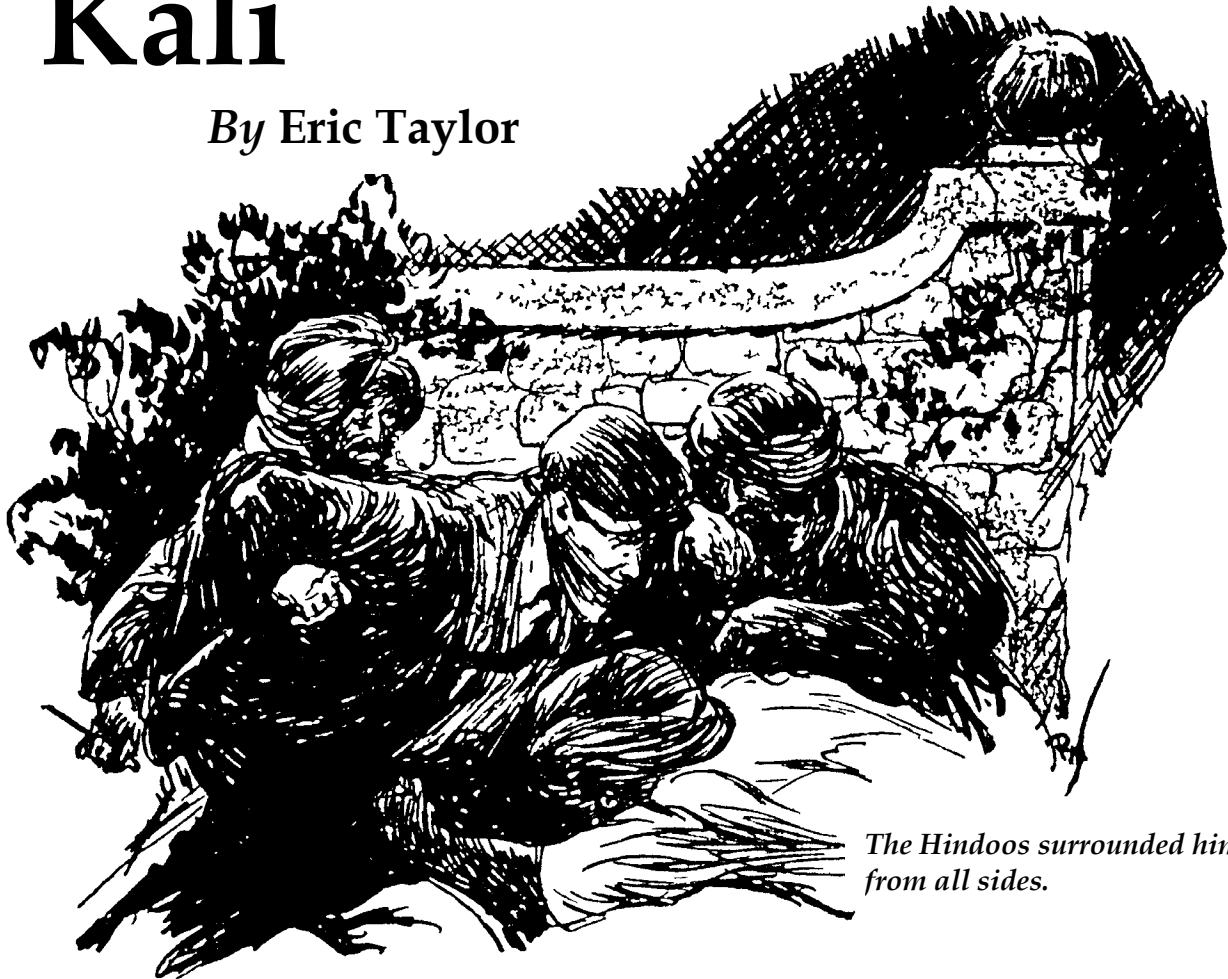


Kali

By Eric Taylor



The Hindoos surrounded him from all sides.

Thick mahogany doors, long stone passages, walls of concealed steel—what was the criminal secret of the Hindoo's American house?



HE elaborate salaams were over. Roy Martin was waved within the house. The grin faded from his cheek and the cold fingers of depression touched him as the windowless doors of solid mahogany swung closed behind his entrance. It was always like that. Once he escaped from the house—and he always considered his departure an escape—the incongruity of this house of Ishan Das Babaji in an American city became absurd. But within the house, the mystical atmosphere, the locked doors, the walls of concealed steel, all gripped him with menace.

His feet dropping soundlessly on the airy

ballast of an Oriental rug, Roy crossed the dim reception hall and came to a doorway whose portières were held aside by a second Hindu servant. He entered a luxurious drawing room to wait for Margaret Miller.

While he waited, Roy fell to musing on the strange household. Ishan Das Babaji was a suave, European-educated Bengali of high caste, with a seductive voice and a gift of easy conversation. His body was slender, lithe, and he moved with the grace of a jungle creature. His carriage and general appearance were distinctive, but the attractions of Ishan Das Babaji were offset by lips that were too thick and the bright gleam of madness that glittered always in his dark eyes.

It was difficult for Roy to picture Margaret's statuesque foster aunt as the wife of the Bengali. The widow of a high official of the British Government in India, shortly after the death of her husband she became fascinated by the dashing Bengali and had sacrificed friends, position, and fortune in a marriage that was the season's scandal in Calcutta.

