

DEPUTY of the DEVIL

By Ben Ames Williams

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WNU Service.

CHAPTER VII—Continued

He stared at her; and suddenly he demanded: "Nancy, how far have things gone between you and that young man?"

"Dan and I are — going to be married, Father." She realized suddenly that the issue postponed till this hour was joined now. If there were ever to be opposition on Doctor Greeding's part, the time for it was come. And she added, to placate him: "Of course, not right away. But — soon, Father!"

He met her announcement with a composure she found in some fashion alarming. "Sure of your ground?" he asked calmly. "Sure you want him?"

"Sure as sure!"

He said gravely: "Dan can't take care of you. I'll talk to Dan. He'll see my point of view."

Something shook her; some dark fear beset her. "You sha'n't!" she cried defiantly; and then, seeing his frown, already repentant: "Oh, Father, can't you see that he and I have to be the ones to decide?"

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "You're too young to decide anything!"

And then, urgently: "Nancy, don't you realize that Mr. Jerrell wants to marry you?"

"He doesn't!" she denied. "I know!"

"You know nothing, Nancy," he retorted, in a deep exasperation. "You're a witless child. I tell you, Mr. Jerrell—" He checked himself, spoke more calmly: "Ira has spoken to me, Nancy," he said urgently. "He came to me, like an honorable man, to ask what my attitude would be. Yes, he wants to marry you. And Nancy, he is my good friend. I am under many obligations to him."

She was afeared now with a deep anger, and cried in furious scorn: "You mean you want to use me to repay him?"

Her wrath warned him to caution. He spoke in the tone of one who reasons with an unreasonable child. "I mean only that I think you ought to treat him with ordinary courtesy," he said. "The courtesy to which a strong man's devotion entitles him. I only ask that you defer any decision until you have had time."

She was cold, trembling. "I'm sorry," she said. "I can't pretend!"

"Can't? You mean that you won't!" he corrected stiffly.

"I mean I won't, then!" she asserted.

There was silence. Then he said, half to himself, in a hushed tone: "It might be better for Dan, and for you, to be a little reasonable!"

She cried, in a quick terror: "Father, you mustn't try to scare me! That isn't fair!"

He looked at her for a long moment with eyes she had never seen before; then the flame in them died, and he managed a wary laugh.

"I'll talk to Dan," he said. "He has some common sense."

"You sha'n't say anything to Dan!" she exclaimed. "You can't scare Dan. Or me!"

And he reassured her with words. "I'm not trying to scare you, dear. Just to talk some reason into that stubborn little head of yours. You and Dan are in love, swept away, lost to all sensible considerations."

She backed away from him, and her hands raised as though to push him from her. "No, no," she cried in a whisper; and then, desperate, seized on a reckless expedient: "You can't do anything to stop us. It's too late!"

His eyes widened in shock and then in wrath. He was over the net in one bound. He gripped her arm like a vise, dragging her toward him.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I mean we're married!" she cried. "Let me go, Father! We're already married. So it is too late, you see!"

He stood for an instant motionless, his eyes probing hers. Then he asked in curt incredulity: "Where? When?"

Her wits, paralyzed by an unreasoning fear of him, found no ready answer. She evaded the direct inquiry.

"And even if we weren't," she cried, "Mr. Jerrell doesn't want to marry me! He's in love with Mary Ann!"

As though he had been struck in the face, he released her. He recoiled from her, and his countenance was black and terrible. She pressed her hands to her eyes to shut out the sight of him.

"Father, don't!" she pleaded. "Don't look like that to me!"

She heard him mutter hoarsely: "So!" Then terror whipped her so that she turned and ran, in stark panic, down the path and away.

But Doctor Greeding stayed where he was; and after a moment the chaos of his thoughts settled in a simple, inevitable pattern. Jerrell and Mary Ann! Jerrell and Mary Ann! He remembered small incidents, forgotten words, each one trivial, yet in their sum enough to

confirm the truth of what Nancy had said. Jerrell and Mary Ann! But if Nancy had been free, Jerrell would never have turned to Mary Ann. And Nancy would have been free, but for Dan.

Dan! On this rock his plans were shattered, then.

Then he walked calmly toward the house. He went to his room and opened a drawer in the bureau, and took from its holster the pistol there.

CHAPTER VIII

Nancy that night did not come down to dinner. She could not bear to face her father. That mask of anger which she had seen upon his countenance left her sick and shaken with a fear she could not name. She stayed in her room, sent word that her head ached.

