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. They discuss marriage, but decide to delay talking to her father about it. Nancy, who has been playing tennis with Dan that afternoon, tells her father she had been playing with a girl friend. Greeding knows this is untrue and is secretly enraged. Stepping into his wife's room, his eye falls on a marble statuette which he dislikes. He picks it up, wishing he could smash it to bits. Suddenly it is snatched from his grasp as by an invisible force and burst asunder. Mrs. Greeding is greatly disturbed over the mysterious destruction of the statuette. The doctor makes light of it.

CHAPTER II—Continued

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She stared at him shrewdly. "Ned, you've been drinking!" she cried. "I can always tell. Your eyes are red. Whatever has happened to upset you? It isn't like you to come home and get drunk and—"

He cried in a deep exasperation: "Stop it, Myra!"

She was, suddenly, pale. "Why, of course, Ned," she said placatingly. "I didn't mean—" She seemed puzzled, incredulous. She came to him, kissed him. "I'm sorry, Ned. I didn't mean to bother you. Had a hard day?"

"No," he barked.

"Then you're worrying about one of your patients."

He shook his head, patted her shoulder roughly. "Not at all," he insisted. "I'm a little tired, nothing more." He released her, and she turned back to the dressing-table. "We must dress now," she said. "We're dining at the Jordans', you know."

"Ruth told me," he assented.

She began to undress. "You'd better hurry, or you'll be late," she said.

He hesitated, but the time was in fact short; and in such matters he was punctilious. He went to his own room, to the shower. But presently, fitting his studs, he came to the door between their rooms again, and saw that she was brushing her hair; he asked in a tone carefully casual:

"Nancy going with us?"

"No," Mrs. Greeding told him. "She's going somewhere with Judith."

His collar pinched his neck as he fumbled with the button; he made a wry face. "Not alone, surely," he protested. His tone was light, amused. "I don't suppose two girls as pretty as Nancy and Judith are likely to go anywhere alone."

"I don't know," she admitted. "I didn't ask! Ford Minick, maybe, or Ethan, or Pete Master, or some of that crowd."

"Nancy doesn't seem particularly interested in any special young man," he remarked. "Or at least, if she is, she conceals the fact from the paternal eye."

"Probably there will be, by and by," his wife agreed. "Nancy'll tell us when she's ready."

The Doctor was conscious of a reservation in her words.

"How about Dan Carlisle?" he asked bluntly.

"Oh, Dan hasn't the money to—play with their crowd," she said, after a moment "Of course, Nancy knows him."

"I've seen him here once or twice," he assented scornfully. "He seems a pleasant youngster; but I can't imagine any man worth his salt deliberately taking to teaching as a profession."

"I've heard Professor Carlisle lecture," she commented. "He's a charming old man!"

"No doubt," the Doctor agreed in a dry tone; but he said then roughly, impatient of indirection: "Yet the Professor's charm does not justify Nancy's imagining herself in love with Dan!"

He saw her eyes widen, and recognized that she had known about Dan, and had wished him not to know; and his face congested with anger at the thought. She saw his countenance in the mirror, and turned pale; but she said nothing.

"You knew! she was?" he said in a low voice, accusingly.

"Nancy's never spoken to me about it, Ned," she urged defensively. "I've only—guessed. I've seen no more than you. It's only that I'm perhaps a little closer to Nancy—understand her better—"

"Closer!" he ejaculated, in a rising wrath.

"She's afraid of you, I think, Ned," she confessed. "You do act, sometimes, as though you owned her, you know."

"Afraid of me?" His cheek was purple. "Why should my daughter be afraid of me? I'm no ogre?"

"No, you're not," she assented honestly. "You've been generous with Nancy, given her everything; and you're always calm, and kind. But—you've always had your own way. I've worried, sometimes, about what you might be like if—things didn't go to suit you."

There were twisting snakes of fury in the man. He tried to laugh. "Is this some sudden discovery on your part, Myra? This sinister side of my character!"

She rose and came toward him. "Ned dear, please," she said. "I'm sorry! You're upset today, different." She smiled. "I suppose all fathers are furious when they discover that their daughters are beginning to love some one else. Some other man. But you'll have to get used to it, Ned. Nancy's a woman now, you know."

She would have put her arms around him, but he rebuffed her. "Never mind that," he said sharply. "I came home this afternoon and— found that Nancy had been playing tennis with this young Carlisle. I asked her about it, and she said she had played with Judith—didn't mention him. She lied to me!"

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You're so sure of things, sometimes, Ned. Was Dan here when you came? How can you be sure?"

"What difference does that make?" he exclaimed, twitching at his tie.

She returned to her dressing-table. "None, of course," she agreed soothingly. "But for that matter, Ned, what difference does it make if Dan did play tennis with Nancy?"

