

TERROR TALES



Volume Nine

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Number Two

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Kiss of the Flame Blossom

By DONALD DALE



Never shall I marry my beloved Margie! Instead I must go once more to the fearful embrace of that dread woman whose breath is a living flame, and whose kiss is the searing brand of immeasurable evil. . . .

MARGIE'S soft lips met mine in a sweet, virginal kiss of greeting. Her gentle, white hand patted an imaginary wrinkle from my coat lapel and stretched upward to push my hair back into place.

She was so tiny. As she tiptoed to reach my head, her round, little breasts thrust upward toward my racing heart, and the flowing blue sleeve fell back to reveal the fragrant hollow under her arm. I found myself wishing that sometime

she would betray a hint of the same madness I felt raging in my blood; but I suspected, even while I wished, that if she did, I should somehow resent it. Yet I could not stifle the wish.

"Darling," I said, clenching my over-eager hands behind me, "let's not wait any longer. Let's chuck the wedding plans and get married this afternoon!"

"Why, Roger"—a tender smile tugged at her red lips—"we can't do that. Besides, I have news."

"News?" I asked vaguely.

"Yes. Lida is coming. I think she will be here in time for the wedding."

"Lida?" Desire was still blurring my mind.

"Yes, Lida. You remember, my step-sister who has spent the last six years in the Orient. She's all the family I have left, you know. Isn't it marvelous for her to be coming at this time!"

"Yes. Yes, of course," I answered, coming out of the fog.

"And now, dear, I know you're tired. Make yourself comfortable and I'll fix something cool to drink.

So I sat in the charming living-room of Margie's ancestral house that hot day in early June and tried to quiet the blood that was pounding in my veins, while somewhere back in the kitchen, Margie set ice clinking in a crystal pitcher of lemonade and arranged homemade cookies on a Dresden plate.

No man ever loved a woman as I loved Margie Clark, the girl I was going to marry in three weeks. I worshipped her. She was so lovely, so unspoiled. There was much about love I could teach her.

A soft movement in the hall stirred me from my exciting anticipation. Absorbedly I looked up. In a flash, I was on my feet, then I started back in sudden surprise. In the hallway stood a strange woman, and her piercing, black eyes were boring straight into me. Neither of us spoke. I just stood there, and my gaze

was held to hers if by some malignant magnetic force.

"Good-afternoon." She finally broke the silence with a charming, faintly foreign accent. "I am Lida. And you—Roger?"

Like a gauche country boy, I stared at her, unable to answer. I had often seen women more beautiful, but never one like this. Hot, violent similes whipped through my mind. A sleek, black serpent, I thought, my eyes following the subtle curves of her tall, unbelievably slender body. The daring cut of the black metallic satin sheath-dress revealed every nuance of her vibrant length. The pointed breasts, like restive, twin volcanoes. The supple waist my two hands could have spanned. The smooth flow of rounded thighs.

Again my eyes sought her burning, gold-flecked eyes, and then the glorious, unhatted crown of red hair. Dull red, like embers ready to burst into flame. And from the black shoulder of her dress, a single rich, red flower leaped upward as if in challenge to the smouldering glory of her hair. Its heavy, insinuating perfume filled the room.

"Are you not going to invite me in?" she asked softly, seeming to taunt me for my stupid daze.

SLEEP did not come easy that night. I thought miserably back over the evening at Margie's. Nothing unusual had happened, really. The three of us had talked, Margie questioning Lida eagerly about the romance of the Orient. Lida giving veiled hints of a mysterious existence. Just a wilful, theatrical girl, I thought, trying to dramatize herself. And yet, I could not throw off the exotic spell the first sight of her had cast upon me.

I reviewed, too, the few things I knew of Lida Suban, who had incongruously been thrust into the same family with Margie by the marriage of Margie's gentle mother to Lida's dark, handsome father, Jhara Suban.

Lida, four or five years older than Margie, had been, even as a child, moody, restless, strange. Year by year, she seemed to become more intense, more secretive, more restive—and more than once had I suspected for Margie she felt only hatred and intense jealousy!

When Lida was eighteen, Jhara Suban died. It was then the arrogant girl found that, in her own right, she had nothing. That all these years she had been accepting the bounty of her step-mother. That night, she had disappeared from the house that had so long been home to her.

And now, Margie's mother was seven months dead, and the roving Lida was "home" again. The pretentious little moocher! I thought savagely. I could not bear the idea of having to try, after Margie and I married, to treat this interloper as a sister. For never had I seen a woman I hated so much—and desired so violently. . . .

