# DEPUTY of THE DEVIL

## By Ben Ames Williams

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CHAPTER I

—I—

The events to be related began upon a certain afternoon and early evening when Doctor Greeding became for almost the first time in his life furiously angry. Call these events coincidence; yet it is permissible to suggest that if human passions be supposed sometimes to have a force of their own, so that a violent emotion in one individual may without any physical action on his part project itself and impact upon other individuals, then these occurrences will fall into an ordered pattern.

Doctor Greeding's own experience had persuaded him that incidents do occur, and conditions do arise, for which there can be no natural explanation. Certain episodes in his life, certain unique traits which he recognized in himself had long since convinced him of this.

Thus his sense of smell was far more acute than normal. If he came into an empty room, he knew instantly who had last passed through that room. In the same way, perhaps from a peculiarity of structure which his oculist early remarked, he could see with some precision in the dark. Incidentally, his eyes sometimes shone like those of an animal; and Mrs. Greeding might be startled, when they both awoke at night, to see her husband's eyes thus gleaming.

Doctor Greeding cultivated these unusual capacities—taking care, for instance, not to smoke, lest he blur his sense of smell; but this was a matter as much of inclination as of choice, for he had a dog's distaste for tobacco. Mrs. Greeding, and his daughter Nancy, respected this feeling on his part. Mrs. Greeding never smoked at all, Nancy never when she was near him.

But he had other gifts not so definitely physical. For instance, he sometimes knew what a person was about to say before the word was uttered. Or when he approached a street-corner, or a closed door, he might find himself perfectly sure that when he turned the corner, or opened the door, he would discover a certain person or scene he had pictured in his mind.

Also, he had had occasionally the experience of wishing very much that something entirely out of the ordinary run of expectation would happen—and having the wished-for event occur. But this he attributed to his luck. Doctor Greeding was in fact a child of good fortune. Life ran well for him. He had married, with the deliberate intention of furthering his career, the girl he chose; and their life together had been all that he had hoped. He had desired one child, a daughter; Nancy was their only child. He had sought material and professional success, and found it.

And in other ways, in the small incidents of daily life, luck was likely to break in his direction. His mother—she was a simple woman—once told him that he had been born under a caul. "So you'll always be lucky," she explained . . .

The thing began with Ira Jerrell, a wealthy business man near Doctor Greeding's own age, whose life the Doctor had saved by a difficult operation. From that day, as a not unnatural consequence, their friendship had steadily deepened.

Today Jerrell had telephoned Dr. Greeding and made an appointment to lunch with him, at their club. During the luncheon they spoke of casual matters. Afterward, Jerrell started to light a cigar, then hesitated.

"Light it, Ira," the Doctor bade him, smiling. "The window's open; and if any tobacco can be tolerable to a sensitive nose, it is that which you smoke."

So Jerrell scratched a match. He was a man physically fit, lean and hard. His thick hair contributed to the youthfulness of his appearance; but there were betraying lines at the corners of his mouth. He said, after a moment's hesitation, in his quiet way:

"I want to have a talk with you, Ned—about Nancy." There was a slow color in his cheeks.

The Doctor nodded. "Yes, I know."

Jerrell looked at him curiously. "How can you know?" he asked. Doctor Greeding only smiled, and Jerrell said: "Ned, I always have a feeling, in talking with you, that you know what I'm going to say. You're a curiously understanding man." He chuckled. "I should not like to try to keep a business secret from you."

"If I could read your mind, I'd have been able to retire long ago," Doctor Greeding remarked, lifting his eyes to Jerrell.

"You don't—speculate, do you?" Jerrell inquired. He had never invited the other to participate in any business affair.

Greeding shook his head. "No. At least, I never have. I'm naturally cautious, and—it hasn't been necessary.

Jerrell finally spoke again.

"Well, you're right, Ned," he said. "It is about Nancy. . . . She's a beautiful, a lovely girl."

"Why, yes," Doctor Greeding smilingly assented, rather amused at the other's indirection. "I think so."

After a moment Jerrell came to the point.

"Ned," he said, "here it is, in words of one syllable: If—well, I should like to marry Nancy."

