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. 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 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. Dr. Greeding is intrigued by Mary Ann, who is a surgical nurse. Mrs. Greeding tells Prof. Carlisle about the destruction of the statuette and he indicates it might have been caused by a "poltergeist," a "racketing, mischievous spirit." Dr. Greeding induces Mary Ann to take a position in his office. Eventually he finds he loves her. Jerrell continues to see Nancy, whose love for Dan is unchanged. The Greedings invite the Carlisles to dinner. Dr. Greeding discusses with Prof. Carlisle the subject of "poltergeists," the doctor telling of some of his own experiences, but attributing them to a friend.

CHAPTER III—Continued

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"I wonder whether it is," Doctor Greeding stubbornly demurred; and he said thoughtfully: "You know, the human body has an infinite capacity to rise to emergencies. If a man loses sight or hearing, his other senses become more acute. If a vein is destroyed, even the jugular, others take up the burden. If fingers are amputated, the thumb redoubles its usefulness. Isn't it possible that in some cases, when a man approaches old age and the impairment of his muscular strength, he may by way of compensation develop such a—power?"

"Old men acquire wisdom," the professor pointed out. "That is weapon enough!"

"But in a primitive society," Doctor Greeding urged, "old men, when their increasing weakness made them a burden to the tribe, would have been eliminated, unless as their strength failed they learned other ways to defend themselves. For instance, to imagine a wound, and have that wound appear—"

And he said, his eyes gleaming strangely: "A man able to do that would be a dangerous enemy."

Professor Carlisle said reflectively: "I expect he would be more dangerous to himself than to others. The world seems to be organized for the general rather than the individual benefit. Probably some counter-force would arise to deal with him."

"Yet it's a fascinating thought," Doctor Greeding insisted.

Professor Carlisle retorted gravely: "I should be inclined to remind such a man that he who eats with the devil will need a long spoon!"

There was something monitory in his tone; the Doctor felt it, and suddenly wary, was silent. Before he could speak again, Mrs. Greeding came to the door.

"You two have been alone long enough," she suggested. "Dan and Nancy have disappeared, and Mary Ann and I are talked dry. Professor, I thought you might care for bridge?"

"By all means," Professor Carlisle assented, and rose so quickly that Doctor Greeding suspected the other man was glad to see an end to this conversation. They settled at the table in the other room, the Doctor and Mary Ann as partners.

But almost at once the telephone rang, and Ruth came to call Doctor Greeding. When he returned, it was with apologies.

"I'll have to break up the game," he explained. "This is a call I can't very well refuse. Up in Kenebunk. An old friend, an emergency." He looked at Mary Ann, smiled. "It's a grand night for a drive, Miss Carlisle," he suggested. "But if you'd rather not—"

"I'll come, of course," Mary Ann assented. "You will want the kit—"

"We'll stop by for it," he said.

Mrs. Greeding protested: "Ned, it can't be necessary to subject Mary Ann to this—nor yourself either. You could send Doctor Mayhew!"

Mary Ann insisted: "Oh, I don't mind. After all, it's my job, you know!"

"I don't know at all," the older woman argued. On the surface there was in her words no more than solicitude for Mary Ann. "Surely your regular work is—"

But Doctor Greeding interrupted. "Tosh, Myra," he said cheerfully. "A doctor's work is never done; and a nurse is just as much abused as a doctor. Come, Mary Ann."

And Mrs. Greeding yielded, though reluctantly. So they were presently upon the road.

CHAPTER IV.

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There was in Doctor Greeding when he set out tonight with Mary Ann a deep intoxication which he rigorously controlled. They took the roadster, and the top was down. The long miles unrolled in a ribbon before their wheels, and the night was jeweled by the headlights of approaching cars. Apple orchards were bright with belated blossoms along the roadside, and the night was warm and fair.

Doctor Greeding drove rapidly and surely, and Mary Ann slipped down low in the seat and relaxed there, her wrap loose about her shoulders, her hair flying in the breeze. He told her the nature of this summons. "The idiot is an old friend of mine, or I wouldn't go," he explained cheerfully. "Some one else could do it just as well, or he could wait till tomorrow. But his wife is alarmed, wants me."

She nodded, and he said in amused irritation:

"The visited us at the lake last summer. I told him then that this operation was inevitable. Tried to persuade him to take care of it; but he's a headstrong old man."

