashed his badge. "A woman and two men," he said. "They came here a short while ago. One of the guys is little with two broken front teeth. The tall one is cross-eyed. Names of Gratz and Bliss—or maybe different names. What room?"

The woman eyed him defiantly. "Never seen them, mister."

Denison leaned close, whispered, "Will you tell me, sister, or do I take the house apart?"

She waved at him angrily. "Get out of here! You can't fool me. You're only a private dick. Get out before I call the cops!"

He caught her wrist. "This is murder, sister. Don't fool around with murder. You show me their room or I'll call the cops!"

She went pale. "You ain't kiddin', are you?"

"No."

"All right. It's room eight. Up at the head of the stairs. But the two men went out. It's their room. They said they were leaving the woman to catch some sleep—she wasn't feeling well."

Denison was halfway up the stairs. The

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woman came after him.

The door of room eight was locked.

"I have a pass-key," she said. Her fingers fumbled it nervously. "God," she exclaimed, "I hope I don't get mixed in this. I can't afford to have cops comin' in here. It'll ruin business."

Denison took the key from her. He inserted it in the lock, turned it, and flung the door open.

The room was lit. It contained a bed, a dresser, and one chair. On the bed was the woman, Nina.

She was dead. There was a knife in her throat. The blanket was red and wet. There was a broad stain of crimson on the bosom of her tailored suit. Denison shivered. He had held her warm body less than an hour ago.

He approached the bed.

She had no shoes on. They lay on the floor. Near them were numerous burned matches.

The stockings had been ripped from her legs. The soles of both her feet were blackened and scorched. They told him a story. She had been tortured for information and then killed. She must have told them the address on Worthing Street, where he was to meet Zadukian. And then they had killed her. It took him a moment to get control of himself. As he turned to go, he almost stumbled over the woman who had admitted him. She had fainted. He stepped over her and dashed down the stairs with teeth clenched tight.

Gratz and Bliss! Gratz and Bliss! He kept repeating the names in his mind. He wanted them now. He didn't care about the rubies so much any more. He wanted those two killers!

OUTSIDE, the cab still stood at the curb, but the driver was nowhere in sight. He came close to the cab, and heard the radio inside it. A voice was intoning: "Calling all cars! Repeating instructions! Pick up Edward

Denison, private detective. Wanted as material witness! He has a fresh scar on his left cheek. Last seen in the vicinity of Fifth Avenue and Sixty-eighth Street. May be riding in a taxicab. Look out for tricks. He is very clever. Calling—" And the voice went on, repeating the instructions once more in a monotone.

Denison stiffened. He saw the taxi driver come running down the street with a patrolman beside him. The driver was pointing to him.

Denison looked around. The street was quiet, only one or two pedestrians. The driver and the cop were still half a block away.

He got behind the wheel of the cab. The motor was running. He shoved the stick into first and stepped on the accelerator. The cab lunged ahead, away from the two pursuers. Behind him he heard a shout, then the shrill of a police whistle.

He was in high now, racing toward Lenox. He heard a shot from behind, then another. But he was too far away from the cop.

There was a green light at Lenox Avenue, and he rounded into it in a wide left-hand turn at forty miles an hour. There was a red light at the next corner. He made a right turn, shot across town to Fifth, and across the bridge to the Bronx.

Soon the radio in back began to stutter, and the same monotonous voice began to intone: "Calling all cars! Look out for Black and Tan cab, license number 0453. Stolen by Edward Denison. He has a gash—"

Denison swore. He pulled to the curb on a dark street along the Yankee Stadium, cut off the motor and got out.

He walked over to Jerome Avenue and watched for a cab that didn't have a sign, "Radio Equip't."

He finally got one and gave the address on Worthing Street. As the cab got under way, he glanced at his wrist watch. It was eleven-forty-five.

WORTHING STREET was in the extreme East Bronx. Number eleven-eighteen was a four-story walk-up apartment house of the cheaper class.

Denison said to the cab driver: "Stick around. Wait for me. And don't go wandering away listening to radios or anything. I'll take care of you."

He went into the dark vestibule and examined the names on the bells. Few of the tenants had bothered to put their names in the slides above the bells. This was a section of the city where visitors were apt to be process servers or men to take away unpaid-for furniture. The tenants here evidently had no desire to make it easy for such callers to locate them. The name of Zadukian or Karabajian did not appear.

Denison went on into the unlit hallway and climbed the stairs. Apartment 4D, the number Zadukian had given him, was on the top floor.

Denison negotiated the last flight cautiously. The electric light bulbs were lit only on the first and third floors. The second and fourth were in darkness. He snapped on his flashlight and managed to decipher a faded "4D" on one of the doors. A sliver of light shone under it. He transferred Bannister's gun from the shoulder holster to his coat pocket. Then he knocked.

There was a slight sound of movement from within, and almost immediately the light went out. He waited, straining his ears. There was no further sound inside.

He put out his flashlight, and tried the door, turning the knob carefully.

The door was not locked!