At dusk from very weariness she slept, and dreamed and woke cold and terrified; and thereafter she lay wide-eyed in the darkness. After a long time she heard her father getting up and then he opened the door into her room.

Entering, he said gently: "Awake, Nancy? Feel better now?"

His tones were soft and reassuring.

"Yes, Father," she murmured.

He sat down on the edge of her bed and touched her hand. "I came to tell you I'm sorry, my dear," he said, smiling, his tone humble.

"Forgive me."

She whispered piteously: "You mustn't ever scare me, Father."

He repeated: "I'm sorry. You're all I've got now, Nancy!" And he urged, pleading in his own defense: "But since your mother died, my nerves—"

"I know," she confessed. "I understand." There were sudden tears in her eyes; she loved him and pitied him. "I do understand. And I didn't mean to—defy you, Father. Only, Dan and I—"

He asked quizzically: "Are you two youngsters really married?"

She shook her head. "No. I just said that because I was desperate. I was—fighting for everything I want, Father. We're not, no." She added quickly: "But we will be."

"I know," he assented. "And I know you would—do as I wish, if you could. But I know that love can be too strong for a girl, for a woman." He added, watching her: "For a man, too."

"Yes," she said gravely.

He laughed in an abashed fashion. "I'm in a confidential mood tonight, Nancy. Don't—blame me, too much; but you know, men—even men of my age have sometimes thoughts, dreams, hopes they can't control." And he asked slowly: "Do you understand what I'm—confessing, Nancy? What dreams I'm telling you?"

She whispered: "Yes. I think I've guessed before."

"Do you blame me, terribly?"

She pressed his hand. "Poor Father," she whispered.

He bent to kiss her brow. "But of course," he said ruefully, "since she and Jerrell—" He left the sentence unfinished. "So I've only you, Nancy." And: "Sleep sweet," he bade her. "Good night."

"Good night, Father!"

The door closed behind him, and darkness wrapped her close. But not terror now. His magic had worked its miracle. She was at peace.

She slept till full dawn, and woke refreshed; her father joined her for a swim and breakfast afterward. The interminable morning somehow sped. Dan and Mary Ann would arrive on the noon train, and Nancy insisted that Doctor Greeding come with her to meet them. It was a fifteen-minute run in the fast boat to the landing by the station. . . . Nancy kissed Mary Ann, kissed Dan only with her eyes; and then they went down to where the boat was moored, Dan and her father carrying the bags, stowing them in the after cockpit. Her father took the wheel, Mary Ann beside him; and Nancy and Dan sat just behind. In a moment they were in the open lake; and Nancy leaned secretly to Dan, to kiss him.

Her father said with a chuckle over his shoulder: "You two showed an admirable restraint, to wait so long." His tone was amused and kindly.

Dan was startled, and then he laughed. "Nancy has told you about us, then, sir?"

"Of course."

"Nancy held tight to Dan's arm; and the young man said: 'I want to talk to you about Nancy, while I'm here.'"

Doctor Greeding chuckled. "This brother of yours has a fine old-fashioned courtesy in him," he told Mary Ann. "Not many young men trouble to consult the girl's father, nowadays."

Mary Ann smiled happily. "Dan has been very well brought up," she agreed.

"I know I can't give her—" Dan began, but Nancy pulled him back to her side.

"Nobody asked you," she said in

crisp, amused reproof. "Don't always grovel, my dear. It bags your trousers at the knee. Now pay attention to me."

They were at lunch when the telephone rang, and Thomas took the call. "Mr. Jerrell, sir," he reported. "He will be at the landing in half an hour."

"Thank you, Thomas," Doctor Greeding assented.

He was watching Mary Ann, saw that her eyes were brighter, her cheek faintly tinted. She felt his scrutiny, and asked disarmingly: "Mr. Jerrell? Is he coming?"

"I'm afraid you and I won't get much work done over the weekend," Doctor Greeding confessed. "Dan and Nancy will be—absorbed in each other, I suppose, so we must keep Jerrell entertained."

"We'll go meet him," Nancy volunteered. "Dan and I."

But her father shook his head. "Nonsense! Mary Ann and I will do that." And when presently they rose from the table, he said: "Nancy, you and Dan perforate a few targets. We'll join you after we fetch Jerrell." He asked Dan: "Ever try pistol-shooting, Dan?"

"Some, yes," Dan confessed. "I used to belong to a club. I rather like it."