Hours later, I awoke with heavy, exciting fumes crowding my nostrils, and the sense of someone in the room. Jerking myself up in bed, I tried to pierce the almost tangible blackness of the room.

At my movement, there sprang up, near the center of the room, small glowing patches as if of fire. To my dazed mind, they had, at first no meaning. Then I saw the pattern!

A helmet of flaming hair. Two blazing eyes, burning holes in the darkness. A faint, glowing outline—as if traced swiftly by a luminous pencil—of a serpentine body. . . . And held like a torch in the phosphorescent suggestion of slender hands, a huge blossom of flame!

In a panic, I seized the cord of the night-lamp, keeping my eyes focussed on the apparition. By the sane glow of electricity, I saw standing before me—Lida Suban, her supple body covered from neck to toes with a long, red-velvet cape!

Once more I saw the tantalizing smile and heard the words which that afternoon

had mocked my gaucherie: "Are you not going to invite me in?"

A tumult of emotions struggled within me. Resentment. Disgust. Passion. An inexplicable terror. "How did you get in here?" I heard my thickened voice ask as I rose to a sitting position.

The contemptuous upquirk of her scarlet lips mocked me, and for answer, she tucked the flame-flower into the red glory of her hair and loosed the gold clasp at her throat. The glowing velvet slipped, caressed the ivory-white length of her, until it sank into a swirl at her feet.

An ivory Aphrodite in a sea of flame! Never was a body more vibrant. I could feel its compelling power, like an electric current as she glided over and sat on the bed beside me. But, though the hot blood pounded in my veins, my heart still spoke of Margie and her clean, pure love. Sharp words of anger rose in my mind for this strange woman who had forced her way into my room, but my tongue could not utter them. She had stretched out her long, glowing hands to stroke my throat, as if exorcising the words of denial that rose there for expression.

I raised my eyes, looked into the queer unfathomable depths of hers, and slowly her gaze wove a net of mad passion around my mind, and thoughts of the worthier love were lost in a hopeless tangle of desire.

THE NEXT morning by the time I had showered and shaved, I tried to persuade myself that no one had been in my rooms the night before. I had had a fantastic nightmare, induced by this strange, alluring woman.

In the first place, it was absurd—insulting—to believe that my fiancée's guest would do such a thing. Besides, there was no way she could have got in. Stubbornly, I thrust back the remembrance that she had appeared in Margie's house also, seemingly without being admitted. This

morning, certainly, when I had awakened, there had been no sign of her.

From the bedroom arose the usual, impudent mutterings of Pansy, the young colored maid, who came in to clean each morning. But suddenly something she was saying hit me like a blow: "Hit sho do smell funny in heah. Hit sho do."

With a queer catch in my heart, I stuck my head into the bedroom. The girl was right. There *was* a "funny" smell—the heavy, acrid odor of the flame-flower!

But something else had caught the sharp eyes now, and their plump owner was bending low, seeming to peer at an object that lay on the floor.

She plucked it up between dusky thumb and forefinger, and as she looked at it, her thick lips moved with wonder and foreboding. Becoming aware of my presence, she turned, saying, "Lawsy, Mistuh Roguh, I never seed anythin' like it!"

Then, hastily, she flipped into the air toward me, the thing that had fallen beside my bed. A musty, glowing petal of the scarlet flower! . . .

The days that followed were torture. I worked frenziedly all day at the office. After that, I called on Margie, sometimes having dinner with her and her guest step-sister, sometimes taking them out to dine and dance.

At those times, there was nothing about Lida Suban to which anyone could object seriously. Exotic, but to all appearances normal in every respect—a quiet visitor whose only peculiarity was the strange, Oriental flower she always wore. . . .

But the nights!

They were a confusion of hate and desire—agony and delirious joy. Every night she came to me—this woman of flame, as if wafted in on the pungent odor of that hellish flower. My new double door-lock was as nothing to her diabolic powers.

Not only was my conscience stricken with my infidelity to Margie, but, not able to shut out her step-sister or to detect the means of her coming, I began to lose control of my nerves. Fear of the supernatural was eating at my mind, at my healthy, scientific sanity. No longer able to bear it, one night I shrieked out my terrified queries to this devil woman. She answered only, "Supernatural? Nothing is supernatural. Nothing *has* to go beyond nature, for nature gave us *all* powers over our bodies and minds. It is only necessary to learn to realize them. I could teach you—"

"My God! All I ask is to be left alone!"

"Is that—all?" And her white fingers touched me there in the dark. Her parted mouth pressed my restless head back upon the pillows. . . .

