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. Prof. Carlisle comments: "He who eats with the Devil will need a long spoon." The dinner party is interrupted by a call for Dr. Greeding from a neighboring town. He asks Mary Ann to accompany him. It is late when they finish. She is disquieted when he kisses her hand on parting. Mrs. Greeding upbraids him when he returns home. That summer Greeding becomes increasingly irritable toward his wife.

CHAPTER IV—Continued

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From Mrs. Greeding's point of view, Doctor Greeding altered in the direction of an increasing irritability. He was apt to object to things which hitherto had evoked from him no least remonstrance. Between any husband and wife there grow up certain tolerances, certain acceptances. It had been so with these two. Mrs. Greeding always came downstairs to breakfast, usually in a dressing-gown and slippers and with a lace cap to hold in order her untended hair. Despite her presence, Doctor Greeding always read the morning paper, and Mrs. Greeding always talked to him constantly throughout the meal, content with his monosyllabic replies.

But now, when she did only what she had always done, he might explode: "I wish to heaven you wouldn't talk to me while I'm reading, Myra." Or: "Can't you find time to brush your hair before you come downstairs?" Or: "Isn't a woman wiser to make herself presentable in the morning before greeting her husband?" Or, obscurely: "They've a rule in Surabaya, I have heard, that no one speaks to anyone else before breakfast. It's a good one."

Mrs. Greeding was disturbed; but she was not in the least in awe of her husband.

"Nonsense, Ned," she protested, one morning. "I declare I don't know what's got into you all of a sudden. You object to the things I've done for years."

"Isn't the fact that you've done the same things for years enough reason for wanting to change?" he retorted.

"No, of course not. People our age are old enough to have arrived at a routine."

"Our age?" he demanded, in a rising exasperation. "You appear to think me on the verge of senility."

"I think you're on the verge of being a crosspatch," she said with a wistful tenderness. "Ned, dear, what's the matter with you lately? Tired? Nervous? Are things going badly at the office?"

"Nothing is the matter with me," he assured her angrily. "But you take the typical feminine attitude. If anything rues the placid surface of a woman's life, she decides there is something wrong with her husband. It never occurs to her that there is anything wrong with her."

"I haven't changed," she protested.

"I haven't either," he insisted. "I always did resent your coming down to breakfast frowsy and half-dressed, and gabbling like a hen. But I've kept quiet about it for twenty years."

She said carefully: "I'm glad you did, Ned. It has made the years pretty happy ones for me."

So he knew a grudging contrition for his words, and came to kiss her cheek. "There," he said. "Sorry, Myra. Let me blow off steam on you, won't you?"

"Of course," she agreed, forgiving him completely. "As much as you like, my dear."

Early that evening Nancy and Dan had gone in her car, with sandwiches which she had herself prepared, to have a picnic supper together beside the Cochituate reservoir; they made a lark of it, enjoying the fact that all about them at little distances were other cars, other young folk like themselves who had come here to be alone.

"It makes me feel as though I belonged," Nancy confessed. "I suppose it's common, but I like it. I like to be doing the things all these other girls are doing, riding out here with their young men, and whispering together in the darkness, and making love." She said half-dreaming: "It makes me feel as though I were part of a big thing, a universal thing." She held Dan's hand tightly. "It is big, and universal, Dan: this loving, this mating, isn't it?"

Dan chuckled. "Bless you, yes, I suppose so," he said. "But I like to think it has never happened to anyone but us before. No one here can even half guess how I feel about you," he assured her. "No woman could!" He said, with mock gravity: "In fact, I seriously doubt if even a man could more than vaguely understand the depth, the profundity, the complexity—"

She smiled beside him, pressed her fingers on his lips. "Hush," she bade him. "Those big words are over my head. Just kiss me, my dear; that's something I can understand!"

But in his arms she confessed presently: "Men are different, though, aren't they?" And she asked: "Dan, do you like Father?"

"Like him?" he echoed. "Sure, I think he's a wonder."

"So do I," she admitted. "But I'm scared of him."

"Why?" he protested. "He's been mighty decent to us. I expected him to rave and cuss and—"

She interrupted reflectively: "I think that's what worries me. When he first guessed about us, I know he was furious; but since then, he hasn't seemed to object at all—except to want us to keep it secret and wait. Dan, I have a feeling that he's just waiting for something to happen to separate us; that he thinks we'll quarrel, or you'll find some other girl, or something like that!"

