DEPUTY of THE DEVIL

By Ben Ames Williams

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CHAPTER V—Continued

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"Do you like Italian food—minestrone, ravioli?" he asked.

"Of course. And I probably make the best spaghetti in captivity," she assured him smilingly.

"That will take some proving," he told her. "They are famous for it here."

But even after lunch she still insisted on the superiority of her own product. "We always have it Thursday nights," she explained. "Maid's night out, you know. Father and Dan devour it by the bale, or bushel, or whatever the unit of spaghetti measure may be."

"I'll come, some Thursday night," he declared, "and give you a chance to prove your claims."

She hesitated, then she said: "Do come! When?"

"This next Thursday?"

She said, half to herself, thinking of appearances:

"Dan won't be there this week; but of course Father will!"

He read her thoughts, and was quick to turn them into another channel. "I saw Dan at the lake," he remarked. "He stopped off for dinner, on his way to the mountains—was there when Jerrell and I arrived."

She smiled "I expect that distressed Dan. He knows Jerrell is—fond of Nancy; and he feels pretty keenly that he hasn't much of anything to offer a girl like her"

"He has—youth to offer," said Doctor Greeding, watching her reaction to this suggestion.

"That's a fairly common asset," she pointed out. "If youth is a man's only capital, he'll soon be bankrupt. I'd rather rely on qualities acquired by years of life and effort, than on the accidental—and fleeting—virtue of youth!"

He looked at her thoughtfully. "You plead Mr. Jerrell's cause pretty warmly," he suggested, an intangible uneasiness awakening in him.

She smiled, said in easy evasion: "Oh, I was just talking abstractions.' Then, abruptly: "It's almost two o'clock We ought to get back."

So they rose; yet he said as a reminder: "Thursday night then. It's settled?"

"Of course, she agreed, and they went out to the car.

Doctor Greeding found himself, during the days that intervened, full of a lively anticipation When at about seven o'clock on Thursday evening he alighted in front of Professor Carlisle's home, he told Thomas not to return. "I'll walk home," he explained. The car moved away and he rang the bell. Mary Ann herself opened the door; but she did not at once bid him enter. He saw that she was flushed and warm, and he said, smiling:

"I can see you've been standing over a hot stove!"

She said in a confused hesitation: "As a matter of fact, it isn't just that I'm—hot, Doctor Greeding. I'm a little embarrassed, too. Hence these blushes." And she explained: "You see, I expected Father to be at home tonight; but there's some distinguished foreigner or other, visiting Professor Middleton, and he called Father half an hour ago, and asked him over to dinner. And Father went."

She added honestly: "He told me to telephone you and put off our spaghetti till some other time."

He said, shrewdly amused and pleased: "But you didn't!" And he stepped past her into the hall.

She confessed, slowly closing the door: "Why, I had it started already and it seemed a shame to waste it!"

"Of course," he agreed. "And now that I'm here, I've no notion of not staying. It's a long time since I've been considered—dangerous. I feel suddenly capable of any impropriety."

She could not well send him away. To do so would only serve to lend importance to the unimportant. So she laughed and said: "Spaghetti isn't very romantic, I'm afraid! Come on out to the kitchen, and I'll put an apron on you, and you can help."

The preparation of supper amused them both; they laughed together and were gay. While they sat at table, they talked at random, and afterward he helped her with the dishes; but when the kitchen was all put to rights, they stood at loose ends, not quite certain what next to do.

"Now if I were a policeman, and you were a cook, or even a second maid," he suggested, "we might walk out together, or go to the movies, or find a place to dance! I feel that something of the sort is almost required of us."

"I think it would be much more comfortable to just sit on the side porch," she decided. "It's dark enough now so you needn't be afraid of being compromised!"

"I don't feel in the least reprehensible, or dangerous," he said reassuringly. "I'm too well fed. Just sitting will suit me perfectly."

They did in fact stay an hour on the veranda together, speaking of commonplace things, but softly; and sometimes silences enfolded them. There were times when words came tumbling to his lips and remained unspoken. They might, despite his effort at self-control, have found utterance in the end; but interruption came, a footstep on the walk in front of the house.

"There's Father," said Mary Ann, and rose to go toward the door.

Doctor Greeding followed her. "I'll say good night," he decided hurriedly. "Time to get along home."

"Not afraid of Father, are you?" she asked, amused; but when they came to the door together, it was Jerrell, not Professor Carlisle, who appeared.

Jerrell's eyes met those of Doctor Greeding, and the two men stared at one another for a moment, equally startled. Even Mary Ann found no quick word. Greeding could read Jerrell's thoughts, could see the other's astonishment and reprobation; and he flushed angrily.

And knew a doubled anger. For—why was Jerrell here? Something like jealousy awoke in him.

Then Jerrell was saying awkwardly: "Good evening, Miss Carlisle. Hello, Ned." And he asked: "Is Dan at home?"