Margaret Miller, twenty-two, a diminutive brunette with short, rolling black hair and cheeks of deep rose was the American of the triumvirate. She was the daughter of an American engineer, who had died in India, and was engaged to Roy Martin.

The drapes at the doorway parted. Roy glanced up. Margaret swept into the room. A cloak was thrown over her arm. A hat was twirling on her fingers.

"Sorry, Roy. My invitation is hereby cancelled. You've got to take me out to dinner. I can't stand this place." Her lips were smiling, but she held Roy's hand in a grip of nervous intensity and her flashing eyes held a tremulous quality Roy had never before seen in them.

"You bet, Marge, this snake charmer's palace always gives me the horrors anyway," Roy laughed.

They strode toward the doorway and the drapes were drawn aside by an unseen servant. The great solid doors swung open. Passing into the outdoors, Roy charged his lungs with air. There was a stifling oppression to the atmosphere of that house.

Margaret glanced into Roy's eyes and laughed softly. "Feels good out here, what? How'd you like to live there?"

"I wouldn't," Roy answered shortly.

They came to Roy's car. Margaret stretched out her tiny body. "And sometimes, Roy, I think that I can't go on with it. Sometimes I feel that I can't stay in there another minute. I want to run screaming from the door. I am haunted with a terrible obsession that.... Oh, Roy, I'm being silly. Why didn't you shut me up? Take me somewhere gay for dinner."

Roy bribed his way to a table on a balcony at the Palm Court. Margaret perversely shook her head at Roy's invitation to dance.

"Marge, I've begged you to leave that house. Come on, say the word, we can be married early

in the morning.

She shook her head. "I can't do that, Roy. You know I can't. We must wait until I'm twenty-three. Aunt Elizabeth is my guardian. Under the terms of my father's will I can't get married without her consent until my twenty third birthday...."

"Aunt Elizabeth'!" Roy cut in. "Why do you call her that? She isn't your aunt."

"There, there!" Margaret said mockingly. "Mustn't be cross." Her eyes sobered. "My mother died when I was three. My father had been away from America so long that he'd lost touch with what few relatives he had here. He was away in the interior a lot and during those absences he left me in the care of Lord and Lady Lertine. They were his closest friends. Lord Lertine was an official of the British Government. They had no children and became attached to me. Before his death, my father appointed Lord and Lady Lertine my guardians. They were wonderful to me and I always looked on them, and spoke of them, as my uncle and aunt. In deference to my father's wishes, they brought me to an American boarding school when I was fourteen. While I was at school, Lord Lertine lost his life in a hunting accident. After school I returned on a visit to India. Lady Lertine had lost all balance after the death of her husband. She became fascinated by Ishan Das Babaji and was completely dominated by him. Nothing else seemed to matter to her. She gave up everything for his sake. I returned to America to enter college. I wasn't surprised to hear soon after that Lady Lertine had married Ishan Das Babaji. Then Ishan Das Babaji ran afoul of the British Government. Fomenting a native uprising, or something. He fled to America with Aunt Elizabeth.

"If I leave them before twenty-three, it might cost me my fortune. If Aunt Elizabeth were not so completely dominated by the Bengali, I'm sure she would consent to our marrying at once. She won't admit it, but it's he who is raising the objections to our marriage."

"Well, so far as money goes, we don't need that," Roy said. "You're going to stew yourself into a nervous collapse if you stay there another ten months."

"Oh, it's not just that, Roy. In a way, I still love Aunt Elizabeth. I'm frightened for her.

Something is going to happen at that house. I must stay there and try to protect her. She was wonderful to me when I was a youngster. She was a mother to me. If you had known her then you'd feel different. And anyway, I'm an American girl, and we're in America. I don't intend to let any Hindu beat me out of the money my father killed himself to earn for me! And that's what I believe Ishan Das Babaji is trying to do!"

"What makes you think that?" Roy asked quickly.

"Well, already he's trying to influence me through my aunt. She's always talking to me about one of those crazy Hindu religions. She's doing that on the promptings of Ishan Das Babaji. I loathe that man!"

"If you must go back there, promise to let me know every day what goes on there," Roy begged.

Margaret laughed brittlely. "'What goes on there!' That's what I've been trying to find out for the last six months. Sometimes I wake in the night with the feeling that something awful is happening around me. At first I thought it was nightmares, or my imagination. But lately the thing has been growing on me. I have got up in the middle of the night and prowled through the house. But most of the doors are kept locked and I can hear nothing. Roy, why are so many of those rooms walled with steel plate?"

Roy shook his head. He tensed and leaned across the table! "Marge, that place fascinates me. I'm going to look it over tonight!"

"I don't want you to do that," Margaret said quickly. "The instant I find out something definite, I'll tell you. And if ever I feel in danger, I'll get word to you somehow. And now you may escort me to my charming home," she said dryly.



DESPITE Margaret's wishes to the contrary, Roy determined to do some investigating that night. Shortly before midnight he was in the alley that passed the rear of the Bengali's back yard. He wore a dark flannel shirt, a blue suit and cap, and in his pocket he felt the reassuring bulk of a .38 revolver. Roy moved along the alley until he reached the high brick wall that surrounded the house. He tied a large, black silk handkerchief over his face. Gripping the top of the wall, Roy pulled himself up until he could see over. A

careful scrutiny revealed no one about the garden. He climbed the wall and dropped to the ground.