"He'll have a long wait," he assured her loyally.

"No, I'm serious," she insisted. "I'm worried, Dan. He'll stop us if he can. And he's so shrewd and wise." Then, remembering: "He's changed lately. Mother says so, and I see it myself. He always used to be so calm; but now little things upset him. It's like having a stranger in the house."

"I suppose he blows off steam at home," Dan suggested; and he said: "Mary Ann says he never gets upset when he's working, says nothing disturbs him. She thinks he's a marvell" He added, vaguely puzzled: "And she says he's a lot of fun, too—joking all the time, and gentle and kindly and considerate. She likes him."

Nancy shivered in his arms; and he asked: "Cold?"

"No, not a bit," she assured him. "I don't know why I shivered. Just—something."

CHAPTER V

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It was not wholly true that Mary Ann saw no change in Doctor Greeding. She did not confess this even to Dan; yet no woman can be wholly unconscious of the fact that a man's thoughts are bound tight around her.

A day or two after that trip to Kennebunk together, disturbed by her own perception of the developing situation, Mary Ann came to the Doctor to suggest giving up her employment with him.

Jerrell Asked, "How's Nancy?"

"I think Dan and Father need to have me more at home," she said evasively. "To keep the house running smoothly."

He said seriously: "I can understand the need for you there; but there is also a real need for you here."

"You could get some one—"

He spoke directly, with a disarming frankness. "Let's be straightforward about this," he urged. "I know what you're thinking. You're—ill at ease, since our drive together the other night. You suspect that—my interest in you is rather more than professional!"

Her cheeks flamed; and he said with a chuckle: "I suppose that suspicion on your part is not unnatural; but Mary Ann, if it will reassure you, I guarantee that I'm not in danger of falling in love with you."

"Heavens!" she protested, laughing. "I never thought that. You must think me insufferably conceited!"

He shook his head. "Not at all!" You know that I like you. I admire your ability, but I like you personally too. Very much indeed. But you need have no least misgiving, Mary Ann." He added soberly: "And in all seriousness, I do need you here. You are invaluable to me in my work. We can save a good many lives together, you and I."

In the end she did stay. He had, by stating her thoughts in plain words, shrewdly succeeded in making them ridiculous, and so destroying any reason she might have had for leaving him.

But also, she wished to stay. She found in this association with his work a daily pride and wonder. He had a healing magic in his fingers. He did miracles, without apparently realizing that they were miracles. She saw him perform operations which her training told her were well-nigh hopeless; yet the patient proceeded to swift and complete recovery.

Late in June, Mrs. Greeding and Nancy went to the lake to open the house for the summer, and the Doctor was left alone in Cambridge. Mary Ann suggested one night that he dine with them; but Doctor Greeding declined.

"I suspect your father is a little bored with me," he said. And he added: "I'm dining with Jerrell tonight. I hope he will spend the week-end at the lake with me. . . . By the way, when can you and Dan come up there? Sometime during August, say?"

"I know Dan will want to," she assented, added evasively: "I'm not sure, myself."

But he insisted. "You must come. Myra and I like to have young people around. I suppose it makes us feel a bit younger ourselves."

"You're the youngest man I know," she assured him, smilingly; but she did not promise to accept this invitation.

He did dine that night with Jerrell; and Jerrell asked: "How's Nancy? I had no chance to see her before she went to the lake."

"You'd better run up with me over the week-end," Doctor Greeding suggested. "Myra will be glad to have you, and Nancy too, I know."

To this Jerrell readily agreed.

They arranged, before they parted, that Jerrell should accompany Doctor Greeding to the lake Friday night; and at Jerrell's suggestion they chartered a seaplane and telephoned ahead, and when they landed in the open water in front of the island, a boat put off to meet them, Nancy at the wheel, some one beside her. Doctor Greeding with a quick resentment and concern recognized Dan Carlisle. He had not anticipated the possibility that this young man would be here, and regretted it; and when they were in the boat, he said almost curtly:

"Hullo, Dan. Didn't expect to see you."

"I was on my way to the mountains," Dan replied. "Just stopped on my way through."

"I made him stay for dinner," Nancy explained, and turned the boat toward shore.

