DEPUTY OF THE DEVIL

By Ben Ames Williams

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CHAPTER VI—Continued

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She saw that he was shaking, whisky remaining in the glass, and she gave it to him. "Here," she said, and managed a wry smile. "You need this, yourself."

He drank the liquor, gagging over the fiery draught. "She was all right not twenty minutes ago," he protested, as though dazed. Nancy thought dispassionately that he must be cold, in wet trunks and no other garment.

"Dry yourself, Father," she urged. "Get into some clothes."

She went out of the room, and Dan followed her, took her in his arms. The door behind them closed. She stood in his arms, rigid and unyielding; and he said whisperingly:

"Sweet, sweet, I'm so sorry for you!"

"It doesn't seem real. So—quickly—" She cried: "It can't be! There must be something we can do."

"If there was, your father—" He tried to lead her away. "Come downstairs, sweet. Out of doors!"

His arm through hers, he compelled her gently toward the stairs; but then her father's door opened, and Doctor Greeding appeared, already dressed save for his coat and tie. He said: "I can't seem to think what to do."

Nancy went toward him; and Dan said gravely: "I'll wake the servants—Thomas and the others." He left them together, went down the stairs and along the path.

Nancy made her father come downstairs. They stood before the hearth where—though the night was warm enough—a small fire burned. She came beside him, and his arm encircled her. They stood thus for a long time silent, side by side.

She felt herself outside a wall, felt a harsh barrier between them. His arm burned across her shoulders.

Suddenly he said: "I'm going out, Nancy. Alone. I can't stay here. Ask Dan to do—whatever is necessary."

He freed himself almost roughly, and departed. This departure was like flight. Doctor Greeding fled like a man pursued, out of the house and along the tortuous path through the dark woods. He barked his shins against boulders without knowing it, blundered into trees, still stumbled on.

He went half around the island thus, heedless of anything except the desire to be alone, to hide. Then he came to where the path crossed an open ledge, and paused there, panting, peering furtively all about. Shadows surrounded him on three sides: the dark water slumbered at his feet. The very shadows, and the black water, seemed to his terror-ridden fancy to hide ominous shapes; yet he could brave them.

But when he looked up, he saw the unwinking stars, and could not support their steady scrutiny. He shrank back into the covert of the dark wood and crouched there his head in his arms, trembling and alone, waiting the stroke that must be even now preparing his destruction.

But by and by, since the human soul can by use accustom itself to any agony, he became calm again; reason, stifled at first by fear, lifted its head. He began to contemplate in the clear light of normal minds his situation—and to take hope therefrom.

For none need ever know the truth—since to any sober sense, truth it could not be! He pounced exultantly upon this thought. Truth it could not be! Coincidence, certainly; a black and terrifying coincidence. But nothing more. It would be madness to think otherwise. His wife was dead; and grief must be his portion. But not fear!

And suddenly—his fears thus assuaged—he grieved because Myra was dead, and wept for her, and tears were his easement.

It was hours after his wife's death before Doctor Greeding at last realized that he was free. Terror had ridden him hard, till he put on grief like a seemly garment. But at the end he came to sudden comprehension that he was loosed from the fetters that had bound him. His bonds were broken! He was untrammeled, free!

In a high exultation the man came back to the house at last. He came straight across the island through the shadowed woods. Yet if he had looked up, he might even then have seen, through the foliage above him, the unwinking stars.

Mrs. Greeding was buried in Cambridge, on Tuesday, in the afternoon. It was a hot, sunny July day, with no breeze to stir the heavy foliage of the trees that shaded the scene. Nancy would always remember, at some distance, the hiss and murmur of cars passing along the nearest street; the far whisper of the heedless world.

Dan and Mary Ann and Professor Carlisle and others were there. Among them, Ira Jerrell. Nancy did not at first discover him; not till they all turned away, and her eyes cleared, and she could look around. Then she saw him near her father, saw him clasp Doctor Greeding's hand. When presently she and her father were in the car again, Doctor Greeding said:

"I asked Mr. Jerrell to drop in for a while, Nancy."

She nodded indifferently. They came home together, and she went for a moment to her room. Doctor Greeding stayed downstairs.

When she heard Jerrell arrive, heard their voices in the library, she descended and appeared in the open door, hatted and ready to depart. Doctor Greeding looked up in surprise.

"Going out, Nancy? Best stay with us."

She met Jerrell's eyes straightforwardly and frankly. "I won't be gone long," she said. "You've Mr. Jerrell for company."

She took the little roadster and drove rapidly, as though anxious to make her escape before something happened to detain her.

She was strongly drawn toward Dan—she felt this deep attraction more keenly than ever before; but also she was thrust toward him by some force behind her, by some thing intangible which her instinct had discovered in her father's mind. In his grief and loss she should have been drawn toward him to comfort him; but she recognized, honestly, that there was in her no genuine solicitude for him. Rather, her instinct bade her avoid him, avoid the neighborhood of his influence and control.