Roy crouched close to the wall and waited. There was no sign of life in the garden and the big brownstone house was totally dark. Warily, avoiding the gravel paths, Roy made his way toward the house. He stood in the shadow of the building while he studied the windows. Either there were no lights in the house, or the windows were so well shaded that no light could escape.

A flight of stairs leading to the door of a semi-basement attracted Roy. He crept stealthily down the stairs and tried the door. It was small, but had the appearance of great weight and strength. Roy saw that the door opened inward. It was locked or bolted. He crouched down and put an ear to the sill.

He heard the soft pad of feet and jumped to an upright position. A blow on the shoulder flung him against the door. Roy staggered. Two men leaped on him. They got inside his reach, but Roy chopped in a few short punches that brought grunts. A thumb gouged into Roy's right eye. He pulled up his knee, thrust it into a soft body and the finger left his eye. Roy shifted from the door. A Hindu shouted in his native tongue. Roy thrust the fellow back a foot, swung a fist and it went to the jaw. The other Hindu was getting up. Roy leaped over him and made the stairs. At the top he almost collided with the tall figure of Ishan Das Babaji.

Roy ran for the wall, but before he reached it a Hindu sprang into his path. Roy pulled his gun, flourished it before the Hindu, and waved him aside. The Hindu's response was a leap at Roy. They both went down. They rolled over and over in a flower bed. Roy spat out a mouthful of dirt that was choking him. The Hindu clutched Roy's gun hand. Roy tried to fling himself loose. The gun cracked and the Hindu went limp.

Roy jerked himself free. He looked down for an instant at the Hindu. The man was dead with a bullet through the head.

Other servants were almost upon him. Roy raced for the wall. He swarmed over and dropped to the safety of the alley. He ran to the first street intersection, then risked a glance back. No one had come beyond the wall. The handkerchief had slipped down to his neck. Roy pulled it away and walked slowly to his club.

He had enjoyed a wild exultation on reaching the alley. But with nerves quieted, he saw little to cause satisfaction. He had failed in the purpose that had led him to the house, and he was responsible for the death of the Hindu.

He decided to wait until morning before surrendering himself to the police. No use talking yourself into jail in the middle of the night, he thought. He bathed and threw himself into the comfort of his soft bed. Would the police believe his version of the shooting?

He was hours getting to sleep, then woke up to find the sun pouring through the open windows. He yawned and grinned. Hellish nightmare. A torn and dirty blue suit lay on a chair. Roy jumped from bed. He drew a revolver from the coat pocket, broke it, and saw an empty shell.

Roy telephoned for coffee and the morning papers. The Hindu's death was not reported.

An hour later Roy visited the morgue. Discreet inquiries revealed that the body of the Hindu had not been brought there. Evidently Ishan Das Babaji disposed of his own dead. Roy changed his mind about going to the police.

He walked away from the morgue wondering why the home of Ishan Das Babaji was so zealously guarded. If there was nothing criminal going on in the house, why the walls of steel? Why the locked rooms? If Ishan Das Babaji were honest, why did he not report the death of his servant? Why had Roy been permitted to escape from the garden when an attempt, at least, might have been made to stop him with gunfire? Was it because the Bengali preferred to allow a prowler to escape rather than risk police investigation by alarming the neighborhood?

At three o'clock that afternoon Roy decided to visit the brownstone house—this time as an innocent caller. He did not know if the astute Bengali had recognized him the previous night. It did not seem likely that in the darkness Ishan Das Babaji could have identified Roy as he flashed past on the run to the garden wall. But Roy did not know at what stage of the struggle the black handkerchief had slipped down from his face.

When he reached the top of the stone steps leading to the house, the windowless doors swung inward. This little circumstance always amused and intrigued Roy. Where was the observation post? There were no windows in the vicinity of

the solid doors and yet they were always opened before Roy had time to announce his arrival by ringing the bell.

He passed before a salaaming Hindu and allowed himself to be conducted to the drawing room. Once again he experienced the feeling of depression that always overwhelmed him when he entered the house. He became vaguely uneasy and doubted the wisdom of this visit.

The crimson velvet drapes parted and Ishan Das Babaji entered the room. Roy arose and exchanged conventional greetings with the Bengali.

"Sit down, Mr. Martin, Miss Miller will be here shortly. And in the meantime, I'm going to avail myself of your company. I'm a victim of ennui this afternoon."

They discussed commonplace things for a time and Roy felt himself reacting to the undeniable charm of his discursive host. Before Roy quite realized it, the Bengali had adroitly turned the conversation on the subject of burglaries. He recounted at length the looting of the home of a mythical friend. He burst into a tirade against the inefficiency of the police and wound up saying: "For myself, I don't depend on the police. I have many valuable art treasures, and I take my own means of protection. My servants are different from yours in that they would deem it an honor to die in my service."

At the words Roy wondered if, after all, he might not be doing the Bengali a great injustice. The steel walls and heavy doors might well be the precautions of an eccentric art collector.

