DEPUTY OF THE DEVIL

By Ben Ames Williams

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SYNOPSIS

Dr. Greeding, a wealthy and talented middle aged surgeon, is possessed of seemingly supernatural powers. He is able to anticipate what people say before they utter a word; occasionally he can wish for something extraordinary to happen and have the wish fulfilled. Greeding meets Ira Jerrell, a wealthy business friend of his own age, who tells him he loves his daughter Nancy and would like to marry her. Dr. Greeding is pleased and tells Jerrell he has a clear field. Nancy, however, is in love with Dan Carlisle, a professor at the University who has little means.

CHAPTER I—Continued

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"Of course not. We'll play two sets out of three," she insisted stubbornly, and they came back to the court again.

She coasted through the remaining games of that set, husbanding her strength, making him run when she could, placing the ball rather than driving it. He took the set at six-four.

"There,' he suggested. "That makes it even-Stephen. Let's call it a draw!"

"Of course, if you're tired," she said derisively.

He grinned. "You're a glutton for punishment."

"I've just begun to fight," she warned him.

"All right, have it your way," he assented. "It's my serve. Let's go."

And without pause, they began again; but Dan's game now had softened. She won his serve then her own, and the first three points of the next game. On the third point he served a double fault; and she picked up the balls and walked toward the net.

"Dan, you beast, you're letting up," she said in angry accusation.

"Not a bit of it," he insisted.

"Liar," she retorted, and her eyes were hot. "Don't you suppose I know? And if there's anything I hate, it's to be babied."

"Why, listen, Nance," he protested. "I— Well, as a matter of fact," he confessed honestly, "I thought you were pretty hot and tired. We're not playing for blood, you know!"

"I'm going to beat you if I can," she said furiously. "And you're to beat me if you can. Is that clear?"

He hesitated, himself angry now. "Perfectly," he retorted then. "You asked for it. I'll give it to you!"

And he turned and stalked back to the service-line. She took her place to receive. "Ready?" he barked.

She nodded, and the ball came blazing at her. Her whole arm tingled from the shock of it. Her return caught the net cord, dropped for an error.

His jaw was set, his face bleak. "Ready?" He took the game. The next. The next. He won five games in a row; and with the score two-five against her, she prepared to serve.

Driving herself to the limit, she served and came in. His return was hot; she met it weakly, could no more than pop the ball feebly into the air. She saw his body bend backward for the smash, saw the sweeping curve of his racket, heard the explosion of the shot; and then something struck her bare leg just above the right knee.

She felt a pang like flame, a sickening agony. She heard his low cry of dismay, and heard her own voice in a keen fine wail of pain; and the world swam and dissolved, and she was on hands and knees, on the ground, dizzy, almost fainting.

Then he was holding her in his arms, and crying out regrets and self-reproaches, and trying to lift her; and the sandy surface of the court abraded her bare knees; and then she was being carried, and abruptly she was being kissed, and so forgot her hurts. Chaos resolved itself into order again, glorious and beautiful. She lay on turf, cradled in his arms, clinging to him.

"I didn't mean to, Nancy!" he cried desperately.

"Please mean to, Dan," she whispered, drawing him nearer.

"I don't mean—this," he confessed confusedly. "Oh, I've meant this, always, I think. Only I never had the nerve. But—hitting you . . . Was it awful? I'd rather break my arm."

"It was terrible," she assured him, smiling through tears. "I thought I'd die! Nothing ever did hurt so. Please be sorry for me."

"Sorry? Honey, I'd—" He hesitated, and his eyes clouded, and he released her. He said awkwardly: "I'll get your coat. You'll be chilled."

"I'll never be cold again, darling," she vowed.

But he left her while he fetched her coat and his sweater. She looked ruefully at the red blaze on her knee.

"That's going to be black and blue," she told him, when he returned.

"And red, and orange, and yellow," he predicted. "You let your father look at it. It might need something."

"I think it's grand," she said, smiling at him as he knelt beside her, drawing him near. "I hope it stays that way for days and days."

And a moment later she said: "If I'd known it took that to make you—do this, I'd have let a ball hit me long ago!"

He frowned miserably. "Nancy, I shouldn't have—kissed you."

"Why not?" she demanded. "I liked it. I think you should do it again."

He protested: "You know darned well—I can't, darling."

"Why can't you?" she challenged.

"It's just a matter of common sense," he urged. "You know what your father and mother—"

"Is it them you want to marry?" she demanded hotly. "Dan, you make me tired!"

"I know," he said. "And I'm sorry. But—my salary is less than your dress-allowance. And it will never be much larger. I'll be a professor, eventually, of course; but you know what that means. It might be years before we could even manage to keep a cook!"

"Will you please get it through your thick head," she insisted, "that I want to marry you. Do you think I'm afraid of working, of being poor, or anything, as long as I have you?"