Eons later, she spoke again. "Roger, I love you." I started at the sudden vibrancy of her voice. Never before had I seen her like this. There was something touching, now, in her simplicity—in her seeming sincerity that lacked all touch of the exotic.

She went on, with grave, appealing dignity. "You have remotivated my whole life. I came back here to get the money of this 'good little sister' of mine, whom my father—everybody—loved better than me. I was to be next in heritage so long as Margie remained single. I determined she should never live to be married. When I found out about you, my first thought was to prevent the marriage until I could have time to carry out my plans. But when I *saw* you, I knew you were meant for me. Let me teach you how to live." For a moment, I felt a sort of pity for her; but in the next breath, all her wistfulness was gone. "Because I love you, it is possible for you to save her. But if you *marry* her. . . ."

As her voice trailed off into silence, the spell her words had cast over me was broken. I pushed her away, sprang from

the bed, and began to pace the floor. "Absurd! Stupid threats!" I raged. "You couldn't—"

My protest died, for suddenly she was no longer there. Only the echo of her parting ultimatum hung in the heavy air of the room:

"The choice is yours!"

I TRIED to pretend it was for my fiancée's safety that I opened my arms to passion each night. I told myself, if I refuse this woman's love, she will harm Margie. Yet I don't know even now how much was truth and how much just a rationalization of a primal urge I could not control.

But I do know when I was away from Lida, or when the three of us were together, I hated her enough to beat her cruel brains out. I tried desperately to think of ways to circumvent her. But this was not the kind of thing you take to the police for help, or to your friends for advice.

I began to show signs of the strain. And Margie dosed me with medicines and with diets. "You'll be better," she whispered shyly, her gentle hand stroking my feverish head, "when I can take care of you properly. And it's only six more days now."

Six more days!

In my mind, I heard the echo of Lida's threat: "*If you marry her—!*" Yet I, too, decided that I should be glad when it was all over. Surely Lida was bluffing. Perhaps after I was married she would go away and leave Margie and me to our happiness. Though I had acceded to Margie's wish that we live in her own beautiful home, I knew one thing: When I became master of the house, I would demand that Lida leave.

With that decision, my mind began to feel easier. And I took that very afternoon off, and Margie and I went to the marriage clerk to get a license. This

definite move would stop Lida's melodramatic, mysterious threats. But how inadequately had I plumbed the depths of her malignity and power!

When we came back from our happy errand, Lida lay languidly on the living-room divan. She wore scarlet satin in the artfully-cut sheath model she always affected. Its sheen highlighted every sinuous curve of her long body. Involuntarily, remembrance sprang up in me of holding her close in my arms, measuring her height against mine. The inescapable red blossom drooped between the pyramids of her upthrust breasts.

"Oh, Lida darling," Margie trilled in her sweet, confiding way; "look, we've got the license. It won't be long now!"

"No!" Lida's burning echo vibrated in the air. "It will not be long now."

Margie said, "I'm going to mix some drinks. We're going to celebrate!" And started for the kitchen.

A strange, premonitory fear held me speechless. Lida curved into a sitting position. Looked around her as if trying to hit upon an object that would suit some predetermined purpose. Just at that moment Margie's huge, white Persian cat, probably having heard his mistress's return, came from the bedroom and started toward the kitchen, edging away, as he invariably did, from Lida and eyeing her with spitting hatred.

The instant Lida saw the animal, she leaped to her feet and stepped swiftly toward it. The beautiful pet forgot his intended visit to his mistress. Great back humped in fear and hatred, and green eyes glued to the strange flower on Lida's bosom, the cat crept toward her, stealthily, as if stalking an enemy, while I looked on, bound to inaction by my own weird thoughts. Suddenly, with an almost human shriek of rage, the big feline catapulted through the air, baring teeth as murderous as those of its jungle ancestors.

Hypnotized by horror, I watched the incredible drama that followed. For a century-long moment, Lida was a flamed-red statue, moved not a muscle until the cat was in mid-air. Then she whipped her white hands outward. As they swept above the flying white fury, a burst of flame filled the room. In a split second, it was gone—as if it had never been. Only my brain retained the memory of the red blossom flaming like a torch in the white valley between the pointed breasts.

On the floor lay the beautiful, white beast. Not willing to believe my senses, I crept closer, held in the grip of incredulous terror. Gently I touched the limp body with my foot, knowing already the truth.

Margie's pet was dead!

The beautiful animal sprawled like a cast-off rag on the polished floor, its once-silken belly turned upward. I stooped, closer and still closer, staring and sniffing. God! I was not mistaken!

The white fur was a blackened crisp, and the poor beast's belly cratered with gaping, raw holes. The air was filled with the smell of brimstone and burning flesh!