Mrs. Greeding was on the wharf to meet them. They moved up the path to the house, and Jerrell made appreciative comments. The house was like a Swiss chalet in outward aspect, with a low red-tiled roof. Within, they came into a big living-room that extended to the roof-beams, with a tremendous fieldstone chimney like a column in the center. A balcony ran along two sides of this living-room at the second-floor level, and bedrooms were accessible from this balcony. Doctor Greeding showed Jerrell his room, in the rear on the second floor, then himself returned with Mrs. Greeding to the big south bedroom which they occupied. And when they were alone there, he said to her in a low tone, resentfully:

"You might have used a little common sense, Myra. You knew Jerrell was coming. There was no need of his finding Dan here."

She said defensively: "I was playing bridge, at Mrs. Thurston's, when he telephoned. So Nancy answered and when I got home he was here. After all, if Nancy is going to prefer Dan, she had better find it out before she marries Ira Jerrell, rather than afterwards."

"She'd have too much native decency to find it out afterward," he retorted. "You know, she's my daughter."

Mrs. Greeding chuckled in affectionate amusement. "Darling, of course! You are a model of loyalty, I know. Not many middle-aged wives can be as sure as I that their husbands have never looked around the corner."

"It's not a thing to brag about," he retorted.

"It happens to be one thing I'm proud of," she insisted smilingly. "The fact that you still love me. I shall even boast about it, if I choose."

He said morosely: "I've heard mothers boast about their immaculate sons, when I happened to know that the youngsters were plain devils."

She laughed. "Don't try to pretend that you're fast and loose, my dear," she protested. "I know you too well." And she added, still lightly: "Even if you and Mary Ann—"

He exclaimed: "Myra, for heaven's sake don't start being jealous at your age!"

She hesitated, said then wistfully: "My age is just the age for jealousy, Ned. But I trust you."

"Well, why shouldn't you?" he cried. "What have I ever done—"

"Nothing," she assured him. "Maybe that's why I'm afraid, sometimes. You're too good to be true!"

"After all," he reminded her stiffly, "even if you are ready to think the worst of me, you might have more respect for Mary Ann. She's hardly a — home-wrecker, you know. It's shameful to suggest—"

"There," she protested, laughing almost desperately, "I don't suggest anything except that you have a swim before dinner. Here's your suit."

So he was silenced, and began to undress.

After dinner Dan had to leave. Nancy suggested: "Shall we all go for a boat-ride, drop Dan at the harbor, and then have a run around the lake afterward?"

Doctor Greeding caught his wife's eye. "Take Mr. Jerrell," he suggested. "Ira, if you're a timid man, she'll give you bad dreams. There are some channels around this lake that I won't even tackle by daylight, but Nancy knows them in the dark. You go along!"

"I think I'll go too," Mrs. Greeding decided. "I—"

But Doctor Greeding said: "I want you to look over the bills with me, Myra, so I can have the checks sent out Monday." And when presently the others had departed, he said irritably: "You're singularly dense, sometimes. Jerrell doesn't want to ride around the lake at night with you!"

She seemed about to speak, then held her tongue.

After Dan was gone, the week-end passed pleasantly enough. Nancy and Jerrell played tennis together; they swam; they explored the lake. Sunday on the tennis court Doctor Greeding and Jerrell and the girl shot at targets. Pistol-shooting was the Doctor's pet hobby.

Jerrell proved singularly inept at this pastime. "I'd better stick to fishing," he confessed at last. "I can cast a fly more accurately than a bullet!"

When Doctor Greeding and Jerrell climbed into the plane for the return trip to Boston early Monday morning, the Doctor was well content. Jerrell and Nancy had been together constantly; and when Doctor Greeding said good-by to the girl, he kissed her, and asked in a whisper:

"Like Mr. Jerrell pretty well, Nancy?"

"He's a peach!" she agreed.

Mary Ann had already gone to the hospital when he reached the office; but he met her in the corridor outside the operating-rooms. His smile quickened at the sight of her.

She remarked: "You look rested," and he nodded.

"I am," he said. "Ready to move mountains."

She laughed softly. "Nothing so massive this morning," she replied.

The forenoon passed in a monotonous routine. When the last case was done, he proposed: "come and lunch with me. You can tell me what has been going on."

She hesitated; but then she assented, smiling at her own hesitation. "Very well," she said.

Thomas, Doctor Greeding thought, looked at her in sidelong disapproval, when they came out to the car; and the Doctor frowned in an exasperation out of all proportion to the cause. He named a restaurant which he sometimes patronized.

(TO BE CONTINUED)