"It isn't what you think, sweet," he said. "It's your mother and father!"

She said after a moment, seriously: "Mother's all right. I can count on her. She knows you, your people—knows how fine you are. But father might be unreasonable." Her brow furrowed. "I've never felt that I—know father very well," she confessed. "He's given me everything, done everything for me; and I know he's proud of me. But I always have a feeling it's a sort of impersonal, possessive pride. Sometimes I'm—afraid of him!"

"Nonsense," he urged. "He's a mighty able man, and a fine man. I don't blame him; but Nancy, from his point of view, you rate some one a lot better than me!"

She drew the coat more snugly around her shoulders. "He sha'n't interfere," she said, a faint desperation in her tones; and suddenly she clung to him. "Dan, Dan, I want you. I want you."

He held her close and tenderly; and when he spoke, his head was high. "All right, Nance," he said simply. "I don't know how we'll manage it, but what you want is what it's going to be. We'll work it out, somehow. I'll see your father."

He saw her eyes shadow with faint fear. "Not yet," she objected. "Let's not tell anyone yet."

He chuckled reassuringly. "Whatever you say," he assented. "Now run along and get that shower! Good-by."

When, an hour or so later, Doctor Greeding came home, he alighted from the car at the side door, and came into the house while Thomas took the car to the garage. But in the small side hall, he paused, attentive, and stood for a moment motionless, almost as though he were listening; but there was nothing to hear. Yet his posture suggested that he heard something, or sensed something.

And this was in fact the case. After an instant he saw the rackets and balls where Dan had laid them down; and he crossed and picked up a ball, and then a racket, and held them in his hands. He frowned faintly, and looked right and left. The question in his mind was answered now, and the answer was unwelcome.

He put down the tennis gear and ascended the stairs. Nancy's room was opposite the head of the stairs; he hesitated, then knocked on her door. She called sleepily:

"Who is it?"

"Mother home, Nancy?" he asked.

"I don't think so. I don't know. I've been asleep."

"All afternoon?" he protested, without opening the door. "On a fine day like this?"

After a moment she replied. "No," she said. "I played tennis for a while."

"Who with?" he asked, carefully casual.

Again it was an instant before her answer came. "Judith Plank came over," she replied at last.

At that word, the man's brows drew together, and a surge of unaccustomed anger swept him; but without comment, he went on toward his own room. He closed the door behind him and stood alone there, his head bent, his thoughts racing. For he knew that Nancy had lied; and that his daughter should lie to him, since it implied a criticism of himself, woke in the man a fretful rage.

It was a moment before he perceived in her mendacity the further implication that she was fond of Dan Carlisle; and Doctor Greeding's eyes flickered at the thought.

He saw that the door into Mrs. Greeding's dressing - room was open, and crossed to the door and spoke her name; but she was not here.

He stood in the doorway, looking around this room furnished in a fashion so distasteful to him. The black-and-white chairs, the gaudy draperies, that hideous, ridiculous malformed chunk of marble, shapeless, meaningless. All the anger aroused in him by the knowledge that Nancy had lied, and what her lie implied, concentrated suddenly upon this ugly marble.

He crossed and picked it up in his hands, turning it over and over, hating it. He wished to break it into bits, smash it to dust. He abhorred this harmless chunk of marble with an unreasoning venom. It was the scapegoat upon which he poured out his wrath.

And while he stood thus, holding the marble in his hand, a strange thing occurred: Suddenly the statuette was no longer in his grasp. Rather, it was snatched away from him as though by an invisible force. The thing left his hands, and for an instant, while time stood still, it seemed to waver in the air.

Then it fell to the floor. The fall was no more than a few feet; yet the solid marble, even before that impact, appeared to burst apart in midair. It lay in a litter of shards and dusty fragments.

Doctor Greeding's eyes distended with an incredulous astonishment, with something like dismay. He stood for a long time looking down at this rubbish. Then he wiped his brow and went softly back into his own room.

CHAPTER II

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Doctor Greeding closed the door behind him, as uneasy as a guilty small boy. Mrs. Greeding, he knew, treasured that absurd statuette, she would be, when she saw it broken, querulous and angry. But this in itself was not enough to account for the inward disturbance which shook him.

It was incredible that a fall of three or four feet upon a hardwood floor should have shattered that solid chunk of marble into a hundred pieces; yet it had! Another man would have dismissed the incident as casual mischance; but Doctor Greeding even in this moment suspected that something within himself, something violent and explosive, had struck the statuette and shivered it to dust. He rejected the thought with all the power of

"Who With?" He Asked, Carefully Casual.

his logical and scientific mind; yet it persisted.

