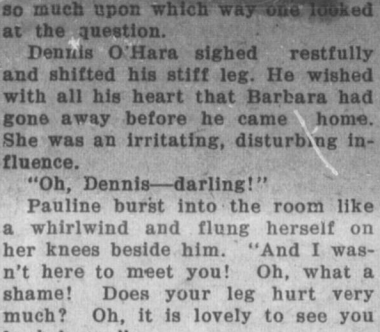


THE OTHER MAN

by RUBY M. AYRES

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so much upon which way she looked at the question.

Dennis O'Hara sighed restfully and shifted his stiff leg. He wished with all his heart that Barbara had gone away before he came home. She was an irritating, disturbing influence.

"Oh, Dennis—darling!"

Pauline burst into the room like a whirlwind and flung herself on her knees beside him. "And I wasn't here to meet you! Oh, what a shame! Does your leg hurt very much? Oh, it is lovely to see you back home."

Her arms were round his neck, and she was kissing him rapturously; even his coat came in for a share of attention.

"Steady—my dear child!" Dennis glanced over his wife's head to where Barbara stood, but she had calmly turned and walked out of the room. He gently put his wife from him. "You'll have the maid in the room in a minute," he protested.

She sat back on her heels and looked at him with dancing eyes.

"Aren't you glad to be home? Isn't it wonderful? Oh, Dennis, I could go mad with joy."

"I shouldn't do that, if I were you," he said comically. He took her hand and pressed it. "Of course I'm glad to be home. Stornaway brought me in his car. I asked him in, but he wouldn't come."

"Wise man! I suppose he guessed we should like to be alone, as it's so long since you were here."

Dennis dragged himself to his feet.

"Confound my leg! Wonder how long it will be before I can walk decently. By the way, Mrs. Stark tells me she is clearing off to-morrow."

"Yes. I wanted her to stay, but perhaps it's as well—I shall have you all to myself." She snatched his hand and kissed it.

"Baby!" Dennis said, smiling. "And what about tea?"

"It's coming now. I'll go and see." Pauline rushed away, and Dennis limped over to the window and looked out at the little garden.

Very tidy and neat, very suburban, he thought, and wondered why it had never struck him: that light before. Life was inclined to be humdrum—at least, his life was!

Outside in the hall he heard Pauline's happy laugh, and he checked his wandering thoughts with a firm hand.

"Ungrateful devil!" he apostrophized himself and turned to greet her as she came in. What more could one desire in a wife? She was loving and pretty and charming, and yet—

"Doughnuts for tea!" she said gaily. "You see I remembered how fond you are of them."

Dennis allowed her to install him in a corner of the couch, submitting with a good grace to be kissed before she gave him his tea.

"Where's Barbara?" he asked.

"She's just coming in. I think she thought we might like to have a little while alone," Pauline said.

"Oh!" Dennis frowned. He wished that he could cure Pauline of her sentiment.

Barbara came into the room.

"Do I intrude? I'm just dying for tea. No, please don't get up Mr. O'Hara."

"Why don't you call him Dennis?" Pauline asked. "Mr. O'Hara seems so silly and formal."

"Well, if he doesn't mind," Barbara said with a charming smile.

"Delighted," Dennis mumbled.

"No doughnuts for me," Barbara said. "I have to consider my figure."

"Barbie! when you're as slim as a willow," Pauline protested. "Oh, dear—what is it?"—for the little maid had appeared at the door.

"Very well, I'll come."

She put down her cup and left the room. "Domestic cares, you see!" she said archly to Dennis.

There was a little silence when she had gone.

Dennis spoke suddenly. "Are you really afraid that one doughnut will spoil your figure?"

Barbara laughed. "Not one, but one might be the thin end of the wedge to other things that would."

He frowned. "Such nonsense! You've got a beautiful figure."

What the devil had made him say that? "I beg your pardon," he muttered sullenly.

"Not at all," Barbara's voice was quite serene. "It's a great achievement to have extracted a compliment from you."

"The truth is not a compliment." "I think it is from you."

"Many thanks," Dennis said grimly. "By the way, I feel that I ought to apologize for smashing you up."

"Smashing yourself up, you mean." "Well, you hurt your wrist. Is it better?"

"Nearly well, thanks. I've had massage. It's been a very small inconvenience. I'm an idle person, you see, with nothing to do."

"Better for you if you had."

She looked at him with wide eyes.

"Oh, why?" she asked.

He met her gaze squarely. "It would keep you out of mischief."

