

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, an assistant 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.

CHAPTER II—Continued

"He's a pauper, always will be. Or the next thing to it."
 "Do you think that makes so much difference, Ned?" she urged gently. "And after all, isn't that Nancy's business?"
 "I won't have it," he insisted. "I shall make it my business."
 "It's possible, you know," she reminded him gravely, "that you can't do anything about it. Nancy has a will of her own, and an income of her own, later, apart from you. From my father."
 He said tensely: "Myra, what's got into you? You've always stood shoulder to shoulder with me."
 "You've always done things I could agree with, and support," she replied. "But I think you would be wrong to oppose Nancy, if she loves Dan, without a better reason than the fact that he has no money. After all, his family is fine."
 And she urged: "Finish dressing, Ned. We must go."
 He started to speak, then held his tongue. He returned to his own room for vest and coat; and when he came back, she was ready.
 "Twenty minutes past seven," she said. "We're supposed to be there at a quarter of, and it's half an hour's drive."
 He said: "The others will be late. Wait." He had decided to

He cried: "I—" But she touched his arm.
 "Hush," she protested. Some one knocked at the door, and she opened it. Ruth was there.
 "Thomas wants to know will you want him to drive," she said in a resentful tone.

Doctor Greeding shook his head. "No, I'll take Mrs. Greeding's car," he answered shortly.
 And Mrs. Greeding, before Ruth could turn away, keeping the servant near as a shield between them, touched his arm. "Come, Ned," she said. "We'll have to hurry."

So they went downstairs together. . . .
 He drove headlong, some of the fury in him communicating itself to the car. The Jordan home was in Winchester; and Doctor Greeding came to the Fellsway and turned in to it to escape the slower traffic on the avenue.

Mrs. Greeding protested uncertainly: "Ned, you're driving awfully fast."

"You don't want to be late," he retorted harshly; and she shrank away from him.

A traffic-light halted them; and when it changed to green, the car beside them leaped ahead and cut in front of Doctor Greeding. His brakes ground to avoid a collision; and the offending car darted away. He said through clenched teeth: "The rat! I hope he breaks his neck!"

The other car was no more than a hundred yards ahead of them. Doctor Greeding heard like an echo of his words a loud explosion, and saw the other automobile lurch drunkenly to the right against the curb. It tilted up and over, and came down crashing. They were so close behind it that he had to jam his brakes hard down to stop in time.

Other machines penned them in, and instantly there was a small jam of traffic, and a motorcycle officer swept to the scene.

Mrs. Greeding cried: "Ned, he must be hurt! Go see!"

Doctor Greeding got out of his car. His legs were stiff, yet shaking. His shoulders jerked convulsively. His brow was wet and cold. There was in him an incredible certainty hideous and horrifying, and yet in some dark fashion intoxicating and full of promise too.

He went forward to where the policeman had dragged the driver out of the wrecked machine. The man lay limp, motionless.

"I'm a physician," said Doctor Greeding briefly, and the policeman gave way to him. Doctor Greeding made a swift examination.

Then he stood up and brushed his hands; he spoke in a voice scarcely recognizable as his own.

"Nothing to be done. His neck is broken, Officer."

The man was dead. He was a middle-aged man, a little shabby. His was an inexpensive car. It was crushed and battered, now, fit only to be junked. The man, fortunately, had been alone. Doctor Greeding, looking down at him, felt terror and contrition—and a dizzying sense of power!

The policeman asked at large: "Anyone see what happened?"
 Doctor Greeding cleared his throat, steadied his voice. There was no more anger in him; but rather a quick caution.

"He was driving very rapidly," he explained to the officer. "He passed us at the last traffic-light, and cut in on me pretty sharply. Drunk, do you think?"

"No smell of booze on him," the policeman replied. "His front tire blew out when he hit the turn. I guess that's the answer." He produced his notebook and took Doctor Greeding's name and address, then turned to the others who had pressed around.

Doctor Greeding, at the first opportunity, returned to his car, took the wheel and moved away. He said nothing; but Mrs. Greeding watched him, saw his deep distress.

"Was he killed?" she asked.
 The Doctor nodded. His brow was moist, his tones shaken. "Myra, his neck was broken!" he said unsteadily, and tried to laugh.

"That makes me feel—curiously guilty, almost responsible!"
 She touched his hand reassuringly. "Ned, dear, don't be absurd!"
 "I feel as though I'd wished it on him," he admitted.

"You're perfectly ridiculous," she urged loyally. "He was driving like an idiot. It just happened to happen right before our eyes."
 "Poor devil!" Doctor Greeding muttered; and she looked at him in a secret astonishment. It was not like her husband to be thus senselessly disturbed; and she sought to turn his thoughts into another channel.

"You'd better hurry, Ned," she reminded him. "We're late already!"