And he had, too, that sensation common to every man: the certainty that somewhere, somehow, this had happened to him before. He was even able presently to identify this memory. As a boy on the farm he had been whipped one day, and sent to his room to reflect upon his sins. There a lamp, at which he was staring unseeingly through a mist of angry tears somehow toppled off the table beside him and fell and was broken. Accused, he denied—in honest sincerity—that he had touched either table or lamp, and was whipped again for his denial. His father, between strokes of the strap, said vehemently:

"One thing I can't stand is a lying young one, Ned! I'll take it out of you!"

And Doctor Greeding remembered that hour now. That day, sent to his room, he had been in a brooding fury at the thrashing he had just received. This day likewise he was filled with a tempestuous rage. After his conversation with Ira Jerrell, the discovery that Nancy had been playing tennis with Dan Carlisle was enough in itself to disturb him. Dan, from Doctor Greeding's point of view, was a penniless instructor, with no prospects worth considering—and no discoverable ambition likely to lead to financial success. Certainly he was not equipped to rival Ira Jerrell.

Yet he was young, and even Doctor Greeding could perceive a certain charm in him. So, finding that Dan and Nancy had been this day together, the man was quick to a jealous alarm. When Nancy lied to him, his uneasiness became anger—which, translated and focused upon a material object, had shattered solid marble into dust!

Doctor Greeding contemplated these facts in silence, conscious of strange stirrings in himself. Presently he pressed the bell. Ruth, the second maid, answered. She was a thin, pale, black-haired woman, who habitually wore an expression of pained disapproval. She and Margaret, the fat cook, had served the Greedings loyally for years.

"Fetch me a cocktail," Doctor Greeding directed.

"A cocktail?" Ruth echoed, in protesting astonishment; for Doctor Greeding was an abstemious man, not given to drinking alone.

"Certainly," he said crisply. Then with a cautious feeling that some explanation was necessary: "I'm tired. Are we dining at home?"

"No sir," she told him. "At the Jordans'." And she disappeared.

He had removed his outer garments and put on a dressing-gown before she returned with the shaker and a glass upon a tray. She set them grudgingly on his table and withdrew; and he drank two or three cocktails, quickly, standing at the window where he might watch for Mrs. Greeding's return. There was a deep impatience in him; and when his wife's open roadster presently turned in from the street, he swung about toward her dressing-room, waiting for her to come upstairs.

He could hear her in the hall below giving some instruction to Ruth; and he resented the delay. Then he heard her come up the stairs, heard her open the door of her dressing-room, next his own; and then her instant cry of consternation, and then her call:

"Ruth! Ruth!"

The maid came hurriedly up the stairs, and Mrs. Greeding demanded: "What happened to my statuette, Ruth? Look at it!"

"I don't know, Mrs. Greeding," Ruth indignantly protested. "I didn't know anything about it. I haven't been in the room since just after you left."

"Who's been here?" Mrs. Greeding demanded. "Who's been upstairs? It couldn't just fall; and even if it did, it wouldn't break all to bits like that! That statuette was valuable, Ruth. If you did it, you might as well tell the truth."

"I didn't, Mrs. Greeding," the woman insisted stiffly.

And Mrs. Greeding said apologetically: "Of course not. I didn't mean to seem to doubt you. But who else has been upstairs?"

"Only Miss Greeding, and the Doctor," Ruth returned.

Then Doctor Greeding opened the door between the two rooms. "Hello, Myra," he said casually. "What's the trouble?"

Mrs. Greeding turned toward him. She was a large, fair woman, with hair a little too insistently yellow.

"Ned!" she cried. "Some one's broken my statuette! See!"

"Probably fell off the stand," he suggested.

"Nonsense!" she cried indignantly. "A fall might have cracked it; but it's just ground to bits. Look!"

"It must have been an accident, Myra," he urged impatiently. "Never mind that now. You can get another. I want to talk to you!" He looked toward Ruth, and the woman grimly disappeared.

"Another?" Mrs. Greeding cried indignantly. "Another indeed! Ned, don't you realize that works of art don't come by the dozen! That statue was unique! It was one of Payson's things, and he's practically my discovery, and that would have been priceless when he became known. Another! Ned, sometimes you're the most irritating man!"

Doctor Greeding fought to keep his voice under control. The affair of the statuette was disquieting enough, certainly; but there were other matters better worth discussing. He managed a smile.

"I'm sorry, Myra. Perhaps if you subsidize Payson sufficiently, he'll do you a copy. I expect he'll be glad of the commission."

"But he can't, Ned! Works of art—"

Doctor Greeding said sharply: "Tosh, Myra! Drop it, can't you?"

"But it looks as though some one had just pounded it and pounded it," she urged, in an increasing mystification. "It couldn't possibly break all up that way just by falling."

He said irascibly: "Will you be still! Forget the fool thing. It isn't worth all this talk, surely!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)