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. He reveals that Ira Jerrell wants to marry Nancy. On the way to a dinner party a car cuts in front of Greeding's. He angrily expresses the wish that the driver would break his neck. An instant later an accident occurs in which this very thing happens. At the dinner the Greedings meet Prof. Carlisle, Dan's father, and his daughter Mary Ann.

CHAPTER II—Continued

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He forgot his interest in Professor Carlisle "Mrs. Jordan contrives these things so carefully," he assented in an amused undertone. "Gives us our cue. You worked with Doctor Homans your father says?"

"For three years,' she assented.

He chuckled, curiously stimulated, forgetting for the present that man with a broken neck limp on the turf beside the road.

"I know your brother Dan," he remarked. "See him around the house occasionally. I expect you know Nancy'

"Oh, yes' she agreed. "Of course, I'm older than she.' She laughed softly "And our orbits don't cross very often.'

She continued to talk to him, in a pleasant and diverting fashion, of a variety of matters; and Doctor Greeding responded, stimulated by her beauty and her wit. Once at something she said, he threw back his head and laughed so heartily that for a moment everyone else at the table was silenced.

He enjoyed this talk with Mary Ann, but when they rose from the table, he lost her; and thereafter, abstraction descended on him like a cloak. Mrs. Freeding came at last to his rescue, and they made their farewells. He was not anxious to go, had hoped to find himself once more near Mary Ann; and in the car, he said almost resentfully:

"Leaving early, aren't we?"

"I saw how tired you were," she replied, and added with a curious sidelong glance: "Though you seemed to enjoy yourself at dinner."

Miss Carlisle is attractive, interesting," he assented.

She seemed about to speak, hesitated, said then: "I suppose you're still worrying about that poor man who was killed. But that's just silly, Ned. Forget him." He nodded silently, and she sought some topic to distract him.

"Professor Carlisle was explaining to me about poltergeists," she volunteered in a sprightly tone. "I had told him of the statuette in my room being broken so mysteriously; and he said we probably had a poltergeist in the house!"

Doctor Greeding remembered. "I've heard the word, somewhere."

"It comes from the German," she explained quickly, grateful for his attention. "It means 'a racketing spirit'; and when there is one in a house, it throws stones, crockery, furniture — all sorts of things — all around everywhere."

And she went on hurriedly: "Professor Carlisle said usually these things happen where there is a young girl who is sick, or half crazy, or something." She laughed. "So I told him Nancy certainly wasn't either sick or crazy; and Ruth may not be so awfully well, but she's over forty and perfectly sane, and cook's fifty if she's a day!"

Doctor Greeding, in a sudden startled interest, asked in a careful tone: "Did Professor Carlisle offer any explanation of these phenomena?" His pulse, absurdly, pounded.

"Oh, he says there isn't any," she assured him. "He says such things probably don't really happen; that they're imagined, or faked, or something. Pictures can't just fall off walls, of course; and fires don't start by themselves."

He nodded vigorously. "Of course not," he agreed. "All nonsense!"

But he had a sudden, vivid memory of a sultry summer day, a day in haytime. Himself a small boy in the mow, stowing away the hay as it was tossed up to him, his nostrils full of choking dust, stifled, miserable. He hated the work, the barn, the hay; he wished furiously for any manner of rescue from this toil. And suddenly there was smoke in the air, and flames about his feet, and he leaped down out of the mow —and had need to work no more that day, but only to watch the barn burn merrily.

Mrs. Greeding's voice went on, an undercurrent to his thoughts: "Things don't just fly around for no reason."

And he said, surprisingly uneasy: "Of course not! All those yarns are pure fraud, or superstition, Myra! Old wives' tales! Or trickery! That sort of stunt is the stock-in-trade of professional mediums; but Houdini demonstrated that he could achieve, by natural physical means, every effect the mediums produce. He exploded the whole fake!"

"I know he did," Mrs. Greeding assented; but she added with inconsequent and maddeningly logical stubbornness: "And of course I don't believe in them—in mediums. But the fact that Houdini could do such things by trickery doesn't prove that others couldn't do them by spiritualism, does it, Ned? I mean, just because I can tip a chair over with my hands doesn't prove that you can't tip it over by just looking at it!"

He said harshly, feeling himself accused, a sudden clutch at his throat: "I, Myra? Nonsense! I don't pretend to any psychic powers!"

"Of course not!" she cried, "I didn't mean you. I meant—anyone.' And she added: "Professor Carlisle says there are so many things which couldn't happen, and didn't happen—and yet they did happen!"

"Tosh!" he protested.

"Well, anyway," she declared, "I wish this poltergeist, or whatever it was, would put my statuette back together again."

Doctor Greeding did not like this conversation. It struck too close home. He turned into their own drive with deep relief.