And he added after a little; "You and Dan must come up to the lake sometime. And your father. We've a pleasant place there: an island of our own, a couple of good boats, tennis court, golf near by if you want it, target-shooting and so on."

"I like tennis," she confessed. "Dan and I often play." She spoke sleepily, relaxed and at ease beside him.

"We go up for all of August," he remarked. "You can take your vacation at the same time."

"I hardly rate a vacation so soon," she demurred.

"You've earned one," he insisted. He added, as a saving phrase: "Mrs. Greeding will insist on your coming, I know."

He had, he reflected in a faint astonishment, been near forgetting that Myra would be at the island, had thought only of himself and this girl and Nancy and Dan. In sudden caution, he curbed his tongue, and they were silent for a while. Through Newburyport, and beyond, the road led smoothly on. They drove swiftly. Once he thought she slept, but when he looked at her, she was watching him. Or rather her eyes swung to meet his.

He had never felt so awake, so alive. He grudged the fact that they came presently to their destination, and had a task to do; and he attacked this business in haste, eager to be done and on the road again with her; and Mary Ann became an automaton, supplementing his own hands with hers, anticipating his least desire . . . An hour of this, like machines. Then low-toned conversation with the Doctor, words of reassurance to the patient's wife, instructions to the nurse. So toward two o'clock in the morning they set out on the return to Cambridge.

They had been urged to stay the night, but Doctor Greeding would not. "I've five cases scheduled for the morning," he explained.

On the road again, Mary Ann said: "You might have been wiser to stay. There aren't five cases. There are only two, and Doctor Mayhew could do them."

Doctor Greeding chuckled. "He shall," he assented. "I intend to sleep till noon. But I wouldn't miss this drive home with you."

"I expect a night's sleep would have done you more good," she insisted, smiling as though his words were a jest.

He shook his head, intoxicated, alive; and after a little, he began to talk. He was in a confidential mood; and he found himself telling her about Ira Jerrell and Nancy.

"But don't repeat this to Dan," he warned her. "That brother of yours is so conscientious he might feel bound to step into the background and give Jerrell a clear field. I don't want him to do that. I want Nancy to make up her own mind, freely, between them."

"I know Dan feels he—isn't good enough for Nancy," she admitted, and added loyally: "Personally, I think she's lucky to get him. Dan's a peach!" She looked at him, surprised. "But I didn't know you knew about them?" she said.

"I have Nancy's confidence," he retorted; and she nodded. He continued: "Did I take the right attitude? Would you have said the same? Do you feel that—a girl makes a mistake to marry a man twenty years her senior?"

She was silent for longer than he liked. He looked at her, smiling. "Tell the truth," he insisted.

"Not if she loves him," said Mary Ann at last. She added, almost reluctantly: "Not if there is no—reason why she shouldn't love him." And after a moment she remarked, half to herself: "Sometimes a girl is wiser to choose a proved man. Then she knows what she is getting. Young men may change as they—mature."

"That's Outside the Bounds, of Course," He Commented, Not Smiling.

He laughed in a sudden swift delight; but when she asked why he laughed, he would not tell her. Silence embraced them again, drawing them together; the car ran smoothly. The moon now was low; and Doctor Greeding's eyes fixed upon the flowing road in a sort of fascination. He drove automatically, his thoughts elsewhere.

It may have been that for a moment he slept. But at a certain point where the road forked and their way lay to the left, he kept straight ahead; and where just beyond the fork, this right-hand road turned, he did not turn. The car plunged through a shallow ditch and into the meadow beyond. His foot jammed home on the brakes, and he came to a breathless stop, thrown forward against the wheel. Mary Ann in a heap on the floor of the car beside him.

He was in dismay. "Are you hurt?" he exclaimed. "I'm sorry! I must have gone to sleep!"

She scrambled up on the seat again. "I don't think so," she declared, laughing. "No, I seem to be all here. My eyes were closed. I had no warning—"

"I must have gone to sleep," he repeated.

She touched his hand, on the wheel. "You're so desperately tired," she said gently. His blood, at the touch of her fingers, raced through his veins. "Let me drive. I'm awake now."

He looked at her hand on his, at her. "I'm not tired," he said huskily, breathlessly.

She withdrew her hand, abruptly; but his eyes held hers. He thought that even in the moonlight he could see her cheeks flaming. Then she spoke defensively, laughing, her head high. "Give me the wheel," she insisted. "You men are all idiots—don't know when you're tired. Come!"