"I don't object to that," he retorted. "I object to her lying to me!"

She said wisely: "That is—significant, of course. A girl's instinct to conceal, to be secretive, is one of the first—symptoms." He saw her smile wistfully, tenderly, at her own thoughts. "I've realized for some time that Nancy was thinking a good deal about Dan," she admitted.

He said flatly: "It is not going any farther. It is going to stop right here."

"But why?" she protested. "Dan's a nice boy."

"He's a pauper, always will be. Or the next thing to it."

"Do you think that makes so much difference, Ned?" she urged gently. "And—after all, isn't that Nancy's business?"

"I won't have it," he insisted. "I shall make it my business."

"It's possible, you know" she reminded him gravely. "that you—can't do anything about it. Nancy has a will of her own, and—an income of her own, later, apart from you. From my father."

He said tensely: "Myra, what's got into you? You've always stood shoulder to shoulder with me."

"You've always done things I could agree with, and support," she replied. "But I think you would be wrong to oppose Nancy, if she loves Dan, without a better reason than the fact that he has no money. After all, his family is fine."

And she urged: "Finish dressing, Ned. We must go."

He started to speak, then held his tongue. He returned to his own room for vest and coat; and when he came back, she was ready.

"Twenty minutes past seven," she said. "We're supposed to be there at a quarter of, and it's half an hour's drive."

He said: "The others will be late. Wait." He had decided to speak. "I want to tell you something. Ira Jerrell asked me to lunch with him today. He wants to marry Nancy."

Her eye widened. "But Ned, he's as old as you are!" she protested.

"Two or three years younger," he corrected. "And I'm not old!"

"He's a Pauper, Always Will Be."

He was fighting to control the fury in him.

"Oh, Ned," she protested. "In twenty years he will be an old man; and she—"

"He won't live twenty years," Doctor Greeding said explicitly. "I operated on him, you remember. He comes of a short-lived family, and he himself has a heart weakness, latent now, but bound to develop. He won't live twenty years; and when he dies, he will leave Nancy still a young woman, and wealthy enough to—"

Her cheek was pale. "Oh Ned, that's horrible!"

"It's sensible!" he insisted.

She stared at him in amazement. "Ned, sometimes I can't understand you," she confessed. "There's a hard, ruthless streak in you. Most of the time you're gentle and loyal and fine; but — I'm afraid of you myself, sometimes."

His lips were tight with rage. "I'm finding out a lot of things about myself," he exclaimed, and he laughed unpleasantly. "It's queer you never noticed them before."

"You've changed lately" she admitted.

He cried: "I—" But she touched his arm.

"Hush," she protested. Some one knocked at the door, and she opened it. Ruth was there.

"Thomas wants to know will you want him to drive," she said in a resentful tone.

Doctor Greeding shook his head. "No, I'll take Mrs. Greeding's car," he answered shortly.

And Mrs. Greeding, before Ruth could turn away, keeping the servant near as a shield between them, touched his arm. "Come, Ned," she said. "We'll have to hurry."

So they went downstairs together . . .

He drove headlong, some of the fury in him communicating itself to the car. The Jordan home was in Winchester; and Doctor Greeding came to the Fellsway and turned into it to escape the slower traffic on the avenue.

Mrs. Greeding protested uncertainly: "Ned, you're driving awfully fast."

"You don't want to be late," he retorted harshly; and she shrank away from him.

A traffic-light halted them; and when it changed to green, the car beside them leaped ahead and cut in front of Doctor Greeding. His brakes ground to avoid a collision; and the offending car darted away. He said through clenched teeth:

"The rat! I hope he breaks his neck!"

The other car was no more than a hundred yards ahead of them. Doctor Greeding heard like an echo of his words a loud explosion, and saw the other automobile lurch drunkenly to the right against the curb. It tilted up and over, and came down crashing. They were so close behind it that he had to jam his brakes hard down to stop in time.

Other machines penned them in, and instantly there was a small jam of traffic, and a motorcycle officer swept to the scene.

Mrs. Greeding cried: "Ned, he must be hurt! Go see!"

Doctor Greeding got out of his car. His legs were stiff, yet shaking. His shoulders jerked convulsively. His brow was wet and cold. There was in him an incredible certainty hideous and horrifying, and yet in some dark fashion intoxicating and full of promise too.

He went forward to where the policeman had dragged the driver out of the wrecked machine. The man lay limp, motionless.

"I'm a physician," said Doctor Greeding briefly, and the policeman gave way to him. Doctor Greeding made a swift examination.

Then he stood up and brushed his hands; he spoke in a voice scarcely recognizable as his own.

"Nothing to be done. His neck is broken, Officer."

The man was dead. He was a middle-aged man, a little shabby. His was an inexpensive car. It was crushed and battered, now, fit only to be junked. The man, fortunately, had been alone. Doctor Greeding, looking down at him, felt terror and contrition— and a dizzying sense of power!