At the door of her dressing-room Mrs. Greeding kissed him good night. "Now, don't worry about that poor man who was killed, Ned," she insisted.

He smiled ruefully, and he said: "I know it's absurd, but—I do feel responsible. I think I'll check up, find out whether his family is left in straits."

She said fondly: "You'd carry all the world's burdens on your shoulders if you could. Good night, my dear."

Till she slept she could hear him moving about in his room next to her. He had, in fact, no inclination for sleep. In pajamas and dressing gown, he sat for a while trying to read, but the book failed to hold him . . . It was of course absurd to suppose that his own wish could have caused that man's death; and yet Doctor Greeding was disturbed. There were emotions which poisoned a man's soul and his body too, could it be possible that hate and anger might sometimes be like deadly shafts projected into the world?

He himself was almost immune to these passions; he prided himself on this fact, and he thought regretfully of his anger of a while ago. So, seeing the cause of it, he remembered Nancy, and the problem she presented. There was a new kindliness in Doctor Greeding tonight. Of course, he decided, if Nancy truly loved Dan, he would not want her to marry Jerrell; yet she might be led to weigh the one man against the other, might make for herself the wise and sensible choice.

It occurred to him inconsequently that if Nancy married Dan, Mary Ann would become like a member of the family; and that prospect had attractions. But his thoughts in the end returned to the dead man, and to the broken statuette; and he remembered at last what Mrs. Greeding had said about this absurdity of poltergeists. It was an absurdity; and yet he wished suddenly to be informed on the subject, and with this purpose in mind he went downstairs to select as the only ready source of information a volume of the encyclopedia.

Nancy came home while he was there, met him in the lower hall.

Abstraction Descended on Him Like a Cloak.

She exclaimed: "Why, Father! Still up?"

He put his arm around her, proudly kissed her. She was beautiful, straight, slender, young and strong.

"I wasn't sleepy, Nancy,'" he confessed. "Came down to get a book."

She looked at the volume under his arm. "The encyclopedia! That will put you to sleep, certainly."

"Theater tonight?" he asked.

"Yes," she agreed. "With Judith Plank."

He said quizzically: "That's not the same Judith Plank with whom you played tennis this afternoon."

"Judith?" she repeated in astonishment, forgetting her mendacity; and then suddenly she remembered, and her cheeks were crimson. She retreated from him, white and startled; turned and ran up the stairs. He had only meant to tease her; but by her flight his almost-forgotten anger was a little revived.

"Nancy!" he called. She stopped, half turning. "You mustn't ever lie to me, Nancy," he said sternly.

She hesitated, facing him doubtfully; but after a moment she descended to meet him ascending. On the step above him, she said appealingly:

"I'm sorry, Father. I—a girl—" She laughed in confused dismay. "Well, a girl instinctively wants to keep some things secret," she confessed happily.

And before he could speak, she added: "You're right. It wasn't Judith, this afternoon. It was Dan Carlisle. When you asked me who was here, we'd only just found out that we love each other! That was why I—fibbed to you!"

Doctor Greeding touched her shoulder affectionately, guarding his tones. "No reason why you shouldn't tell me and your mother, is there?" he asked quietly.

"I was afraid you wouldn't—"

"Never be afraid of me, Nancy," he urged. "You'll always find me on your side."

"Then you don't mind my—loving Dan!"

"I mind your being afraid of me." He kissed her again, and he added judicially: "As for Dan, I hardly know him, Nancy. Bring him around more often. Let your mother and me get acquainted with that young man." And he suggested: "After all, there's no hurry. You and he will want to treasure this new happiness in secret for a while."

Then, before she could either assent or demur, he said: "Good night. It's late, my dear."

She hugged him warmly. "You're sweet!" she whispered. "Good night, Father!" And ran up the stairs.

He followed more slowly; and in his own room, the door closed behind him, he stood fixed and rigid, frowning. But in the end he dismissed Nancy for the present from his mind, and opened the volume he had brought upstairs.

CHAPTER III.

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Next day Doctor Greeding was not his usual self while in the operating-room. Ordinarily he worked without conscious effort, smoothly and swiftly; but today each procedure required a conscious concentration.

Doctor Mayhew, his assistant, observed this; and Miss Rimes, the surgical nurse, likewise felt it, and reacted to Doctor Greeding's tension by a definite failure in her usual efficiency. Once when without looking toward her he reached for dissecting scissors, she offered him the knife instead, and the point punctured his glove, so that he had to change.

Such accidents had occurred before; but today Doctor Greeding was in no case to meet the incident equably and calmly. Fortunately the skin was not even pricked; yet many a surgeon had lost a finger, or a hand or an arm as easily as this; and he told Miss Rimes so, in dry, cutting tones.