"Yes, Mr. Martin," the Bengali continued softly, "it would probably cost the life of any burglar who attempted to break in here." The words were softly spoken, but held a note of menace. The eyes of the Bengali blazed with fire; his lips twitched, and his long, slender fingers clasped and unclasped. "And it would be a terrible death!" he finished.

So, Roy concluded, he had been recognized after all, and this was a not too subtle warning of what he might expect if he made another attempt to break into the Bengali's house.

Margaret entered the room and the Bengali's manner changed to calm graciousness. The three sat and talked for some time, when the Bengali begged to be excused and left them. Roy did not

think the house any place to discuss with safety the things he wished. He suggested a drive and Margaret consented.

Roy decided to tell Margaret nothing of his attempt to enter the house the previous night. Little was said until they reached the suburbs, when Roy asked Margaret what kind of night she had passed, and if anything had disturbed her.

Margaret said she had slept well, except for waking once some time after midnight. She did not know what had awakened her.

"Marge, how many servants are there in that house?" Roy asked abruptly.

"Eight."

"And are they all Hindus?"

"Yes. When I went there, I wanted to bring a maid, but the suggestion excited Auntie so much that I never repeated it. I make up my own room, except once or twice a week when it gets a thorough cleaning. I don't like the idea of those Hindus prowling about my room."

"Do you think it would be possible for us to get into any of those locked rooms?" Roy asked.

"No, it wouldn't," Margaret replied. "There is never a time when Ishan Das Babaji or some of the servants are not at home. I wish we could, because I think that in those rooms...."

She stopped abruptly.

"Go ahead," Roy urged. "You're getting interesting."

Margaret smiled. "Oh, I don't know. It's just that if anything is happening in that house, it must be going on in those rooms."

Roy turned the car toward town. Neither spoke much. Margaret had become depressed and after several attempts to lead her into a livelier mood, Roy lapsed into silence.



HE large lady who presided over the destinies of the Reliable Employment Agency hung up the telephone receiver and addressed a group of applicants.

"An upstairs maid for a place in the country—close in. Gotta be a young girl—good appearance. Gotta be a girl that don't live in town here. They don't want a girl always runnin' into the city, Good place—seventy, all found."

Before the manager of the agency finished speaking, several girls arose and advanced toward the desk. One of the girls, a trifle more aggressive

than her fellow applicants, pushed to the front and shouted, "I'll take it!"

She was young and pretty, and showily dressed in cheap finery.

"What experience?" the manager demanded.

"None," the girl answered frankly. "I've always worked in stores. But I can do housework. Lord knows, I've done plenty of it back home."

"Where is your home?"

"Columbus," the girl answered.

"Well, I'll let you go out and talk to them. They said experience wasn't important. They want a girl that's young and of good appearance. And they want a girl from outta town. The fee's five dollars. What's the name?"

"Irma Rollins."

The manager of the agency filled in a form to be given to the employer and gave Irma a receipt for five dollars.

"You go to Wendley station. They'll meet you there with a car. The fare is sixty cents and if they don't hire you, they'll pay your fare both ways. You get a train at two-ten and take your clothes because if they hire you, you got to start right in."

The manager of the agency nodded her head in dismissal and her responsibilities were ended.

Irma hurried to her room to pack. With a little crowding, a suitcase and handbag held her worldly possessions. When the packing was completed, her roommate entered. Irma drew herself up to a statuesque pose and invited her friend to "Pipe the slavey!" Hurried and scant details of the job followed, and Irma prepared to depart. "I'll write to you, dearie, and if I meet some millionaire sheik out there I'll try to make it for two." A farewell kiss and Irma was gone.

At the pretty little station of Wendley, decorated with well-kept lawn and shrubbery, Irma found a large limousine waiting her. She noticed, with a trace of disappointment, that the liveried chauffeur was some sort of colored person. The chauffeur advanced and took her baggage. The door of the limousine opened and a voice of cultured dignity bade her enter.

Irma found the speaker to be a strikingly beautiful woman of early middle age. A mass of orange-gold hair shone beneath her hat, and the woman's eyes were the green of the sea. The lady leaned far back upon the cushions in regal poise,

and when she spoke it was in soft, musical tones.

“English,” Irma observed inwardly, “or uppitty Bostonian.”

“You have come from the agency?” the woman asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Irma replied, and handed her the employment slip.

The lady read it carelessly and asked, “Where is your home?”

“In Columbus, ma’am.”

“And you have no relatives in the city?”

“No, ma’am.”

“The reason I ask,” the lady continued, “is because we find that girls whose homes are in the city want to run in to town too frequently.”

“Oh, I don’t care about going to town,” Irma told her prospective employer. “I have no one there.”

“Very well, my child, I think you’ll be satisfactory.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Irma’s employer signaled the chauffeur and the car started.

During the short interview, Irma had noticed that the lady’s questions were asked in a mechanical manner, and that her employer appeared to be vaguely troubled. The face had lost its beauty temporarily, and become lined and haggard. The green eyes were fixed straight ahead and were strangely devoid of expression, while a great struggle appeared to be going on in the mind behind them. Irma jumped to the conclusion, that her employer was a dope fiend. “Sure, wasn’t a lot of these society dames hop-heads?”

Her reflections were interrupted by the soft, musical voice: “We are going to the city now. I am to meet my husband at our town house. You may come with me.”

Irma replied with another, “Yes, ma’am.”

