

THE OTHER MAN

by RUBY M. AYRES

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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 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. . . . Barbara stays only

one day after Dennis' return from the hospital. Much against his will Dennis finds a new attraction in Barbara, who plays the same cool and detached role as formerly. NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY.

"That's very unkind. What mischief am I in? I've never done you any harm, have I?"

"I should never give you the chance," he answered grimly.

Barbara laughed, a cool laugh of amusement. Then she moved away from the fire and sat down on the couch. "Well, to-morrow I shall be gone," she said with a little yawn.

Dennis fidgeted. "Where are you going?" he asked rather jerkily.

"Home—you must come and see me some day. Get Pauline to bring you," Barbara said with a faint mockery, "if you don't care to come alone."

He turned round, looking at her squarely. "Do you imagine that I am afraid of you?" he asked angrily. Barbara opened her eyes wide; they looked very dark, like deep pools of still water. "My dear man, what a question! Of course not."

"That's fortunate," he said, "because I've never been afraid of a woman yet, and I'm not likely to begin now."

Brave-sounding words? When in his heart he knew that he was more afraid of Barbara Stark than he had ever been of anyone in his life.

Barbara left on Friday morning by the first train.

"There is no need for anyone to get up and see me off," she told Pauline. "If the maid will bring me some toast and a cup of tea—that's all I want. I'm catching the nine something."

"It used to be Dennis' train," Pauline said reminiscently. "I know it's wicked of me, but I'm so glad he can't go back to business yet. It will be heavenly to have him all to myself for a little while."

"A second honeymoon," Barbara said lightly. "Well, make the most of it, but not too much of him."

Pauline's eyes clouded.

"I wish you wouldn't always say things like that; it just spoils everything. Of course, I know you think love doesn't last, but—"

"It depends whose love," Barbara interrupted. "But why argue? We can only speak of life as we find it. Run along to bed, but don't tell Dennis I am leaving early." Pauline repeated Barbara's words to Dennis and was surprised at the anger in his eyes.

"That woman's always sneering at me," he said angrily. "I'm damned if I'll have it. I'll get up and see her off."

His wife looked disappointed. Like all women of her type, she loved to make a fuss of a man; she would have been perfectly happy to keep Dennis bedridden for another month. It would have been bliss for her to wait on him. But secretly she rather admired Dennis for showing Barbara he was not a mollycoddle.

They had just finished breakfast when Barbara came downstairs.

"Oh, good-morning my children!" she said benignly.

"Have you got everything packed?" Pauline asked. "I know you're so forgetful. I'll just run up and look round your room." She clattered away upstairs, happily assured that she was doing the right thing and looking after her departing guest in the proper fashion.

"You're an early bird," Dennis said.

"Yes!" Barbara did not turn round from the mirror, "I've got to catch the worm, you see."

"Isn't that rather hard on Bar-net?" Dennis asked maliciously. "I hear from Pauline that you are lurching with him."

"He's not the particular worm I was referring to," Barbara said coolly. She turned round now and met his gaze steadily. "You don't look in the least like an invalid, you know."

Dennis half rose from his chair; "Look here—" he began impulsively, then he stopped as Pauline came clattering downstairs again.

"You've left a handkerchief and a pair of bedroom slippers and a comb," said Pauline all in a breath. She plumped them down on a chair.

"Where's your dressing case? They'll all go in," she said. "And the taxi's at the door. I do wish you weren't going. When shall I see you again? Come down soon, won't you, if you can stand such a quiet couple."

She liked to think that she and Dennis had been married for years; she was sure he was happy and satisfied to be alone with her as she was with him. She would have been bewildered if she could have seen into his mind at that moment. Barbara gave Dennis the tips of her fingers in farewell.

"Good-bye. Get well quickly," she said, and was gone.

Dennis went back to his seat at the breakfast table. He could hear Pauline's affectionate farewells and adjurations to come again soon.

Something in him badly wanted to get up and go to the window to see the last of her, and something else kept him sitting unwillingly where he was. Before they turned the corner of the street Barbara leaned out of the window and looked back at the little house with its shining windows and dainty curtains. Pauline still stood in the doorway, waving her hand, but it was not for her that Barbara looked.