She found Mary Ann and Dan together, and Dan kissed her, and Mary Ann too. But Mary Ann, with a wise understanding, said smilingly:

"Take him away somewhere, Nancy. You don't want me around, you two; and I've nowhere to go, and people may come in. Go along with you."

Nancy nodded. "Yes, I do want to be with Dad," she said.

Once they were alone, she was for the moment content; and without speaking, she drove on and on.

He said, later: "I suppose you and your father will go back to the Lake soon."

"Not right away," she told him. "I won't go till he can. I wouldn't want to be there alone. Not with Mother—down here." Her tones were husky; she said: "Father starts his vacation next week-end. He may want me to go away somewhere with him; or he may want just to go to the Lake. He loves it there. I'll do whatever he wants."

Dan nodded. "It's a grand place," he assented.

"If we go up there, Dan," she decided, suddenly near panic at the thought of being alone with her father, "you must come up. I can't be alone with him. I'll miss Mother so."

He said doubtfully: "I've had about all the vacation I ought to take."

"I'll need you dreadfully, Dan," she said, and he cried:

"God knows I'll need you, Nancy! Always!"

She turned off the highroad into a byway; the road degenerated till there were only wheel-ruts in the sand. They passed through an oak wood which closed like a screen behind them, and she stopped the car at last on a turfed slope, fragrant in the slanting sun.

Nancy stopped the engine, and locked at Dan; and he leaned toward her, held her for a moment close and tenderly.

They descended from the car. On the firm turf, she lay at length, her arms across her eyes, in the full beat of the sun.

He sat down beside her. After a moment she looked up at him, and her eyes drew him down. He said, huskily: "Your lips are trembling."

"I'm not—trembling, or afraid, or doubtful any more, Dan," she whispered. "I know what I want."

His eyes were troubled. She covered her eyes with her arm again, and spoke slowly and carefully.

"I won't argue with you, Dan, my dear," she said. "I've made up—our minds." Her lips smiled faintly. "No need of going over the same ground again and again and again. Of course, we will wait—a little while, for Mother's sake. But waiting will be hard, and it mustn't be long, because the world is settled, for us. No matter what you think, you're going to marry me."

He Said Huskily: "Your Lips Are Trembling."

"We'll be deadly poor," he confessed. "I've nothing but my salary—never will have."

"Dan, my dear, you're so commercial," she reproached him whimsically. "A body'd think you were bent on marrying money."

He said, laughing with a deep delight: "You're as obstinate as—"

"I'm not," she protested "I'm not obstinate. It's only obstinate when you insist on doing the wrong thing; so you're the obstinate one!" Her arm reached up and drew him nearer. "Don't be so strong and stubborn, Dan."

He whispered, stammering and breathless: "Nancy, you'll have me—drunk with your sweetness, in a minute. Let me keep my head."

"I want you drunk, and quite mad, and wholly irresponsible," she insisted. "I don't want you to keep your head." Her arms were tight around him. "Dan, Dan, I want you with me, to fight with me, to stand with me, to hold me."

"I am holding you, Nancy."

"Never let me go," she whispered.

And she said: "I want it settled, finally, and absolutely, and always and forever, between us, Dan. Do you hear?" And she cried a half sob in her tones: "Oh, it's only so that nothing can happen, so that I can stand up to Father, and so that I can cling fast to you, Dan. No matter what he says, or does." Her eyes questioned him. "Dan, you mustn't argue, and find reasons, and think of obstacles, ever any more. Promise?"

He agreed helplessly:

"Anything, Nancy. Yes. If you're sure."

"I want to count on you always."

"You can."

She said soberly: "This is as binding as anything any minister can ever say over us, Dan."

The sun was low, sinking swiftly now; and a light breeze began to blow, as though approaching dusk shepherded the hot afternoon air away before it. They stayed awhile, watching the purple flood that flowed across the marsh; and it grew cooler, and Nancy said at last, in a tone of surprise:

"Dan, my dear, I'm hungry!"

"It's dinner-time," he assented, laughing at her. "Why shouldn't you be?" Their voices were rich and husky.

It seemed to them the essence of perfection to eat hamburger sandwiches at a lunch-cart on the way home, where two truck-drivers ate beside them and discussed the day's ball-game with the cook. Yet afterward they were reluctant to go on, and it was late when Nancy brought Dan at last to his own door.

She would not come in. "I don't even want to see Mary Ann tonight," she said.

He spoke soberly. "Nancy, there's one thing: Jerrell's a good man, and a fine man. And he's been mighty nice to you. You must tell him, Nancy."

"Why?" she asked curiously. "I will, of course, if you think so, Dan. But why?"