Doctor Greeding's heart quickened its beat; but he held his tongue. After a moment Jerrell went on, hurriedly.

"Of course, I haven't spoken to her," Jerrell explained. "It seemed to me that under the circumstances I ought first to come to you—my old friend, and Nancy's father."

And he continued: "I see quite clearly the difficulties in the way. I am twenty years older than she is, twenty-two or three years older. That is an obstacle. Then I have known her, as a child and as a young woman, for years; but she has thought of me as an old man—who grew older—for as long. That is another obstacle. There may be still others. It may be that she is—in love with some one her own age; and it may be that even if she were not, you and Mrs. Greeding would object to her marrying me, either because I'm so much older, or for some other reason."

He hesitated, and when Doctor Greeding still held silent, he went on:

"I don't want to—distress her, if she—already loves some one else, some youngster her own age. And I don't want to embarrass you or Mrs. Greeding, by putting you in the position of opposing her marriage to me."

He hesitated, said then: "That's the situation, Ned. What do you think?"

After a moment Doctor Greeding chuckled. "Well, Ira," he said, "I can't pretend to be—surprised. I've not been blind to your new interest in Nancy in these recent months. Mrs. Greeding has told me some things about your visit with them in Georgia." He added calmly: "And Nancy's fine. I should have been more surprised if you had failed to discover that obvious fact."

He went on, thoughtfully: "Nancy has friends, of course—boys her own age. A girl of twenty-two is very much a young woman; but a boy of that age is still a boy. She has a troop of these youngsters at her heels most of the time; but no one of them more often than the others." He smiled. "I feel sure the field is open," he said.

"How about you? And Mrs. Greeding" Jerrell asked bluntly.

The Doctor hesitated, then went on: "The difference in your ages may seem to her an obstacle, as you say. She may feel it a barrier too great to be surmounted. On that point, I cannot speak. That is for Nancy to decide."

Jerrell said simply:

"Of course, in the last analysis. But would you and Mrs. Greeding—"

The Doctor met the other man's eyes straightforwardly. "I know you pretty well, Ira," he replied. "If Nancy loved you and wished to marry you, Mrs. Greeding and I would be—gratified."

Jerrell chuckled with a quick, youthful pleasure; but he sobered then, and he said gratefully:

"Thanks, Ned. I appreciate your attitude." And after a moment he added: "I— love Nancy, Ned. And I'm not so old as my years. I've lived decently, taken care of myself. I believe—if she came to love me—I could make her happy."

Doctor Greeding nodded. "I know as much about you—physically—as you know yourself." He was proud of his tone. It was dispassionate and calm, with no hint in it of the inward excitement which he felt.

Jerrell colored. There was always in him something deeply likable. He said awkwardly:

"I know this is an old-fashioned proceeding, my speaking first to you . . . And I don't want to be rebuffed. Are you sure she is—free?"

"Perfectly sure," Doctor Greeding promised. "I have her confidence. If there were anyone, I would surely know."

Jerrell smiled, and his eyes lighted. "Thanks, Ned," he said. "I shall bank on what you say."

Doctor Greeding drove back up town in a complacent triumph. He had no least misgiving of what was to come . . . Edward Greeding was the only son of a Maine farmer. Even as a boy on the farm, he revealed some unique and unusual quality; and his mother's pride furnished a driving motive force. By his own labors he put himself through Bowdoin and afterward through Harvard Medical school, where he ranked second in his class.

By the time he had finished his hospital work, both his father and mother were dead. In Cambridge he had learned to value the atmosphere of dignity and pride which surrounded some of the fine old houses there. In one of them—that of Doctor Bendon—he was a welcomed visitor; and he shrewdly decided that if Myra Bendon were his wife, his career would begin under good auspices. He wooed the girl—she was a little taller than he, plain and awkward, not beset by suitors—and won her. Later, when Doctor Bendon died, Doctor and Mrs. Greeding came to live in the old house that had been built by her great-grandfather a hundred years before.