She was on her employer’s time now, and it mattered not a whit to her where they went. She would as soon spend the afternoon riding in a purple limousine as doing housework. She settled herself back to enjoy the ride.

The summer afternoon lulled her sensibilities and she gave herself up to day dreams. She would meet some handsome young millionaire who would marry her, and then she would have a limousine like this for her own. A short flight of the imagination brought her to the ownership of

this very car. She was oblivious to her employer and gazed out of the window, occasionally nodding to imaginary acquaintances.

If Irma was oblivious of her, that beautiful lady was far from being oblivious of her new employee; and if Irma had given the lady as much attention as the lady was giving her, Irma’s thoughts might have been uneasy ones.

Sometimes as the older woman’s eyes fell on the young girl beside her, she would survey Irma from head to foot in careful appraisal. The result was apparently satisfying. At other times she looked strangely uneasy and sad.

At last the car came to a stop. “Here we are,” the lady said.

They left the car and walked toward a massive brownstone house that stood in the midst of spacious grounds. Before they reached the uppermost of the steps leading to the house, two windowless doors of solid mahogany swung open. They entered the house and, to Irma’s surprise passed a deeply-bowing Hindu. The great doors closed and the reception hall in which they stood was in almost total darkness.

A strange feeling of uneasiness stirred Irma. The darkness, the closeness of the incense-filled air, made her apprehensive. Her employer led her to the end of the hall, where a naked oil lamp burned faintly. They came to a doorway whose heavy drapes of crimson velvet were held apart for their passage, then passed into the most magnificent room Irma had ever seen. She was struck with amazement at the strange richness of the furnishings.

Silhouetted against the soft gray walls was mahogany furniture upholstered in dull reds and golds. A wealth of cushions lay recumbent upon the oriental rug. Bronze statues of rare eastern design showed dim outlines in the subdued light of the room.

Advancing toward Irma was a remarkable man. He was tall and slender, and moved with a lithe, sinuous grace. His skin was a dark brown and his features sharply defined. A simple robe of white silk covered his body. Slender hands with long, tapering fingers extended beneath the loose sleeves of the robe. A pair of sandals was his only footwear.

The man advanced until Irma saw his features clearly. His manner was conciliatory, but

Irma recoiled in terror from the thick, curling lips and the mad fire of his dark eyes. He surveyed her critically for a moment, paying no heed to her obvious discomfort, then nodded to the lady who had brought Irma to the house.

“Come, my child, we’ll wait upstairs,” the lady said.

Hesitantly, Irma followed. She felt in peril from these strange people and resolved to flee when they left the house to re-enter the car. Coming to a door on the upper floor, her employer held it open for Irma to enter. Irma found herself in a small, but artistically furnished bedroom. She heard a sharp click behind her and turned to find herself alone and the door closed.

She ran to the door. Her worst fears were realized. The door was locked! Irma screamed in terror, and her cries thundered back derisively from the walls. Exhausted after a time, she threw herself on the bed and sobbed. She began to think more clearly. Surely some hue and cry would be raised at her disappearance that would lead to her rescue.

The hue and cry that was raised for Irma was the casual remark passed in a cheap rooming house some days later from a girl to her roommate: “Before you come in with me, I had a nice little kid here called Irma Rollins. She went out to the country to work. Some millionaire’s joint. Funny she don’t write.



ON the third day of her imprisonment Irma Rollins was on the point of complete collapse. She had touched no food since her capture. The stifling air of the room, whose only ventilation was through a small, grill-covered opening in the ceiling, and her sobbing, resulted in continual nausea. Food had been brought her regularly, and had as regularly been sent away.

For the first two days every opening of the room’s heavy door marked a furious struggle in which the desperate girl fought to escape. But invariably she was overpowered and thrust back into the room. The tall and beautiful lady who had brought her to the brownstone house Irma had not seen since her imprisonment. She could hear no sounds of life, either from within the house or from the outside. The room was completely sound proof. And yet, not fifty feet away moved the

daily life of a great American city. She told herself that it was all a hideous nightmare—that such a thing as her abduction was an impossibility in an American city, but the grim reality of that steel-walled room was too apparent.

The sunshine never found its way into her prison, and terrified of the darkness, Irma had burned the electric lights continually. She never slept for longer than a half hour at a time. Occasionally the tall Hindu, whom she had seen in the white robe, visited her. His visits were terrifying experiences for Irma. His lips smiled in an attempt at reassurance, but his dark eyes blazed while he told her that a “signal honor” was being prepared for her. Sometimes he came in the long robe of white silk; at other times he wore conventional clothes.

By the third day Irma had reached utter despair. She had searched the room for a means of ending her life, found none, and awaited her fate with apathy. The ominous threat that lay behind the blazing eyes of her captor did not escape her, and she felt the chill of death in his words, “*a signal honor!*”

Irma lost track of time, but she believed it to be late night on the fourth day of her imprisonment when the door opened and the tall Hindu, accompanied by two servants, entered the room and locked the door.

He was dressed in the long robe of white silk and his feet were sandaled. His eyes burned with magnetic fire. Irma shrank from him.

“Come, my child, the hour has arrived!”

