

THE OTHER MAN

by RUBY M. AYRES
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FOURTEENTH INSTALMENT

It was a happy evening, and yet—nothing was settled. It was like going round and round in a circle. Dennis thought savagely when they were back again in Barbara's flat and she was telling him it was time to go. He looked at her as she took off her wrap, and suddenly he said, "Are you ever going to choose between us all, Barbara?"

She turned. "What do you mean?" He laughed unhappily. "Well—there is Barnet and your husband and myself—we all want you."

The delicate colour tinged the whiteness of her face.

"But I only want one of you, Dennis. You know which one."

He answered doggedly, "That she could have him if she wished."

"You have bewitched me, Barbara. I seem to be nothing but desire for you. I can't—God forgive me—even be sorry for Pauline. He went close to her and looked down at her with passionate eyes. "Let me stay, Barbara. Something seems to tell me that if you send me away tonight I shall never come back. Oh, my dear—don't you love me well enough? If I'm willing to throw everything away for you—"

"But—are you willing?" she whispered. "Isn't it only just for tonight, because we are alone? And tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow may never come."

She turned away, and for a moment there was a breathless silence. Why did she hesitate? Barbara asked herself desperately. She was not generally scrupulous; as a rule she took what she wanted of life and let tomorrow take care of itself, but when Dennis would have caught her, she felt a revulsion.

"Wait—let me think." He moved away from her impatiently and began pacing the room. Barbara stood very still, looking into the heart of the fire. Her pulses were racing, and she put a hand on the mantelpiece to steady herself. At that moment she saw the letter addressed to herself in Pauline's writing.

She took the letter and hid it in the folds of her gown; then she returned. "Come here, Dennis."

He came at once and took her in his arms. He could not speak, and his lips burned as they touched hers. After a long time he whispered, "Do you want me?" She could feel his heart beating against hers. "Do you want me—as I want you? May I stay?"

Barbara closed her eyes, and her whole being seemed to clamour for one passionate word in reply. "Yes, yes, yes—"

But something—she never knew what it was—kept her from speaking aloud.

"Dennis—if—tomorrow—you still want me—"

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow never comes," he broke in almost violently. "How do we know what may happen here, tomorrow? Don't send me away, my dear. I love you so much, Barbara for God's sake—"

She disengaged herself from his arms.

"Tomorrow, Dennis, if you still want me—I swear—"

In the end she sent him away, how she never knew, and when he had gone she stood against the door that shut him out, her eyes closed, utterly exhausted, and the tears rained down her face.

She loved him so much, and yet she had sent him away. Why? Why? God alone knew.

She was roused by a little sound in the passage, and she looked up to see Mrs. Mellish, in a drab gray dressing gown, watching her with kindly eyes.

"Come to bed, my dear—I'll get you something hot to drink."

Barbara laughed sobbingly.

"I've been a fool, Mellish," she said. "I've been a silly damned fool. I've sent away the only man I ever loved."

Mrs. Mellish took her hand and patted it.

"He'll come back," she comforted. "He'll come back tomorrow."

Barbara broke away from her sobbing.

"Tomorrow never comes," she wept. "Tomorrow never comes."

She read Pauline's letter sitting up in bed long after Mrs. Mellish had gone comfortably away, believing that Barbara slept.

Darling, Darling, Darling (Pauline began in her extravagant fashion):

I don't know why I am writing to tell you my wonderful secret even before I tell Dennis, something seems to tell me I must. I think somehow I've known it for a long time in the day that people know things—subconsciously, don't you call it?—and that I've been afraid to admit it even to myself. But now I'm sure, and I'm so wonderfully, wonderfully happy that I want to share my happiness with you, because you are my best friend, and I love you. Barbara darling, I'm going to have a baby.

The little green and gold clock on

the dressing table which Jerry Barnet had given to Barbara ticked merrily on—the only sound in a world that seemed suddenly to have grown empty and ceased to live, and at last with an effort Barbara picked up the letter that had fallen from her hand and went on reading.

"If it's a boy..." She closed her eyes with a dreadful feeling of weakness.

Of course it would be a boy! a boy with eyes like Dennis's and a smile like Dennis's, like the man they both loved. Oh, Dennis—Dennis!

She was so cold; suddenly Barbara realized that her hands were like ice and that she was shivering violently. She slipped out of bed, leaving the rest of Pauline's letter unread, and crouched down by the fire.