The policeman asked at large: "Anyone see what happened?"

Doctor Greeding cleared his throat, steadied his voice. There was no more anger in him; but rather a quick caution.

"He was driving very rapidly," he explained to the officer. "He passed us at the last traffic-light, and cut in on me pretty sharply. Drunk, do you think?"

"No smell of booze on him," the policeman replied. "His front tire blew out when he hit the turn. I guess that's the answer." He produced his notebook and took Doctor Greeding's name and address, then turned to the others who had pressed around.

Doctor Greeding, at the first opportunity, returned to his car, took the wheel and moved away. He said nothing; but Mrs. Greeding watched him, saw his deep distress.

"Was he killed?" she asked.

The Doctor nodded. His brow was moist, his tones shaken. "Myra, his neck was broken!" he said unsteadily, and tried to laugh. "That makes me feel—curiously guilty, almost responsible!"

She touched his hand reassuringly. "Ned, dear, don't be absurd!"

"I feel as though I'd wished it on him," he admitted.

"You're perfectly ridiculous," she urged loyally. "He was driving like an idiot. It just happened to—happen right before our eyes."

Greeding drove in silence; but he could not so easily dismiss this tragedy from his mind. Common sense told him that this was no more than one of those incredibly apt coincidences which occur in the life of every man; yet something deeper than common sense, something rooted in the very base and foundation of his soul, cried out against accepting such a simple explanation. He was trembling and shaken with a vast and perilous excitement, like one who stands before a closed door, long locked, in which now the key is fixed, waiting only for him to turn it, and open the door, and enter in.

Suddenly his hands wavered on the wheel, so that Mrs. Greeding caught and steadied it; and she cried sharply:

"Ned!"

"It's all right," he said huskily. "I'm upset, that's all." And he added: "I've a mind to turn around and go home. I don't feel like seeing people."

"Nonsense!" she insisted. "It's what you need."

"Oh, I suppose so," he assented.

But she watched him thereafter with an alert attention, till they came to their destination, where other cars were already parked, and alighted and went in. On the way up the walk to the door, she held his arm, her eyes full of solicitude, till he smiled at her reassuringly.

"I need a cocktail," he said. "That will pick me up."

And in fact, once in the house, greeting a dozen people in succession, he was swept out of his own distracting thoughts. He gulped a cocktail and another, and felt new strength flow into him. In the drawing-room he recognized, standing with Mrs. Jordan and two or three others by the hearth, Professor Carlisle, who was young Dan's father. The professor was a small, lean, gray old man with clear blue eyes; and Doctor Greeding, with an impulse to cultivate the other as a possible ally against Dan and Nancy, crossed to speak to him.

As he did so, a young woman by the professor's elbow turned to watch him approach; and Doctor Greeding unconsciously paused as he saw her countenance. She was tall, her glance serene and steady. As though she marked his hesitation, there was a faint amusement in her eyes; but after that momentary pause, Doctor Greeding went on, and Mrs. Jordan welcomed him into the group and made introductions.

"You know Professor Carlisle, Doctor Greeding? And Mary Ann? I've put Miss Carlisle beside you at dinner, Doctor, so you can talk shop as much as you please!"

He shook hands with Professor Carlisle and with the girl. Mary Ann's hand in his had a strength which pleased him. He found her deeply, stirringly beautiful. At Mrs. Jordan's word, she smiled again; and Doctor Greeding echoed: "Talk shop!"

But before Mary Ann could reply, Mrs. Jordan swept her away. Doctor Greeding and Professor Carlisle were left together. Doctor Greeding said casually:

"I've met your son, of course, Professor; but I didn't know you had a daughter too."

Professor Carlisle smiled fondly. "She doesn't—circulate as much as Dan does," he assented. "She's a registered nurse—takes her profession rather seriously."

"That is apt to be a—sporadic occupation," Doctor Greeding suggested.

"She was Doctor Homans' surgical nurse until he died," Professor Carlisle explained. "But since then—"

The exodus toward the dining-room began. Doctor Greeding found himself placed at Mrs. Jordan's right, Mary Ann on his other side. Mrs. Greeding was at the other end of the table, beside Professor Carlisle.

The effect of the cocktails the Doctor had taken began to pass, and memory of the tragedy he had witnessed so short a time ago returned to disturb him. By and by he heard Professor Carlisle at the other end of the table utter a word at once strange and vaguely familiar. The word was poltergeist. It touched some chord of memory in him, and he tried to hear what the other was saying; but Mary Ann just then released herself from the man beyond her, and smiled and suggested:

"We don't actually have to talk shop, I suppose, Doctor Greeding; but we ought to say something to each other!"

(TO BE CONTINUED)