"No man likes to find himself in the position of making love to—an engaged girl," he explained. "It makes him ridiculous; and Jerrell's too much of a man for that."

"If he doesn't want to be ridiculous, he shouldn't make love to a girl half his age," she protested mischievously.

Dan insisted: "I like him, and respect him. Nancy, you do it."

She said demurely: "Who am I to oppose you, Dan, my dear? I'll do exactly as you say." She urged then, happily: "But let's not tell anyone else, till we're ready to be married the very next day!"

He nodded. "All right. But I'd like to shout it."

"I'd like to sing it, darling," she whispered. "Kiss me now." He did. "And good night. Tomorrow night, Dan?"

"All the tomorrows," he promised.

CHAPTER VII

Doctor Greeding decided that he would go to the Lake for his vacation, just as he had planned. He said to Nancy, "I think your mother would want us to," and he explained: "I shall do some work. I've papers to prepare. Miss Carlisle can get the data together and bring the material up to me."

Nancy nodded, and he added: "She's a very capable girl, Nancy."

"Oh yes," she agreed. "Yes, Mary Ann's fine."

"I've never worked so well as since I took her on," he said. "She—" He spoke of details, till it occurred to Nancy, incredibly, that he protested overmuch. She said at last, faintly disquieted by his reiterations:

"You don't need to praise Mary Ann to me, Father."

He flushed, and then he laughed. "Fine," he said. "I'm glad you won't mind her being up there with us."

"I'll ask Dan too," she said. "So that I'll have some one to play with while you and she are working."

He hesitated. "I don't know whether that's—wise, Nancy. So soon after your mother's death."

She did not urge the point, assuming that when the time came, Doctor Greeding would be more complaisant.

She was, during these days, and despite the steady undercurrent of her aching grief, quietly happy and content, with a sense of security and peace in the certainty that she and Dan would never be parted. Her interview with Jerrell had been easier than she feared. He heard what she had to say without surprise.

"I guessed that long ago," he said smilingly. "Young lovers are—transparent. I knew it, perhaps, before you did." He said gravely: "I think you know how much I wish happiness for you."

"Yes," she assented. "I think I do."

He smiled. "If Dan were not before me," he confessed, "I might have dreamed some absurd dreams myself, despite my age."

"I've never thought of you as old," she told him gently.

The intervening days till their departure for the Lake passed like leaves on the wind. Nancy noticed once or twice that her father read with a frowning attention the financial pages of the newspapers. She herself had no interest in such matters, but she spoke of it to him. "I thought you seemed worried," she remarked; but he answered irritably:

"I'm not. Please allow me to attend to my own affairs."

Yet as a matter of fact, Doctor Greeding, though he denied it to Nancy, was worried, and with cause. His reckless venturing had involved him more deeply than he could bear to contemplate; and in the end, in a sort of desperation, he went to Jerrell, telephoning for an appointment. "I want to discuss some investments with you," he explained.

When he came to the other's office, Jerrell greeted him with a smile. "Surprised me to have you phone," he confessed. "I didn't know you were interested in stocks."

Doctor Greeding hesitated. "Well, I'm not, seriously," he declared. "But I did take a flyer in Cottons, as a result of some of our conversations. I notice they're not doing well, and I'm wondering whether to take my losses, or hang on." He tried to laugh. "Matter of fact, I went in pretty deep."

Jerrell said gravely: "The whole market has been weak, and it's never wise to fight the narket; so we've let Cottons sag, waiting for the turn." He tapped his desks with the end of his pen. "What is the extent of your commitments, Ned?"

Greeding hesitated; but in the end, with a sort of shame, he named the actual figure. Jerrell's astonishment showed in his eyes.

"You should have asked my advice," he said irritably. "Before—this. What do your holdings average?" he asked; and when the other told him, he sat in silence for a while. Then he smiled, as though in decision, and relaxed in his chair.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of fact, I expect Cottons will touch that figure this week, Ned. When it does, you'd better unload." He hesitated, then thrust the telephone toward Doctor Greeding. "Put in an order to sell at your price, G. T. C.," he directed.

Doctor Greeding took the phone; but he looked his doubts. "You're sure it won't go higher?" he asked.

The pen tapped more sharply. "Ned, man get out with a whole skin and consider yourself lucky," Jerrell bade; and there was something like scorn in his tones.

So Doctor Greeding called Paul Master and gave the order, then turned to Jerrell.

"You have put me heavily in your debt, Ira," he said slowly. "If I can ever repay you—if there's anything you want of mine—" And he suggested, not looking at the other man: "Why don't you come up to the Lake sometime in August? Nancy and I will be there. I have some medical work to do with Miss Carlisle."

Jerrell smiled, shook his head. "You don't owe me anything, Ned," he said patiently. "And—neither does Nancy. But I may come."

(TO BE CONTINUED)