With deadly quietness, Lida Suban spoke: "I can do the same to her. *The choice is yours!*"

DURING the days that followed, Margie was so distressed about my increasing bad health that she never probed my lame explanations about the sudden death of her well-loved pet. I will admit that she was justified in her concern about the state of my nerves. I was at the breaking point.

I knew one thing only. I must not marry Margie, for I was convinced now of Lida's malignant power. What it was, where it came from, I did not know. I only knew it was fatal—and hideous.

I tried to use my extreme bad state of health as an excuse to postpone the wedding. But for my fiancée, my illness was

only a more urgent reason for immediate marriage. Thwarted in that argument, I urged, with the purpose of escaping Lida, a long wedding trip. But Margie contended that I was not well enough to undertake it.

I learned the tyranny of gentleness. . . .

My wedding was like a hellish dream. The stately chords of the wedding march were a dirge—a funeral dirge for my bride. I was hardly aware of her, so sweetly virginal, coming down the aisle to meet me, for my feverish eyes were pinned to her demoniac maid-of-honor—long, serpentine body sheathed obscenely in white satin, mysterious eyes shadowed by a drooping, scarlet brim, pale hands clasping the malevolent flame-flower.

The unbearable strain of waiting from moment to moment for her to strike! When would the fatal blow come? What satanic form would it take?

"Wilt thou, Roger, take this woman. . . .?"

"I will." I heard my own voice pronounce Margie's death-sentence.

But nothing happened! . . . The never-ending reception. Nothing. . . . The intolerable wedding-dinner! Still nothing. . . . The evening—and at last, Lida Suban retired to the guest room and my bride and I were alone.

It was not the sort of wedding night a man could have wished. I knew it was not what Margie had dreamed of, during our lovely engagement days. But everything was excused on account of my "health."

"I'm glad all the formalities are over," Margie said, looking tenderly at my drawn face and nervous hands. "My first duty—and pleasure—is to help you get well."

When I lay beside her in the darkness. I clasped her tightly as if mortally afraid of losing her and, laying my head upon her breast, I broke into sobs.

She shielded me in her soft arms, as a mother does a sick child. With little,

tender sounds of love and soft, gentle caresses, she soothed me. As the minutes went by, I felt all hurt, all strain of the awful preceding days go out of me, as if by magic. Memory of that woman sleeping in our guest room faded. The hovering, intangible menace drifted away on a tide of love. . . .

My honeymoon began.

"Margie! Margie!"

A VOICE calling my bride waked me from a deep, sweet sleep. At the same instant, Margie, too, was awake. "It's Lida," she whispered; "I wonder what—"

She sprang out of bed and started for the door, from beyond which the voice seemed to come.

But, suddenly, Lida stood in the room, as if wafted in on the eddy of sweet, poisonous fumes that drugged the air. The evil flower that hung between her breasts lighted her figure like a torch.

Folds of diaphanous, flame-red chiffon billowed about her, revealing her undulant body. She was unearthly—like some heathen goddess of fire. Incandescent, as if alight with an inner flame. She took one swift, gliding step toward Margie.

With a shriek of terror, Margie retreated. The tableau of these two women became an unbreakable fetter, binding me. The tall, menacing woman of flame. My ivory madonna, veiled only by her sheer, white nightgown.

Another tiger-soft stride. Helplessly, I looked on. The red chiffon draperies burst into an aura of living flame. The long, slender arm made a sweeping gesture and Margie's gown hung from her in charred rags.

My wife's agonized scream released me, like a taut spring, and I hurled myself from the bed and toward the living flames. But instantly, her left hand whipped through the air in front of me, and I was thrown back by a blast of

scorching wind, held helpless by a wall of roaring heat.

With ghastly, macabre humor, the Flame Goddess toyed with my loved one. First, the hellish hand swept above my bride's head, and the golden curls fell to the floor. Then, she let the blaze play—gently—upon the softly-rounding breasts and, with a cruel sweep, down the curving length of the ivory body.

Margie's screams were almost inhuman now, and I had got beyond making a sound. I had no reason, but plunged, idiotically, over and over, against the unseen barrier that held me.

Gradually, hopelessness laid its heavy hand on me, and out of the calm of despair came a glimmer of reason. The flower, the blossom that blazed so evilly upon the softly-glowing bosom of this she-devil! Did the secret of her power lie in it?

I abandoned my futile plunging against the singing wall she had with a gesture thrown up in front of me, and began to make a stealthy circle about the death struggle of these two women. I heard my crazed laughter break out into the room as I pictured myself, a hard-headed, young, American business-man, creeping cautiously around my own bridal chamber trying to outmaneuver an imaginary wall of wind!