So he drove on in silence; but he could not so easily dismiss this tragedy from his mind. Common sense told him that this was no more than one of those incredibly apt coincidences which occur in the life of every man, yet something

deeper than common sense, something rooted in the very base and foundation of his soul, cried out against accepting such a simple explanation. He was trembling and shaken with a vast and perilous excitement, like one who stands before a closed door, long locked, in which now the key is fixed, waiting only for him to turn it, and open the door, and enter in.

Suddenly his hands wavered on the wheel, so that Mrs. Greeding caught and steadied it; and she cried sharply:
 "Ned!"

"It's all right," he said huskily. "I'm upset, that's all." And he added: "I've a mind to turn around and go home. I don't feel like seeing people."

"Nonsense!" she insisted. "It's what you need."
 "Oh, I suppose so," he assented.

But she watched him thereafter with an alert attention, till they came to their destination, where other cars were already parked, and alighted and went in. On the way up the walk to the door, she held his arm, her eyes full of solicitude, till he smiled at her reassuringly.

"I need a cocktail," he said. "That will pick me up."

And in fact, once in the house, greeting a dozen people in succession, he was swept out of his own distracting thoughts. He gulped a cocktail and another, and felt new strength flow into him. In the drawing-room he recognized, standing with Mrs. Jordan and two or three others by the hearth, Professor Carlisle, who was young Dan's father. The professor was a small, lean, gray old man with clear blue eyes; and Doctor Greeding, with an impulse to cultivate the other as a possible ally against Dan and Nancy, crossed to speak to him.

As he did so, a young woman by the professor's elbow turned to watch him approach; and Doctor Greeding unconsciously paused as he saw her countenance. She was tall, her glance serene and steady.

As though she marked his hesitation, there was a faint amusement in her eyes; but after that momentary pause, Doctor Greeding went on, and Mrs. Jordan welcomed him into the group and made introductions.

"You know Professor Carlisle, Doctor Greeding? And Mary Ann? I've put Miss Carlisle beside you at dinner, Doctor, so you can talk shop as much as you please!"

He shook hands with Professor Carlisle and with the girl. Mary Ann's hand in his had a strength which pleased him. He found her deeply, stirringly beautiful. At Mrs. Jordan's word, she smiled again; and Doctor Greeding echoed: "Talk shop?"

But before Mary Ann could reply, Mrs. Jordan swept her away. Doctor Greeding and Professor Carlisle were left together. Doctor Greeding said casually:

"I've met you once, of course, Professor; but I didn't know you had a daughter too."
 "Professor Carlisle smiled fondly. "She doesn't—circulate as much as Dan does," he assented. "She's a registered nurse—takes her profession rather seriously."

"That is apt to be a—sporadic occupation," Doctor Greeding suggested.
 "She was Doctor Homans' surgical nurse until he died," Professor Carlisle explained. "But since then—"

The exodus toward the dining-room began. Doctor Greeding found himself placed at Mrs. Jordan's right, Mary Ann on his other side. Mrs. Greeding was at the other end of the table, beside Professor Carlisle.

The effect of the cocktails the Doctor had taken began to pass, and memory of the tragedy he had witnessed so short a time ago returned to disturb him. By and by he heard Professor Carlisle at the other end of the table utter a word at once strange and vaguely familiar.

The word was poltergeist. It touched some chord of memory in him, and he tried to hear what the other was saying; but Mary Ann just then released herself from the man beyond her, and smiled and suggested:

"We don't actually have to talk shop, I suppose, Doctor Greeding; but we ought to say something to each other!"

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. Greeding 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 sil-

ly, 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 racking 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 in 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."
 Till she slept she could hear him moving about in his room next to hers. 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 kindness 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. 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."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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"He's a Pauper, Always Will Be."

speaking. "I want to tell you something. Ira Jerrell asked me to lunch with him today. He wants to marry Nancy."

Her eyes widened. "But Ned, he's as old as you are!" she protested.
 "Two or three years younger," he corrected. "And I'm no old!"
 He was fighting to control the fury in him.

"Oh, Ned," she protested. "In twenty years he will be an old man; and she—"

"He won't live twenty years," Doctor Greeding said explicitly. "I operated on him, you remember. He comes of a short-lived family, and he himself has a heart weakness, latent now, but bound to develop. He won't live twenty years; and when he dies, he will leave Nancy still a young woman, and wealthy enough to—"

Her cheek was pale. "Oh Ned, that's horrible!"
 "It's sensible!" he insisted.

She stared at him in amazement. "Ned, sometimes I can't understand you," she confessed. "There's a hard, ruthless streak in you. Most of the time you're gentle and loyal and fine; but—I'm afraid of you myself, sometimes."

His lips were tight with rage. "I'm finding out a lot of things about myself," he exclaimed, and he laughed unpleasantly. "It's queer you never noticed them before."

"You've changed lately," she admitted.