She shook her head. "No. No, he's in New Hampshire; won't be back till Sunday." And then, quickly, to Doctor Greeding: "I'm sorry our phone didn't ring, Doctor. It must be out of order. Too bad you had to come way over here; but I'll be ready at six in the morning."

Doctor Greeding, perceiving that she was protecting him, felt a quick delight. They were thus brought in alliance to deceive Jerrell; and he said readily:

"It's quite all right. I needed the walk. And I'll have Thomas pick you up at six."

Greeding nodded, waiting; but Jerrell made no movement to leave —and Doctor Greeding was by Mary Ann's deception left with no pretext to stay.

His tone was calm as he bid the two good night, but he walked away from the house in a deep turmoil of conflicting emotions. There was a storm of passion in the man—of anger at Mary Ann, for permitting Jerrell to stay thus alone with her, in the empty house. He thought, absurdly, of chiding her next day, of uttering some admonition.

But she might remind him that if his own presence there involved no indiscretion, certainly she could receive Jerrell. This thought, that Jerrell might freely pay Mary Ann whatever attention he chose, swept through Doctor Greeding like a storm; Mrs. Greeding, from that moment became in his thoughts like an iron chain that fettered him and held him bound.

CHAPTER VI

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Doctor Greeding did not sleep that night at all. He was shaken and trembling and perspiring; yet he felt cold, and he pressed his teeth together to prevent their chattering . . .

Man's character is built of many reticences, of an infinite number of self-restraints. He is molded and determined not so much by the things he does as by the things he refrains from doing. Doctor Greeding had so long held himself under discipline that it had become automatic to do so; he had molded himself into a proficient surgeon, into a devoted husband, into a wise and indulgent father. He had come to think of this individual whom he had created as himself, his essential self.

But tonight he recognized the fact that this conventional and respectable individual was not himself, but a mask which he presented to the world. Behind this counterfeit presentment there lived another man, bold and ruthless and passionate, driven by appetite, drunk with desires so long restrained.

He lay sleepless all that night, twitching on his bed like one racked by pain; and at work next day he

Doctor Greeding Did Not Sleep That Night at All.

was somber-eyed and frowning. Even Mary Ann remarked this; she said to him when they were alone:

"I'm afraid my spaghetti didn't agree with you?"

"Oh, yes," he assured her shortly.

She watched him. "I persuaded Mr. Jerrell to stay and eat the rest of it," she explained.

"Ah," he assented in a grim tone.

The girl was disturbed. "I hope you didn't mind my—pretending you were there on business," she said. "I thought you might prefer it so."

He said shortly: "I wasn't in the least ashamed of having dined with you, Mary Ann."

"I was afraid Mr. Jerrell wouldn't understand."

"Was it for my sake alone that you—feared his ill opinion?" he asked, in almost angry challenge.

She looked at him in quick surprise at his tone, on guard, yet also amused. "Oh, of course I've my own reputation to consider, too," she said—and turned quickly away.

He found no further opportunity for speech alone with her that afternoon; and when he left the office, the man was ready to risk any folly in order to see her again, to amend the damage his last word might have caused. Thomas, without orders, took the road to the Lake; but the Doctor ordered him just to stop at the Carlisles'.

Mary Ann was not at home, however. Professor Carlisle himself came to the door; and Doctor Greeding asked for her, his thoughts swift to seek a pretext for this call. Professor Carlisle said:

"I'm sorry; she's dining with Mr. Jerrell. Shall I give her some message?"

Dining with Jerrell? Doctor Greeding shook at that word as though a strong wind blew upon him; but he managed to speak easily. "It's not important," he said. "I was just starting for the Lake, and stopped by on the way; but this can wait till Monday."

Mary Ann could dine tonight with Jerrell, without provoking criticism; and he and Jerrell were of a like age, of an equal stature, both men! The only difference between them lay in the fact that—Jerrell's wife was dead, while Myra was alive!

While Myra was alive! . . . His dark thoughts focused there.

At the last village before reaching the lake, he bade Thomas telephone the island so that a boat would meet them at the landing. The chauffeur pulled up opposite the lights of a drug-store; and Doctor Greeding also alighted, as much because he could not bear inaction as for any other reason. While Thomas was at the phone, he bought a box of candies. Myra liked candy.

"Mrs. Greeding will come to the landing, sir," the man reported.

Doctor Greeding nodded. "All right," he said, holding his tones under control.

The car turned into a gravel road, tortuous and winding, and Thomas drove more slowly now. There were, a hundred yards short of the landing, some public garages, one of which Doctor Greeding kept under rental for the season. At this point he said:

"Let me out here, Thomas. I'll walk down to the wharf. You can put up the car, and we'll wait for you."

So the chauffeur pulled up, and Doctor Greeding alighted. With the box of candy under his arm, he went on down to the lake shore.

The boat approached, its bow light shining red and green; Mrs. Greeding swung it in to the landing.

"Hot in town?" she asked.