"I'll take you on for a round," Doctor Greeding offered. He chuckled. "Jerrell tried it, when he was last here; but he's hopeless. We'll give him a lesson." He spoke to Mary Ann. "By the time we get to the landing, he'll be there."

Nancy said, half laughing: "Do we have to shoot targets, Father? Dan and I might rather—just take a walk or something."

"I know you would," he told her good-humoredly. "But there'll be a moon tonight; much pleasanter for—walking. Do as I say, my dear."

He led Mary Ann away toward the boathouse. Nancy looked at Dan

with a grimace, amused, perplexed. "I suppose we have to humor him," she confessed.

Dan caught her close. "Say, when he's been so decent, I'd spend the afternoon standing on my head if he asked me to."

She stood silent, frowning, intent, as though listening. "What is it?" Dan asked. "Hear something?"

Nancy shivered in his arms. "No, no. I felt—it's funny, but I felt cold." She freed herself, caught his hand. "Come, we'll get the targets and things," she said.

Jerrell was on the wharf when the boat pulled alongside, and he reached down to shake Doctor Greeding's hand, and across the Doctor to Mary Ann. Doctor Greeding saw their glances meet.

Then Jerrell's bags were in; they were away. Returning along the shore of the island, they saw Dan and Nancy on the court, screened by the intervening trees; and the girl waved to them.

"We're having a shooting-match this afternoon, Ira," Doctor Greeding explained. "Dan says he's a good shot, and Nancy's fair. I know you're rotten, but we'll teach you the rudiments, give you a handi-cap." And he asked Mary Ann: "Have you ever tried it?"

She shook her head. "Oh, no."

"Mary Ann and I will be the gallery," Jerrell proposed. "You'll never make an Annie Oakley out of me."

"You'll be surprised," Doctor Greeding assured him. "After I've given you a tip or two."

"I'm much more likely to shoot some perfectly innocent bystander," Jerrell demurred.

"No fear," Doctor Greeding promised. "We'll all keep out of the way, keep behind you." He brought the boat to the landing with an expert hand. "Thomas will fetch your bags," he said. "Leave them. We'll go on up to the court."

Jerrell urged: "See here, Ned,

you and Dan do the fireworks. Mary Ann and I—"

But the Doctor was so insistent that Jerrell had in the end to submit, or by an outright refusal seem ungracious. "You act as if this were life or death, Ned," he protested, amused and yet annoyed, too.

Doctor Greeding nodded. "It's my hobby," he assented, laughing. "I suppose I do ride it hard."

There was in fact a strange urgency in the man. He shepherded them up the path to the court like a dog nipping at their heels, and Dan and Nancy met them there, and Nancy proudly showed her father a target with bullet-holes close grouped in the center.

"Here's Dan's very first, Father," she boasted. "You never did as well in your life!"

Doctor Greeding chuckled. "All that I need is some competition," he declared. "You'll be surprised!" Dan had the pistol in his hand, and Doctor Greeding took it from him and turned to Jerrell.

"But first, Ira, you give us a horrible example," he suggested laughing. "Show us how not to do it!" He looked up the court, and saw that there was a fresh target on the frame; he examined the pistol. "Here," he said. "It's ready. All you have to do is point it at the target and pull the trigger."

There was an unreality about what so swiftly followed. Jerrell was driven like a sheep. Reluctantly he took the weapon in his hands, thoroughly ill at ease, handling it gingerly.

"I don't know anything about these things," he protested.

"You don't need to. Just point and pull," Doctor Greeding insisted. "Go ahead! Aim at the black spot on the target. Hold the pistol so the fore sight is just in the middle of the notch in the rear sight. Then press the trigger slowly, till it fires!"

And Jerrell, after a moment, differently obeyed. A splinter flew from the edge of the batter-board.

Greeding laughed. "Six feet wide, Ira! Don't you see the target, man?"

Jerrell, hoping to finish this ordeal, hurriedly tried again, and then again. But his shots were wild. Between shots, Doctor Greeding coached him, showing him how to stand, how to hold the pistol, how to press the trigger; but Jerrell at length lowered the weapon, turned aside, shook his head, laughing uncomfortably.

"That's enough," he insisted. "It's not my game."

He had swung halfway around, facing them; and Doctor Greeding cried quickly: "Look out, man! Point that thing somewhere else!"

Jerrell stared stupidly at the pistol in his hand. It was in fact leveled at Doctor Greeding's body. He dropped the muzzle. "Sorry," he said. "I thought I had it pointed at the ground. You can see I'm not to be trusted! Here, take it."