He knelt down and pushed it open, then crawled in on his hands and knees. Gently, he closed the door, and stood up. He could see nothing in the pitch blackness. He held his flashlight at arm's length and snapped it on. He swung the beam around the room, and cut

off the light quickly. Then he changed his position.

He swallowed hard. His hands were clammy. For in the second that the light had been on he had seen a terrible thing. The body of Zadukian hung from the chandelier in the center of the room!

His throat had been cut, and the head hung at a queer angle, looking down at his dangling heels. His white shirt front was coated with blood, and there was a pool of blood on the floor beneath him.

Denison crouched, listening. He had that peculiar awareness that there were others in the room with him.

His hand touched something, and he drew it away quickly. He took out his gun. Then he put out his hand again. It was a couch he had touched. He ran his hand along it to feel the contour.

HE was sure now that there were others in the room with him. But why hadn't they shot when he had lit the flashlight? Perhaps they were closing in to use cold steel, as they had done on Zadukian.

And suddenly somebody jumped him!

An arm clawed around his neck. He shifted sidewise, carrying the other with him. There was a hot breath in his face and something swished by his cheek.

It caught him in the shoulder, ripped the cloth of his sleeve, tore into his arm. And he felt a numbing, searing pain from shoulder to elbow as the knife raked him.

He raised his right hand and brought the barrel down viciously. He felt it crunch into bone. There was a gasp, and his attacker slumped, sank down.

There was a cautious movement at the other end of the room. A low voice demanded, "Bliss! Did you get him?"

Denison fired at the voice.

There was a startled oath, and the sound of

someone stumbling. Then a gun roared from the other side and a slug whined past Denison's head and thugged into the wall. Denison fired again, a little to the right of the gun-flash.

He heard a long sigh from the other side. There were no more shots.

After a while he ventured to snap on his light again. Gratz was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, panting. He was ghastly white, and was holding both hands to his stomach where Denison's last slug had got him, trying to stanch the flow of blood.

Denison swung his flashlight down to where Bliss lay unconscious at his feet, with a bloody gash in his head. Then he crossed the room, past the grisly, hanging corpse of Zadukian, and knelt beside Gratz.

Gratz was trying to say something. His pallid lips were trying to form words.

Denison brought his ear close. Gratz was saying, "Get a doctor, for God's sake!" Even as he said it, he closed his eyes and died.

Denison found the light switch and put it on. He shuddered as the room became brightly illuminated. Bliss stirred and opened his eyes.

Denison heard the mumbling of voices outside. Evidently the neighbors had heard the shooting, but were afraid to come in.

He knelt beside Bliss, gripping his gun by the stock. He waved the barrel in front of the little gunman's eyes. "Talk," he said, "or I'll rake you with the sight till your face is in ribbons. Where are those rubies?"

Bliss was fully conscious now. There was abject fear in his eyes as they looked into Denison's. "Gratz's pocket," he whispered.

Denison went over to Gratz and put his hand in the dead man's pocket. He brought it out clutching the eyes of Durga. There was blood on them, and blood on his hand.

He came back to Bliss. "You might as well come through with the whole thing now."

Bliss said weakly: "Nina framed it. She

had it on Zadukian—knew he was in the country illegally. She made him open Masterson's safe and take the rubies. He knew the combination. But Zadukian wouldn't do it except he had an out—wanted it to look like an outside job." He stopped, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. "My head hurts like hell."

"Never mind," Denison ordered. "Your head'll hurt worse if I drag this gun across it. Go ahead."

"Nina sent for us. We come from Detroit. The lay was for Zadukian to take the rubies out of the safe in the morning, before he went off for the day. We were supposed to bust in and mess the place up, make it look like an outside job. But Masterson walked in on us and I—gave it to him.

"Then Zadukian got cold feet and figured he'd cross us, turn in the stones for the reward. And Nina—" he managed a sickly grin, "—she figured on crossing all of us. She wanted to get the rubies from Zadukian and lam by herself."

Denison said, "What a gang!"

There was a noisy rush of feet on the stairway outside. Excited voices shouted, "In there—in 4D. Someone's been shooting!"

And a gruff, authoritative voice, "Stand back, everybody, we're goin' in!"

Denison opened the door. Outside there was Captain Lacey, with Detective Sergeant Rice and a squad of men. And next to Lacey was Bannister.

Bannister grinned like a cat when he saw Denison on his feet.

"Come in, boys," Denison invited. "Everything is under control." He suddenly felt very weak.

He stood aside while they trooped into the room. Bannister grabbed his arm and he winced.

"Hell, you're all cut up!" Bannister said.

"No, just sliced here and there."

Lacy exclaimed, "What the devil's been going on here?"

"I got worried about you," Bannister told Denison. "With the police after you, and these gorillas on the other end, and everything. So I opened up to Lacey. Told him where you were

going. That's why we're here. And Lacey agreed to withdraw all charges against you. I fixed everything."

Denison tried to smile. "Yeah. You fixed everything. Here's your damn' rubies." And he fainted.