Mrs. Greeding would have preferred more modern surroundings; but her husband insisted. There were in the old house many things—furniture, silverware and the like—which had been old and fine when the house was new; and Doctor Greeding had a keen appreciation of these possessions. He took pride in them, took pride in having achieved them. But Mrs. Greeding kept the old things from a sense of duty. There were a few things—a vase, a modern painting or the like—which she had bought and against the Doctor's protests insisted on keeping; and her own dressing-room, her particular domain, was decorated and furnished in a modernistic vein.

The house stood on half an acre of well-landscaped grounds, with a fine bay hedge in front, and flowers, and a pool where goldfish swam, and a tennis court. The tennis court was at one side, and the wire screen designed to catch stray balls was itself overgrown by vines, so that the court was hidden from the eye of anyone not actually within the enclosure.

This afternoon—it was a day in May, when spring was already full blown, and the sun was warm—and only a little while after Doctor Greeding had assured Jerrell that Nancy was heart-free, the girl was playing tennis with Dan Carlisle. This young man was an assistant professor of economics in the university, and his book on the business cycle had already won respectful notice and was used as a text in

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the business school. He telephoned Nancy soon after lunch; asked whether she were free. She told him, eagerly, to come; and at a little before three he arrived, to find her driving balls against the batterboard which had been set up at the end of the court.

Doctor Greeding did not suspect that those great plans he had for Nancy were guessed by half the world; but they were not as secret as he supposed. Thus when Dan arrived, he peered through the gate in the screen around the court, and hissed sharply. Nancy heard, and called, "Oh, hello!" and she came swiftly toward him.

"Sh-h-h!" he warned her, finger on his lips; and he looked right and left, cautiously. "Are we alone?" he whispered.

"Idiot!" she laughed. "Yes, of course. Mother's gone to play bridge—won't be home till late."

"Ah!" Dan sighed contentedly. "And your father won't, either. So it's perfectly safe for me to show myself!"

"Don't be silly, Dan," Nancy indignantly protested. "You're not exactly an outcast, you know."

He insisted with mock gravity: "Indigent instructor plays clandestine tennis with daughter of wealth and beauty." He shook his head. "That's bad," he said.

Nancy cried, half-irritated: "Just for that, I shall beat you!" She spun her racket. "Rough or smooth?"

"Rough," said Dan; and the racket fell.

"Smooth," she announced triumphantly. "I'll take the serve!"

So Dan stripped off his sweater and crossed to the farther court, and Nancy's racket rose and swung in a free full circle. The ball clipped the line, went untouched into the backstop.

"Weren't you ready?" she called.

"Sorry," he confessed with a grin. "You ought to wear a veil or something, Nancy, or black your teeth! How can a man keep his eye on the ball?"

"You'd better watch this one!" she retorted, her cheeks bright, and served again. But the ball came back, low and fast on her backhand, and at her feet; and thereafter Dan managed to keep his attention on the game.

Yet—inattention might have been forgiven him. Nancy was slender, with loose dark hair; and she wore one of those scant tennis costumes calculated to permit the greatest possible freedom of movement, with no sleeves, and a skirt which even in repose scarce reached the knee. Her bare legs were golden brown from three months of southern sun, and her arms and throat were the color of honey. Dan thought her like that classic figure of Diana with the stag. Her movements were liquid and effortless; her body flowed through a succession of postures, each beautifully composed, like a fine work of art, which the eye recorded and remembered.

Dan himself was no work of art. He was taller than Nancy, but so broad of shoulder and heavy of leg that he seemed short and almost chunky. He moved about the court with a robust zest and a reckless waste of energy. His stroke seemed awkward, but had a surprising efficiency and power. Nancy had learned her tennis in a good school, and played easily and well; and she did in fact win that first set from him, though by sheer stubborn persistence he carried it thrice to deuce.

But in the second set his superior pace began to tell; the balls he hit had a steam behind them which when they struck her racket communicated the shock to her hand, to her wrist and arm. Little by little, her returns began to drift faintly to the right of the spot where she aimed them; she made errors. He broke her serve . . .

"Golly, Nancy," he protested, "you're blazing! Too hot?"

"Of course not!" She laughed at him. "You're no iceberg, yourself," she retorted. "You're red as beef! It makes me hot just to look at you."

"Want to call it off?" he urged. "No sense killing ourselves."

*(TO BE CONTINUED)*

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