The words fell on Irma as a death warrant. She begged and pleaded the inexorable Hindu for mercy. The two servants gripped her arms and struggling futilely she was led to a corner of the room. She freed one arm and turned in a frenzied attack upon the Hindu gripping the other. Kicking, biting, scratching, she fought with the abandon of despair. Her free arm was recovered by the Hindu. She was turned and dragged to the corner. A panel of steel slid along the wall and the opening revealed a narrow, iron staircase leading down. Dragged through the gap in the wall, Irma’s strength left her. Her body went limp in the Hindus’ arms.

Roy had taken Margaret to a matinee that afternoon. Three days had passed since the

episode of the Bengali's garden. Roy had read and heard nothing of the dead Hindu. Margaret said nothing unusual had happened at the house.

Roy went to his club after taking Margaret home. Going into the dining room a page stopped him. Roy followed the boy to a phone. Margaret was on the line. She was calling from a drug store and wanted to see him at once.

Ten minutes later Roy stopped his car at the curb in front of the store. Margaret ran to him. "We've got to do something, Roy. When I was dressing for dinner, I heard a muffled cry. Someone is locked up in the house. There was just one cry. It sounded as if a door might have been opened for a second and then closed. There were no other sounds. When I came down to dinner, Ishan Das Babaji looked at me strangely. I pretended not to notice and after a while he relaxed and seemed relieved."

"Want to go to the police?" Roy asked.

"Oh! What would we say?"

"Just what you have said to me."

Margaret shook her head. "No, Roy, it's no good. He'd fool them in some way. Besides, there's Aunt Elizabeth. I just can't bring her into trouble. Maybe I'm wrong, Roy. Maybe I was mistaken. Maybe one of the servants got hurt accidentally. Can't we do anything without going to the police? Think what a fool I'd look if we brought the police and found nothing wrong. If we could only be sure first."

"All right," Roy agreed quickly. "Get me into the house, into your room tonight. I'll find out..."

"But how, Roy? How can I get you in without their knowing?"

"I'll get you a rope. There's a radiator in your room? Right. Tie the rope to the radiator. At one o'clock, I'll wave you a signal from the street. You lower the rope to the ground."

Half an hour later Roy left Margaret a block from the old brownstone house.

A few minutes before one Roy stood beside the high brick wall. Margaret's windows were open and he saw the curtains stirring gently in the faint breeze.

For ten minutes Roy remained close against the wall watching those fluttering curtains. He glanced at his watch. A minute after one. His eyes strained up to the windows. The room was dark. His eyes saw no sign of movement beyond those

curtains. Five minutes, ten, dragged by, still Margaret failed to appear at the window.

Roy made a sudden decision. He'd get close to the house and risk a whistle.

He glanced up and down the street, climbed the wall, and ran to the cover of the house. Roy crept along the wall toward the open windows. The big house was dark, silent. He looked up at the window again and saw a rope that reached to the ground.

Roy ran forward and jerked the rope in a signal. He moved away from the wall and watched. The curtains above fluttered idly. Roy pulled at the rope again. He tested it with his weight, then began the ascent. His hands rested on the windowsill. He drew a knee up and whispered, "Margaret!"

A curtain blew against his face. Roy flung the drape aside. Margaret lay on the bed. Roy called again, then scrambled into the room. He ran to the bedside. "Margaret! Margaret!" His hand clutched her wrist. Her pulse was resolute. Roy jerked the torch from his pocket. He snapped on the switch and turned the light full on her eyes. She lay back silent, deep in a drugged sleep.

Roy turned away from the bed. His torch swept over the room. Pinned to the rope near the radiator Roy saw a white sheet of paper. There was a message on the paper:

"Roy darling:

Terribly sleepy. Believe I am drugged.

Lowering rope now at eleven-twenty. If it is not discovered and you find this, get police.

Margaret."



ROY dropped the note into a pocket. He drew his revolver, left the room and descended the stairs to the ground floor of the house.

The stairs led to the reception hall. So far Roy was on familiar ground. Passing the portières of the drawing room, he continued toward the rear of the house. A chill gripped him as he heard the faint outcries of a girl. The sound came from above and Roy retraced his steps and ran lightly up the stairs. He tried the door of every room on the second floor, but could gain admittance to none except Margaret's.

Roy listened at every door. This part of the house seemed deserted. He returned to the ground

floor and stole to the end of the reception hall, where, cautiously pushing aside the heavy drapes, he passed into a room of oriental splendor, lighted by many naked oil lamps. Roy was making his way toward an open door at the far end of the room when he heard the notes of subdued, low-pitched music. The music was weirdly barbaric and was accompanied by muffled drumbeats.

The music stirred something remote and primitive within Roy. He listened for a moment spellbound before continuing toward the open door. The door consisted of a panel of steel that slid up and down, and worked, apparently, by means of a counterweight and inlaid rollers, which, when the door was open, were visible.

From beyond came the sound of chanting voices accompanied by the low-pitched music. Roy could see only a corner of the room from which the notes issued. A thick carpet of rich purple covered the floor and the walls were hung with velvet drapes of the same color. The drapes hung loosely and reached to the floor. They offered a fair chance of concealment. Roy stepped cautiously to the threshold of the door, jumped into the room and behind the end of a drape.

He waited for the cry that meant his discovery, but the chanting and music continued. Working his way along the wall, Roy came to a place where two of the drapes overlapped. Here he paused and drawing the drapes slightly apart, looked out upon a scene that amazed him.