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FIFTH INSTALLMENT

SYNOPSIS: Pauline, sentimental, trustful, sincere and loving love, becomes engaged and marries Dennis O'Hara in the belief that their blissful happiness will continue unchanged thru all the years. On her wedding morning she awakes with a strange premonition that maybe love does change, a thought buried in her mind by a letter from her closest friend, Barbara, the night



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before. Pauline adored Barbara who had been married, was the mother of a child which died, but now divorced and living a life which some of her friends could not understand. Between Dennis and Barbara is a seeming wall of personal dislike by both. Six months after Pauline's wedding, Barbara comes for a short stay. During this visit Barbara confesses to Pauline that there is a man she really loves, but she refuses to tell his name. . . . Barbara decides suddenly to go home and Pauline insists Dennis drive her to the station. Irritated, Dennis drives recklessly, and they are in a crash. Barbara escapes injury but Dennis' leg is broken. As he returns to consciousness he learns who the man is that Barbara loves. It's himself. Dennis spends several weeks in the hospital. Barbara returns to stay with Pauline, but on one pretext or another fails to visit Dennis with Pauline at the hospital. Pauline plans highly for Dennis' return home.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

Pauline was only too ready to obey. This headache fitted in nicely with her scheme of things. It seemed providential when, about half-past three, she peeped into Barbara's room and found her still fast asleep.

She was all ready to meet Dennis—one of the doctors was bringing him home in his car, a man named Stornaway, with whom Dennis had struck up a great friendship.

It would be so wonderful to have him at home again. The moments seemed to drag. Everything had gone perfectly, the house looked a picture, so Pauline thought with pride as she wandered about, unable to settle to anything.

The little maid came to her breathlessly.

"Oh, please, madam, the fruit hasn't come for dinner, and it's early closing day. What shall we do?"

Miss and maid stared at each other aghast; then Pauline said firmly: "I'll go round to the shop myself. There's plenty of time before the master comes. She went on her

rand with cheerful readiness, almost running down the garden path.

It was the slamming of that gate that woke Barbara; she started up, conscious of having long overslept, and glanced at the clock beside her bed—half-past three!

"Heavens! What waste of a lifetime." She bathed hurriedly, dressed and went downstairs; her headache had not gone, and she felt a little heavy and depressed.

The little maid heard her in the hall and came from the kitchen.

"Can I get you anything, madam?" Mrs. O'Hara said I was to go up presently and see if you were awake."

"I'll have some tea, please," Barbara was at the door of the drawing room. "Why, what lovely flowers!" she said. "Are we expecting visitors?"

The maid giggled. "The master, madam! He's coming home! It was to be a surprise, and—oh, dear, I believe there he is, and the mistress out! Oh, dear, what will she say, not being here to meet him! It's long before his time, too."

She heard Dennis' voice and the pleasant voice of another man.

"No, I won't come in, thanks. You've seen enough of me during the last month. Some other time. Don't overdo it, now—good-bye."

A moment, and Dennis was in the hall. He did not look ill except that he was thinner and walked with a stick. The little maid was greeting him excitedly.

"I do hope you're better, sir. It's nice to see you home, I'm sure."

"Thanks."

Barbara waited for him to ask for Pauline. But he did not—he came across the hall unassisted, slowly and with some difficulty; then he saw her.

Barbara went forward coolly. "Welcome home," she said. She gave him her hand. "Pauline will be disconsolate. She has just run out for a moment. Oughtn't you to sit down? There's a fire in the drawing room."

"Thanks," Dennis' voice was rather grim, but he gave his coat to the maid and followed Barbara into the drawing room. When he was safely ensconced in the armchair he looked up at her.

"You came off better than I did," he said. "Is that wrist a memento?"

"Yes, but only a sprain." Barbara waved her bandaged wrist in the air to show what little damage had been done. "Will you have tea, or shall we wait for Pauline?"

"How long will she be?"

"Not long. I think she has gone to the shops for something they forgot to send."

"Why didn't you go with her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Only that as you refused so steadily to come and see me all these weeks I thought I should probably find you had run away."

Barbara laughed lightly. "You would have done, if you had come to-morrow, as you originally intended."

"You did not want to meet me?"

"Oh, no. I merely had a previous engagement."

Dennis' eyes darkened. He had thought about this woman more than he cared to remember during the past tedious weeks, and he had looked forward to seeing her with a queer sort of pleasurable anticipation.

Was it in a dream that she had kissed him and implored him to speak to her? Looking at her now he was sure it must have been.

But the memory of her lips on his was real enough.

Dennis looked at Barbara's lips artificially reddened, and felt ashamed. Thank God, Pauline never made her face up—no rouged cheeks and darkened eyes. Almost angrily he contrasted the two women. Pauline with her simplicity and wholehearted devotion to himself, her interest and happiness in the small things of life, her pride in her home, her loyalty and sweetness—and then Barbara Stark!

O woman of the world, spoiled and insincere. A poseuse who had been taught by an unhappy experience, no doubt brought about by herself, that life was a bitter jest and that faithfulness and loyalty were nonexistent. And yet once—just for a moment—he had seen a glimpse of the real woman hidden beneath all the veneer of artificiality; or had that been the sham and this the real woman who stood before him now, cool, unruffled, almost insolent in her self-possession.

"Oh, my dear—Dennis—Dennis—speak to me."

Perhaps he had dreamed those words, perhaps they had been the conjuring of a semiconscious mind, founded on the thing that Pauline had told him—"She does love someone—frightfully!"

Was he the poor devil, then—or the lucky man? It all depended

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