He did not trust his voice. Without speaking, he got out of the car and went around to take the other seat. She backed into the road again.

"Now shut your eyes and do go to sleep," she commanded.

He obeyed her; he did shut his eyes. But he did not sleep. It seemed to him he had never been so wide awake before. There may be in the mere circumstance of sharing together even a passing peril something mystic and compelling in its effect on man and woman. For a moment, it might have happened that he and Mary Ann would die together; it seemed to him now that after that moment, their two lives could never take completely separate ways again.

But if Mary Ann had any such thought or feeling, she did not betray it. Somehow she found the proper road again; somehow she brought them back to Cambridge. For all that time he neither spoke nor opened his eyes; but his thoughts were a millrace. Only when she stopped the car did he rouse from his abstraction.

"Can you manage the rest of the way alone?" she asked lightly then. "Or shall I take you home and tuck you in?"

They were, he saw, at her father's door.

"I can manage, of course," he assured her. She alighted; and he got to the ground, and extended his hand.

"Thanks for taking care of me," he said. "I needed some one." Her hand was in his. "Anything might have happened," he confessed.

"But nothing did!" she reminded him, smiling. "Except that it's almost daylight, and we've lost a lot of sleep."

Impulsively, he lifted her hand to his lips; and then he saw the startled light in her eyes, and was quick with a word to make that gesture meaningless.

"This is for a good little girl," he said. "Good night!"

She turned away, quickly, in something like flight—darted toward the house. He waited till she had disappeared, before driving on toward his own home. The car he left at the side door.

Upstairs, he undressed slowly, trying to face and measure this new passion in his life. When he came into the bedroom he and Mrs. Greeding shared, gray dawn was in the windows. His wife roused sleepily; her face was an unlovely mask of cosmetics, her hair awry.

"Ned?"

"Yes, Myra," he said shortly. "What time is it?"

He protested irritably: "What difference does that make?"

"It's ridiculous," she protested, "for you to be out all night. You could have sent Doctor Mayhew!"

He got into his own bed without replying.

"I believe you like this sort of thing," she asserted. "I declare, Ned, you ought to have some sense of your own position."

"Don't talk, Myra," he said sharply. "I'm dead tired. Let me sleep in the morning."

"It's morning now," she reminded him. "And I sha'n't close my eyes again, you may be sure of that. You might have some consideration—" Her voice went on, unheard, till suddenly a word fixed

Cotton Sagged Steadily; But Dr. Greeding Continued to Buy.

his attention. —and driving all over New England with Mary Ann!"

He made no reply; but he was conscious of a rising tide of anger.

He closed his ears to his wife's words, found solace and contentment in remembering Mary Ann—whom incredibly, he loved!

Incredibly; and also with great futility. Doctor Greeding was essentially conventional, accepting the decent standards of his world, abiding by them. No matter what he might feel for Mary Ann, he would still cleave loyally to Myra, so long as they both should live.

Or—so long as Myra should live!

Thus insidiously, as he lay half dreaming, there crept into his thoughts a hideous possibility, one of those monstrous specters which need only to be recognized to be abhorred . . . Yet which, if a man contemplate them long enough, may cease to affright him, may come to wear an aspect treacherously beautiful.

Sometimes, in retrospect, it is possible to say that on a certain day, or even at a certain hour, there occurred in an acquaintance a fundamental change; to recognize that he became from that moment another person, almost a stranger.

There was this summer such a change in Doctor Greeding, but even those who knew him most intimately were not afterward able to fix definitely its beginning. His wife's death, it was sometimes suggested, might have been the cause; but Mrs. Greeding had in fact herself remarked the difference in him, and had more than once spoken of it to Doctor Greeding himself, before she died.

To each of the people who knew him best, this change presented itself in a different guise. Paul Master, through whom Doctor Greeding made his occasional investments, saw it in the shape of a reckless turn to speculation. Doctor Greeding had in such matters always heretofore been willing to hear advice and to be guided by sane counsels; but Associated Cottons was not the sort of security calculated to appeal to a conservative man, and Greeding had always been conservative. When during May and June he steadily increased his purchases of this stock, Master was more and more perplexed and uneasy. Cottons sagged steadily; but Doctor Greeding continued to buy, with a stubborn insistence which Master's best arguments could not shake.

(TO BE CONTINUED)