The room was a large and lofty one. Its occupants were grouped at the opposite end. Three of the Hindu servants comprised the primitive orchestra. They played before a huge and hideous idol.

The idol reached to a height of about twelve feet and was the figure of a woman. She was black, with a great outpointed tongue of flaming red that extended to her waistline. Venomous teeth glistened against the black background of her face, and around her neck was a string of skulls. From her shoulders extended four arms of startling size; two were extended in a gesture of welcome; the third held a great and awesome sword, and from the fourth there hung the severed head of a mighty giant.

The awful idol touched on a chord of memory and Roy recalled the circumstances. It was while in Calcutta on a world tour with his

father that he had made a pilgrimage to the temple at Kali-Ghat, a short distance from Calcutta. The three-hundred-year-old temple was not, as Roy recalled it, an impressive affair. It was the hideous atrocities perpetrated in the name of worship that left an indelible imprint on his mind, for here was worshipped the terrifying goddess, Kali, "Kali, the Divine Mother!"

Kali, Roy remembered as a savage virago who demanded great quantities of blood from her worshippers under pain of pestilence and famine. Her worship was accompanied by self-inflicted tortures. Her votaries ran sharply-pointed canes through their muscles and tongues, and in excesses of devotion, caused themselves to be swung on high while suspended by iron hooks passed through the muscles of the back.

This hideous monster is worshipped at midnight throughout Bengal as a great warrior, the giver of victory, and the protector and avenger of her people. Bloody sacrifices of animals are made daily at her altar, while, a few generations ago, Roy knew, the sacrifices were human, and as recently as March, 1925, a young girl was sacrificed to the goddess *Kali* at Mandla, near Jabalapur.

Roy heard the sound of footfalls approaching the door through which he had come. He flattened against the wall, withdrawing his eye from the aperture between the drapes. A small procession passed his hiding place and Roy again peered out.

He saw a group of white-robed people move across the room toward the image of the hideous idol. A convulsion of rage shook his body when he saw that the group consisted of four Hindus dragging the unconscious form of a young white girl followed by Ishan Das Babaji.

In fascinated horror Roy watched the Hindus, including Ishan Das Babaji, remove the long robes of silk, revealing themselves clad in the native *dhoti*, a loose garment that extended from the waist to their bare feet, and wearing the *janeo*, or sacred thread, bandoleer-fashion over one shoulder.

The Hindu servants dragged the captive white girl to a concave indentation in the floor. This indentation was oval in shape and about six feet in length. It was lined with porcelain. In the center of the oval stood a wooden block about two feet square.

A long, curved knife, approaching a cutlass in size, was placed in the hands of Ishan Das Babaji by one of the servants. The girl was lifted to the block. Knife in hand, Ishan Das Babaji advanced toward her.

Roy watched the proceedings in a chill of horror. With the full realization that here, in an American city, a young girl was to be offered as a sacrifice to a barbaric goddess, Roy, galvanized with action. He flung caution aside and burst from his hiding place. At the sound of the sudden movement, the Hindus turned and sprang to meet him.

Roy pointed his gun at the foremost Hindu, pressed the trigger, and the Hindu folded up like a jack-knife. The second Hindu closed with Roy. Roy fired as the man seized his gun hand. The grip on his hand relaxed; the Hindu slipped down. But Roy was borne to the floor by the other five Hindu servants. He fired one more shot, which missed, and the gun was wrenched from his hand. The Hindus were engrossed in getting the revolver. When Roy lost the weapon, he squirmed from beneath the Hindus and jumped up. His feet were pulled from under him and he was down again. This time they held him. His hands and feet were bound with a thin, tough cord. After he was secured, the Hindus lifted Roy to his feet and held him before Ishan Das Babaji.

The tall, distinguished Bengali had stood aside during the struggle. He surveyed the disheveled Roy with mad hate flashing from his burning eyes. His thin lips twitched in ungovernable rage and he was unable to speak. Slowly he settled into a calm, and then, speaking quietly, and outwardly composed, said in impressive solemnity:

"Mr. Martin, you have come to look on at the worship of Mother Kali! Kali, the Divine, the Protector and Avenger of her people! Kali, who, when she has drunk her fill of the blood of whites, will come to the succor of her people and cast aside the yoke of white domination!" The solemnity of the voice changed, and a cynical note was suggested, as he concluded, "*A signal honor shall be yours!*"

Roy made no answer to the Bengali's words. A heavy depression settled on him at the hopelessness of the situation. He turned to look for the girl and saw her on one of the many piles

of cushions that lay against the walls of the room. At a command from Ishan Das Babaji, two of the Hindus arose and walked to a small table on which there stood a number of bowl-like vessels of gold. Each picked up two of the vessels and walked to the Bengali's side. Two others lifted the girl from the piled cushions.

The Bengali took a step forward and stood with arm upraised above the girl's neck.

The horror of the thing he was about to witness turned Roy into a raving madman. He pulled at the cords that tied him until they cut deep into his flesh. He hurled wild, bitter oaths at the Bengali. And in a frenzied attempt to attack the Bengali bound as he was, Roy fell helplessly to the floor.

The Bengali spoke a command in Hindustani to the servants and two of them dragged Roy to a pile of cushions where they left him.