Jerry Barnet met Barbara at New York. He was a square-shouldered, cherry soul, with a loud laugh and an absolute gift for making a hash of things. He boasted rather proudly that nothing ever went right for him.

"Born under an evil star," he would chuckle. "Well, it's all in the game of life, I suppose. Awful."

He had failed in business and failed in marriage, and at the moment was keeping his head above water and having what he called a "bon time" because his father had recently died and left him a considerable sum of money. "I shall lose it all, you see if I don't," he told Barbara cheerfully. "The only hope is for you to take me in hand and look after things a bit."

Barbara raised her delicate brows. "My dear man. What would your wife say?"

He grinned. "She'd say what she always did, I suppose—'Jerry, you're a damned fool!' Not so sure she's not right, too."

"Thought you were never coming back," he told her, as they drove away in his car. "Gave me an awful turn when I heard about that smash. Supposin' you'd been killed. Awful!"

"I got off with a sprained wrist. Dennis O'Hara was badly hurt, though."

"So you said in your letter. Rather nice chap, isn't he? Friend of mine—Stornaway—knows him very well; doctored him, didn't he?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"He likes him—said he felt rather sorry for him, too."

"Sorry for him?"

"Yes, unhappy marriage, isn't it? Like the rest of us—eh? Awful!"

Barbara paled a little. "My dear man," she said calmly, "Dennis O'Hara has only been married six months, and his wife is a great friend of mine, charmingly pretty, and she adores him."

"Dare say she does; it's generally one-sided," Jerry agreed, unabashed.

Barbara looked ahead of her down the busy street; there was a little smile on her reddened lips—rather a wistful smile.

It was nearly a fortnight later that Pauline wrote that she and Dennis were coming to town.

Barbara was breakfasting in bed, with blinds drawn against the bright morning sunshine because her head ached.

She had had what she called a hectic time since her return to town—late nights, and too many cocktails, and too little sleep.

She had dashed off a short note to Pauline thanking her for her hospitality and hoping Dennis was progressing favorably, to which Pauline had replied at her usual length of four closely written pages.

"I adore waiting on him, of course," she wrote, with many underlinings. "But, poor darling, he hates being ill, and he isn't quite a saint over it. Still, I don't mind anything as long as he gets well."

Barbara had not answered. There seemed nothing to say—besides, she had been too busy racing about with Jerry Barnet, turning night into day and getting herself talked about.

She opened Pauline's second letter with a yawn, but after the first glance she sat up and read intently.

Darling Barbara

I have some news for you which I hope you will be pleased to hear, though I am not sure whether I am pleased or not . . .

Barbara's face hardened. "Going to have a baby I suppose," she told herself cynically. With an effort she turned again to the closely written pages.

We are coming to New York for a fortnight's holiday. The doctors say Dennis must not go back to business yet. You can imagine how amazed I was when he suggested coming to town and doing some theatres and things! Can you imagine it? He said he thought New York would do me good. We are coming next Wednesday, and are staying at the Albion. It's quiet and not smart, but it's central, isn't it? and not far from you. I hope you are in town, and not thinking of dashing off anywhere just yet. Den-

nis has told me to get some new evening frocks, and gave me quite a big check. I shan't spend it till I come to New York, of course, so you can go with me. Your taste is so much better than mine. Dennis is so much better and walks quite well. I am sure you will think he has made a wonderful recovery. I asked Dr. Stornaway if he thought it was the right thing for Dennis to go to New York, and he said, "Let him do what he fancies." So, of course, there was no more to be said. Anyway, I shall see you—I have such a lot of things to tell you, darling.

Barbara laid the letter down and closed her eyes. Somehow she was not at all surprised. Experience had taught her that people—especially men—did the most unexpected things.

Wednesday! and today was Monday. Well, she must have a look

at her wardrobe and furnish it up a bit. She stretched out a languid hand and rang for Mrs. Mellish—a quiet little widow who looked after the flat.

"My bath, please," Barbara said briskly. "Oh, and get Mr. Barnet on the 'phone."

She got up and went over to the mirror, jerking up the blind as she went. Sunshine, warm and beautiful, fell all about her, and with a sudden incongruity she wondered why on earth Dennis wished to come to New York.

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