"There is still tomorrow!" It was as if a voice whispered those words into her ear as she crouched by the fire, and suddenly her cheeks flushed and her pulses quickened.

Tomorrow! It was not yet too late. He would come back, and just for once, if never again, she would know the perfect happiness of his love, and then...

Across the warm, beautiful room she caught sight of her reflection in a long mirror, and it seemed to her overstrung imagination that a shadow Pauline stood behind her, a smiling, happy Pauline, with loving, trustful eyes.

Her best friend! Barbara fell forward on the floor, her face hidden, her hands clenched as she moaned over and over again in utter self-abandonment.

"I can't—I can't... to be such a beast—such a vile beast!"

And yet in her heart she knew it was not so much for Pauline that she was willing to make her sacrifice as for the sake of a child she had once held in her own arms.

Such a little life! It had been, but it had yet left something indelible in Barbara's heart, some memory which, recurring now, would not allow her to bury the child of another woman.

Barbara woke from a troubled sleep late in the following morning to the sound of voices in the little hallway outside her door. Mrs. Mellish's she knew—the quiet, unemotional tones that never varied, and then another—the only voice that had ever had the power to make her heartbeats quicken and her cheeks flush, Dennis! and so early.

Barbara leaned on an elbow and stretched over to her watch. Half-past ten. Something must have happened to bring him so soon, or was it just that he found he could not do without her any longer? She listened intently.

"Not up yet—very tired after last night. Sleeping soundly." Then Dennis's voice again, impatient, obstinate. He would wait—if she would tell Mrs. Stark. Then the sound of his steps going to the sitting room, then the shutting of the door, and Mrs. Mellish rapping gently on her own.

"Come in."

Mrs. Mellish entered, calm eyes, undisturbed as ever. "Mr. O'Hara. He says he will wait. I told him you were still sleeping."



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For a moment she could not answer; then she said with an effort: "Oh, yes." "I'll get up. Please get my bath ready."

Barbara got out of bed and looked at herself in the glass. She did not look her best in the early morning, and she knew it.

"I look old," she thought with a pang, and hurriedly turned away. Barbara had never dressed so quickly before.

Why had he come so early? What was he doing now?

She looked in the mirror a hundred times, and at last she went to him without paint or powder on her face.

Dennis was standing looking down into the fire, and he had not taken off his overcoat. "You are an early bird," she said, trying to speak lightly, and Dennis turned.

"He has heard from Pauline—he knows about Pauline," Barbara told herself, and her hand went to her heart.

"I'm so sorry to come so early. I ought to have rung up, but I—somehow I couldn't. I—" He broke off; then with an effort he pulled himself together again and said constrainedly: "You look tired. Won't you sit down?"

Barbara laughed. "Don't you mean I look old?" she laughed bitterly. "Old!" He did not understand; then, seeing the pain in her face, he said vehemently: "No—good God, no!" Then again the unbearable silence fell. Barbara took a cigarette from the mantelshelf and lighted it.

With a supreme effort she controlled her thoughts and turned to him. "I had a letter from Pauline last night." Was that the lead he wanted? Every pulse in her body seemed to stand still awaiting his reply.

Dennis said, "Oh, did you?" And then suddenly he plunged forward and took her hand. "And I had a visit from Barnet," he said.

(CONTINUED NEXT WEEK)

Would Reduce Amount For Legal Advertising

(Special to the Democrat.)

Raleigh, N. C., Feb. 21.—Probably reflecting feelings in his home town of Mocksville between attorneys and newspaper publishers, Representative Burr C. Brock, of Davie, one of the few Republican legislators, dropped, by request, a bill into the House hopper Saturday which would reduce the amount now being paid for legal advertising in the newspapers.

For all such advertising the rate would be 25 cents an inch for the first 100 inches and 15 cents an inch for any over 100 inches, one column running measure. And in towns and cities with more than one newspaper the advertising would have to be awarded to the lowest bidder. The measure would not apply to any existing contract but county and municipal officers would be required to make contracts in the future on this basis. Itemized publication of receipts and disbursements of counties and municipalities would not be carried the totals only being published annually and publicly posted.

Mr. Brock said the bill was prepared by E. H. Morris, Mocksville attorney, who told him Robert S. McNeill, another Mocksville attorney, aided him its preparation. Mr. Brock wants it known that he introduced the bill "by request", a term used when the introducer does not care to take credit for or sponsor a bill he introduces.

The Chatham County farm agent reports 12 colts being grown by farmers of the county this year and says there is considerable interest now in raising more work stock at home.