Doctor Greeding chuckled, and received the weapon from Jerrell's hand. "Wait a minute. Don't give up yet," he persisted. "Let me show you how it's done!"

He fired rapidly, two or three times. "There," he said. "Like that! Now Dan, go put up a fresh target, will you? Ira's got to score one hit, at least, before I let him off." He took the empty magazine out of the pistol and turned to Jerrell. "Try it without actually shooting," he suggested, and pressed the weapon into Jerrell's hands. "Maybe you're flinching, afraid of it. Just aim, and snap the trigger!"

Dan had gone obediently toward the other end of the court to fix a new target on the frame. Jerrell protested half angrily: "Ned, I don't want to shoot, I tell you."

But Doctor Greeding still insisted. "Don't be an ass, Ira. If you can make the stock-market sit up and beg, you ought to be able to point a pistol at a target. I'll stand behind you, see whether you're aiming properly!"

Jerrell was flushed and furious, yet it was impossible to refuse without actual offense. He lifted the weapon and faced the target yonder; and Doctor Greeding said, behind him: "All right, now go ahead."

Jerrell pointed the pistol in the general direction of the other end of the court; but as he did so, Dan, his task concluded, turned and saw him and cried quickly: "Hey, don't aim that thing at me!"

Nancy had been watching Jerrell, sorry for him because her father pressed him so tactlessly, but also puzzled by something in his countenance. She saw his lips compress, and veins on his forehead swell as though he were engaged in an actual physical struggle. But when Dan called his protest, she looked that way.

Her father, here at Jerrell's shoulder, said reassuringly: "Don't worry, Dan! Gun's empty!"

And then—the shot, in the still air of mid-afternoon, rang loud and startlingly. Nancy saw Dan, in the very act of moving to one side out of line with the pistol's muzzle, clasp his middle with both hands and slump quietly forward on his knees. He bowed down and fell, a little on his side, very quietly.

There was something terrible in that quietness.

Nancy, just before the shot, had been watching Jerrell, puzzled by the contortion of his countenance with its suggestion of violent physical effort, and at the same time sorry because he must submit to her father's urgencies. But at the sound of Dan's voice she looked toward him, just in time to see his garments flick and twirl at the bullet's stab, before his hands caught at his body and he went down.

Nancy was standing a little to one side, near Mary Ann; and when Dan fell, she remained a moment motionless, all her senses in suspension, unable to think or move, able only to see.

She saw Dan lying there so quiet on the ground and she saw Jerrell staring incredulously at the pistol in his hands. She saw her father turn to Jerrell, leap toward him, snatch the weapon away. He cried out, furiously:

"You clumsy fool! Give me that gun!"

Then some one brushed her shoulder, spinning her half around. It was Mary Ann, darting past her, running to where Dan lay.

Nancy was still too dazed fully to understand. This was one of those occurrences which the mind cannot quickly grasp.

Now Nancy felt at first neither grief nor fear. She knew that Dan lay yonder on the court, but her only emotional reaction to the fact was annoyance. She went toward him, saying aloud:

"Dan, don't pretend! You're scaring me!"

Mary Ann, already by his side, kneeling there, looked up quickly over her shoulder at the girl; she said gently:

"He's shot, Nancy!"

Doctor Greeding and Jerrell came toward them; and Jerrell said hoarsely:

"The gun insisted on pointing at him. I couldn't drag it away—" His tones were hollow and flat. "It was as though some one had hold of it," he insisted, in a stubborn, dazed bewilderment.

Doctor Greeding said icily: "It was pure clumsiness, Ira."

But Mary Ann spoke to him. "Doctor Greeding," she called. She was crisply insistent. "Never mind blaming anyone now. Here, quickly!"

Nancy moved aside to let her come at Dan. He knelt there, but he shook his head. "He's dead," he said.

Mary Ann said sharply: "He's not, either! See!"

"Not dead?" Doctor Greeding exclaimed. There was in his tone incredulous surprise like dismay. He stared at Mary Ann. "He must be!" he muttered; and his eyes were wide, glassy, staring.

Mary Ann shook his arm. "No! What's the matter with you, Doctor? Quick! He's still alive!"

"But I tell you—" Doctor Greeding insisted.

"Look at him!" she exclaimed. Then, more sharply: "Look at him! Don't stare at me!"

And after a moment he did turn his eyes from her to the man here on the ground.

Then Nancy saw Dan looking up at her, his lids half closed. He grinned. "All right, Nancy," he whispered.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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