"Rotten," he said harshly. "Where's Nancy?"

"At the Frisbies'," she said. "Dan turned up this afternoon, on his way back to Boston, and they've all gone to picnic down the lake, cook supper on the beach."

At this mention of Dan's name, Doctor Greeding thrust the clutch lever viciously forward, and the boat leaped ahead.

"Tired?" she asked, "you seem tired."

"I had a hard week," he agreed. Then they cleared the point of the high terrace built out into the lake in front of the house, and saw the boathouse lights.

He eased the throttle shut; the boat slowed, the broad bow settled down into the water, checking their way. They drifted easily into the ship. He turned off the ignition, and the engine died, and he stepped out on the wharf. Thomas was making the boat fast at bow and stern. He said: "Good night, Thomas."

Mrs. Greeding climbed out of the boat, and they went up the winding path toward the house together.

Doctor Greeding and Mrs. Greeding came to the big empty house. The living-room was lighted, and the billiard-room. Their steps echoed hollowly. She kissed him.

"Would you like some supper—crackers and milk or something, Ned?"

He shook his head. "I'll swim," he said. "I'm still hot from town. How about you?" She never swam at night, and he expected her refusal. She shook her head.

He went upstairs alone, while she stayed below. Then: "Myra, will you bring me my trunks?"

She said, amused: "You're the most helpless thing!" He heard her coming up the stairs, heard her go out on the balcony and so return. She appeared in the open doorway, his swimming-trunks in her hand. He took them.

"I brought you a box of candy," he said curtly. "There on the table."

She was fond of sweets. She loosed the wrappings, opened the box. "Bless you," she said. "You never forget, do you Ned? I know I shouldn't eat them, but—"

She chose a caramel. He buttoned the trunks. She put the piece of candy in her mouth; and mumbling the words, she asked casually:

"Who did you see, this week?"

This trick of hers, speaking when her mouth was full, always exasperated him; it acted now like a detonator on his bottled anger.

"I had dinner with Mary Ann last night," he said, willing to annoy her.

She protested: "Ned, was that wise? It takes so little to start talk."

"Talk! Talk! Talk!" he exploded, his eyes red and wrathful. "I'm sick to death of your talk! I wish you'd—"

She seemed suddenly to choke, as though on the candy in her mouth. The Doctor stared at her in swift dawning understanding. He took one step toward her; then, his face pale, his lips white, while she coughed, strangling, he went abruptly out of the room, down to the little beach where they were accustomed to swim.

He burst into the water with a sort of violence, like a man breaking chains which bound him. He dived and swam under water, far out from the shore.

When he came to the surface, he heard a motorboat approaching. It rounded the point of the island, its exhaust suddenly loud and near at hand. Doctor Greeding swam back toward the beach, to be clear of its course; and a moment later the boat slid past him into the empty slip, and the engine died. As he reached the beach, Nancy, a white shadow in the darkness, came up the path with Dan at her shoulder.

Doctor Greeding's voice was calm and steady as he called: "Hullo, Nancy."

She had not seen him. "Oh, you, Father!" she cried, startled at this apparition.

"Yes." He kissed her, at arm's length, careful not to wet her. "Hello, Dan," he said, and grasped the young man's hand.

"Where's Mother?" Nancy asked.

"She was just starting to devour a box of candy when I came down to swim," he explained, and they went up to the house together.

At once Doctor Greeding went upstairs.

And an instant later he called, from the door of their room up there, in tones of terror and despair:

"Nancy! Nancy! Quick! Come here!"

In the first shock of that desperate alarm, Nancy and Dan stood an instant motionless. Then Nancy ran through the billiard-room toward the stairs, and Dan came in great leaps after her.

The door into the big south bedroom which Doctor and Mrs. Greeding shared was open; Nancy came to the door and saw him bending over her mother, who lay across the bed.

The girl, in her terror, cried meaningless words. Then Doctor Greeding, even while he made automatic efforts at resuscitation, said harshly:

"She's dead, Nancy!"

"Dead?" Her voice was a hollow whisper.

"She must have choked on a piece of candy," he panted. "Open the windows, quick!"

"They're open, Doctor," Dan told him.

Nancy brought whisky in a glass, and Doctor Greeding forced it between Mrs. Greeding's set teeth; it spilled as though out of an overflowing cup. When he saw this he stopped his efforts, and stood erect, looking down at his wife's body, and then at his daughter. He put his arms around the girl.

"Nancy, she's gone," he said brokenly, and held her close. "You'll have to be the steady one, Nancy. You're all I've got left, now."

She stood erect in his arms, no wavering in her; but after a moment, releasing herself, she turned to the bed. Her mother's garments were disordered. She straightened them. Her father helping, they laid Mrs. Greeding's body decently. Then Doctor Greeding drew Nancy away.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Swelled Head, Big Heart

"I has noticed," said Uncle Eben, "dat a man very seldom has a swelled head and a big heart at one an' de same time."