But I could not get through! For as I circled, so did the cruel heat-wall. At no point could I penetrate it.

With diabolic cunning, the Flame-demon continued to play her deadly game with my bride. She swept a crisp trail down the lovely curve of back. Left a scorched girdle around the fragile waist.

Fierce anger rose in me. Somehow I must stop this. I looked wildly around me, agony sharpening my wits. Suddenly I had it!

I sprang to the dressing table, seized a huge, cut-glass atomizer. Stepping back to give myself arm-room, I hurled it into

the heavy French mirror. The glass shattered into a thousand pieces.

Wildly I surveyed the wreckage. Snatched a razor-sharp lance of it. The natural, earthly feel of it cut cruelly into my tight-gripping palm reassured me.

I knew I had to be careful, or I would strike Margie. I realized, too, that my interference might cause anything. Would we all go up in a sudden burst of unearthly flame? Would the she-devil, with one last violent manifestation, destroy Margie completely?

The answer had no bearing. I knew only that anything was better than this cat-and-mouse game of fire, so cunningly played. Death, annihilation—anything!—would be welcome.

It was not courage that urged me on—it was wild unreasoning terror. I could see the game was almost over. Lida was tiring of her sport, and Margie was swaying on her feet, on the verge of collapse. Her screams of agony had died away into the soft and unintelligible whimperings of a hurt child and it was only the primitive instincts of a wounded animal that kept her trying to avoid the torturing darts of fire.

I made a last tormented effort to break through the blasting wall of heat . . . but I could not do it. My legs crumpled under me and I fell heavily to the floor. For a moment Lida paused in her torture-game and turned to me with a look that embraced all the evil and malice in this world. It was that glance of concentrated venom that somehow gave me the strength to struggle unsteadily back to my feet. Lida turned away from me contemptuously and slowly raised her arm to loose the withering blast that would mean the end of hope and life for my beloved.

I knew that I could wait no longer—and I must not miss. Lida was taking her time, enjoying to the fullest the pain she was inflicting. As her fingertips were al-

most in a line with Margie's horror-glazed eyes, I suddenly drew back my arm and, before the Flame-thing could realize my intention, I sent my glass cutlass whizzing through the air—straight at the hellish blossom!

It fell to the littered floor.

THE SUDDENNESS of the result was almost too much for me. The conflagration was turned off as if by magic. The wall of wind was gone. Margie slumped to the floor, a pitiful heap of scorched skin and blackened wisps of cloth.

Lida was no longer a flaming goddess, but a violent, dangerous, disheveled woman at bay. She turned toward me, a look of demoniac hate lashing from her queer, golden eyes. Fear contorted her features.

As I lunged toward her, she whirled, and stooped to snatch wildly at the broken flower at her feet. Suddenly, with an unreasoning flash, I knew what I must do.

I hurled my body through the air, stiff-arming her in my plunge. She was thrown against the wall, but like an angry tigress, she was at me again. But not before I had the red-hot flame-blossom in my bleeding hands.

Fiercely I rent its flaming petals, tore out its demoniac heart. With one hell-ridden scream, the woman dropped to the floor.

Like a man aroused from a nightmare, I looked down at her. Stooped, and laid my hand upon her heart.

Lida Suban was dead.

* * *

MMARGIE'S golden hair is growing out again and is now an unruly mop of little-girl curls. The burns on her body, with the excellent medical care they had, are nearly all gone.

As for me, from my horrible experiences with Lida Suban, I have developed an interesting hobby—the study of pyrotechnics and pyro-chemistry, for I have

determined to preserve my own peace of mind by working out a natural solution for every manifestation of Lida's seemingly supernatural power.

I accept Lida's boast: "Nothing is supernatural. Nature gave us all powers. All we have to do is to realize them." And from it, I have worked my way, honestly, through the maze of horrible memories.

Lida knew much of the so-called sorcery of the Orient. The luminescence of her body when she appeared in my room and the weird, fiery manifestations on my horrible wedding night are not much more remarkable than many pyrochemical tricks used by "magicians" the world

over. As for the flower, a well-known botanist, upon examination of its tattered remnants, pronounced it a giant *dicentra*, native to most of East India. There was nothing unusual about it.

But Lida had appeared in locked rooms, with no reasonable means of ingress; the cat died at a gesture from her evil hands; she herself fell dead when I destroyed her flower. I am determined not to push these inexplicable facts back to fester in some dark corner of my subconscious. So I continue my study.

And in the meantime, I am the happiest man in the world. I have the perfect wife.