Even while he spoke, he realized suddenly that he disliked Miss Rimes intensely. She was an efficient nurse; but he recognized now that she was a dark, unlovely woman. He had never before thought of her except as an automaton; and his physical distaste for her lent an unintended heat to his rebuke.

She made no defense; but afterward in the corridor he saw her talking with Doctor Mayhew; and there was a hint of tears, of hysteria, in her manner. So Doctor Greeding belatedly repented his heat; and back in his office, he summoned Doctor Mayhew and by way of amends bade him grant Miss Rimes a month's full-pay vacation.

Doctor Mayhew suggested doubtfully: "I'm afraid, after her mistake this morning, she may feel this is a reproof!"

"Not at all," Doctor Greeding insisted. "It is simply that I think she is overworked, tired."

But the other man persisted in his view; and Doctor Greeding reluctantly summoned Miss Rimes and in Doctor Mayhew's presence made amends.

"I owe you an apology, Miss Rimes," he confessed. "I was tired this morning, nervous, and I blew off steam at your expense I'm sorry."

She assured him, eagerly: "I was clumsy!" But when he spoke of the vacation he proposed that she should take, she protested: "Oh, I can't just now! With Miss Johnson ill, there's no one to handle the work; and I'm not tired, really."

"Nonsense!" he said in fraternal kindliness. "We'll manage!"

After she had left the office, Dr. Mayhew asked "Who will you use in her place? Miss Ryan?"

Doctor Greeding hesitated. He had not considered this problem, but now he smiled in swift appreciation of the fact that luck once more had played his game. But he only said guardedly:

"I have some one in mind. Let it rest for now."

But when Doctor Mayhew was gone, he rang for his secretary. "Will you pnone Miss Mary Ann Carlisle," he directed, and gave Professor Carlisle's name and address. "Ask her to come in and see me, if she can; say I may have some work for her."

An hour later, Miss Carlisle was announced. "Our meeting last night may have been fortunate for us both, Miss Carlisle," he said to her. "I don't know if my secretary told you why I wished to see you?" She shook her head, and he explained: "My surgical nurse, Miss Rimes, has been working too hard. I've given her a vacation, and that leaves us short-handed. Naturally, I thought of you. I believe you said you've had some experience in assisting?"

"Yes," she agreed. "I worked with Doctor Homans."

"His specialty was the brain, of course," Doctor Greeding commented, in no hurry, content to watch her, to go slowly. "My work is more general." He added: "However, a few days will give you the routine, I'm sure." And he smiled. "I'm proposing, you understand, that you come in and work with me."

She said: "I've been doing special nursing; but—I should be glad of a more steady income." She smiled faintly. "As you may imagine, with two rather improvident professors in the family—'

He chuckled. "Naturally." They discussed finances. "Then suppose we try it," he suggested. "If we are both satisfied, there is no reason why you should not stay on indefinitely. Even after Miss Rimes returns. You can alternate with her, and there are a lot of details outside the operating-room which you can divide between you."

She asked calmly: "Shall I start now? Or report in the morning?"

And thus swiftly the matter was arranged. Doctor Greeding drove home that afternoon in his usual easy mind. The tragedy of the day before, he began to dismiss as the coincidence it had appeared to be; he could ignore the formless, terrifying shapes that floated in the background of his thoughts.

So soon as he came home, he asked for Nancy.

"She's gone into the country with Dan," Mrs. Greeding explained. "To some little inn for dinner." She watched her husband doubtfully; but he said, in a disarming tone:

"I saw her for a moment last night when she came home. We had a little talk, Myra. Probably I was wrong to be—dogmatic, yesterday, to play the angry parent. Dan's all right, I expect." He hesitated, conscious of a faint confusion. "As a matter of fact," he said, smiling at his own thoughts. "I think better of the Carlisles than I did yesterday. I even engaged Miss Carlisle to take Miss Rimes' place, this afternoon."

She stared at him, frank doubt in her eyes. "Ned, was that wise?" she wondered. "After all, while she may be a charming dinner partner—"

"Oh, I sha'n't keep her on unless she does her work," he said casually.

"She's entirely too attractive to be a nurse," Mrs. Greeding insisted. "Mary Ann is one of these independent young women, perfectly sure of herself and of everything else; resentful of—conventions."

"You make her sound dangerously fascinating," he said, amused, and touched her arm affectionately. "You've always had the notion some siren would carry me away, Myra. In spite of the fact that none has ever even tried!"

She smiled at him. "Nonsense, Ned. You know I never worry about you, my dear!"

"You never need to," he assured her gently.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Wrote "Fair Harvard" Song

In 1836 Rev. Samuel Gilman, Harvard graduate and a Unitarian minister at Charleston, S. C., wrote the college song "Fair Harvard" for the university's bicentennial celebration. It was written in less than 13 hours before it was sung at the morning exercises on September 8 and is called the noblest college song yet written in America.