Ishan Das Babaji turned again to the girl who lay unconscious across the block and began a chanting invocation to Kali.

Roy grew calmer and strove desperately to think of some plan of escape. He was bound so tightly that he could not make the slightest movement of hands or feet. A short distance from him there stood on a small stand one of the oil lamps that provided the room with its dim light. Roy saw a chance—a desperately remote one—and seized it.



In a writhing movement he advanced on the lamp. His movements were unnoticed by the worshipping Hindus. He reached the lamp and got to his knees beside it. His back to the lamp, Roy held his wrists above the naked flame. A fearful scream echoed through the long room. The girl had recovered consciousness.

Two of the Hindus jumped forward and held the screaming girl across the block of sacrifice. Ishan Das Babaji ceased his chanting and raised the great knife high above his head.

The cords that bound Roy's wrists snapped. Unmindful of seared flesh, Roy reached to his pocket, secured his knife, and cut the cords that bound his ankles.

He seized the lamp and hurled it at the Bengali. The lamp struck Ishan Das Babaji on the side of the head. The Bengali dropped. The scanty

clothing of the mad fiend burst into flame. The Hindu servants rushed about their master endeavoring to extinguish the flames. Roy ran to other lamps and threw them on the drapes and cushions. Oil-soaked, they blazed in a dozen fires.

Before the excited Hindus, intent in their extravagant devotion on extinguishing the flames that enveloped their master, realized what had happened, Roy was in their midst at the block.

The girl stood in a daze. Roy gripped her arm and pointed to the door. She stumbled. Roy gathered her into his arms.

He was halfway across the large room when he heard a shout in Hindustani. He looked back and saw Ishan Das Babaji waving an arm toward him. Two Hindu servants ran across the room. Roy spurted and reached the door. He dropped the girl into the outer room. The foremost Hindu was on Roy. Roy reached forward and gripped the man by the neck. His thumbs bit deep into the fellow's throat. Roy loosened his hold and swung on the man. The man dropped. Roy jumped forward, caught the second Hindu by the shoulders, spun him around and tossed him back into the room. Roy jumped backward into the next room and slammed down the steel panel door.

The girl stood sobbing beside him. Roy gripped the girl's hand. They ran to the reception hall. Roy heard loud hammering on the steel door. Apparently the Hindus were experiencing difficulty in opening it.

There was a delay of a moment at the windowless doors while Roy found the double locks, and they stood outside the house.

"I've got to go back for someone else," Roy said. "Wait here, outside this door. I won't be a minute. If anyone comes, run and yell."

She nodded tearfully. Roy ran to Margaret's room. He wasted no time trying to arouse her. Terrific pounding on the steel door echoed through the house. Roy flung a robe around Margaret and carried her downstairs.

He reached the door and found the girl waiting. They ran to an alley where Roy had left his car. He placed Margaret in the seat, then he and the girl climbed in beside her.

Roy could not take them to a hotel as they were. He decided to invite the hospitality of a married sister.

Margaret still lay in a heavy sleep. Roy

turned to the girl.

"My name's Roy Martin. This is my fiancée, Margaret Miller."

"I'm Irma Rollins. And I can't thank...."

"Then why try," Roy laughed.

"I'm driving first to my sister's, then we can go to the police."

Roy put the two girls in his sister's care. He told her as much as he could in two minutes while his sister bound his burnt wrists with ointment-soaked bandages. Roy moved his hands, decided he could drive in a kind of a way, and ran down to his car.

His route to police headquarters took him close to the brownstone house. A strange fascination tempted him to drive past it.

When a block away he saw flames leaping high in the sky above the house of Ishan Das Babaji. Fire apparatus stood in the street.

Roy drove his car as near to the house as was possible. A small crowd stood in a rough circle near the house. Roy left his car and approached the group. He edged his way to the front rank and saw that the object of their attention was six badly charred bodies.

He turned away from the gruesome spectacle and spoke to an officer on duty there. "Were they caught asleep?"

"No," the officer answered. "Some nut of a Hindu art collector lives there. He's got steel walls to a bunch of the rooms. Scared of burglars. The whole crowd of them was caught in one room where the fire started. A steel door jammed and they were trapped. The fire spread along the floor and gutted the whole place. It had a big start before an alarm was turned in, and the fire department was blocked by the steel walls. They just brought those fellows out now. The floor fell through and the bodies dropped to the basement. There was one woman in another part of the house. She was asleep and went goofy, I guess. She flung open the front door as we got here, put a gun to her head and blew herself off."

Roy moved slowly toward his car. He turned for a last look at the brownstone house. Why say anything to the police? He decided to leave that to Irma Rollins. So far as he felt, it could serve no possible good and would result in much unwelcome publicity for Margaret. It seemed poetic justice for the Bengali to be trapped within

his own steel walls. Roy thought of the beautiful wife of the mad Ishan Das Babaji. He wondered how much she knew of it all. Well, she knew enough, or she wouldn't have killed herself at the door, he decided.

Roy returned to his sister's home. Margaret had come out of her heavy sleep. Roy, his sister,

Margaret, and Irma Rollins sat in a bedroom and discussed the question of going to the police.

Irma didn't think much of the idea from the start. She decided it would be a lot more fun to be Margaret's companion on a round-the-world cruise.