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Other People's Troubles

An Antidote for Your Own

By Winnifred Reeve (Onoto Watanna)

Author of "A Japanese Nightingale," "Heart of Hyacinth," "Wisteria," "Marion," "Me," "Delia," etc., etc.

SYNOPSIS:—"Other People's Troubles" is the new type of a continued story wherein each episode is a complete story itself, but the whole is connected through the central figure of Dr. Carpenter, a very fine character, who believes that to get interested in other people's troubles is the best cure for your own. Dr. Carpenter has his niece, Laura, living with him, and also the servant, Katy. Laura, too, has had some trouble, and the doctor is trying his medicine upon her by telling her of the great sorrow of Lenox Holt, a lawyer, who has been accused of killing his wife's lover, and, although let free by the court, has the stigma of murder attached to his name. To him the doctor is going to entrust Laura's case. In the last episode, the doctor is interviewing patients, including a poor scrubwoman and her sick baby.

"Well I simply forbid it." She sat back resignedly, looking down at the baby with a wan look of despair.

"Then I'll have to stop work." "Only for a week or two." "I'll lose my place." "Stuff and nonsense. Give me the name of the manager. I'll call him up myself." "You'd be making it harder for me, doctor."

"You get good wages?" "Yes—the best for the work—\$30 a month."

"And have saved?" "No, I could't do that. You see you told me to get all them extra things for the baby, milk and eggs and medicine, and they cost a lot in winter. Eggs ain't for the poor, doctor."

"Sixty cents a dozen," growled the doctor, frowning.

"I get them for forty, but there's always one or two of 'em rotten, so it comes to nigh the same thing." She sighed heavily. "The poor can't afford to eat nothing these days, seems like," she said.

"The baby looks well nourished, and you should be thankful you can give him the needful food and medicine. Many poor mothers can't even do that."

"I'd like to do more," said she, wistfully, 'but I'm just losing heart.' He don't seem to get better somehow. I wished I could afford it to take him to Dr. Schwartz."

"Dr. Schwartz?"

"Yes, I guess maybe you know of him. He's the druggist at our street corner, but I guess he comes high, though they say he's worth it, not but what I'm not thankful to you for doing it for nothing for us, but I wished I could afford Dr. Schwartz."

Dr. Carpenter's expression was inscrutable. He put his finger precisely on the electric button on his desk and waited for his niece to answer.

"Yes, Uncle Dan?"

"Take Mrs. Daly back to the kitchen. Katy has some biscuits for her, and honey for the baby. And I want the baby put to bed. He'll spend the night here. And by the way have Katy tell Mr. Daly about Nell O'Grady's baby."

He had arisen, and had dismissed the woman with his usual formal professional bow. She shuffled wearily along in the wake of Laura.

IX.

The doctor was not looking well. His face had a drawn, haggard appearance when he was not speaking, and once or twice his hand slipped under his vest and seemed to fidget about, as though he were pressing upon some spot that pained. Although he stiffened up and talked cheerily enough to each patient in turn, there was something constrained about his looks and words.

One by one they came and went, and it was long past his office hour when the last of them finally departed.

He sat for a time staring vacantly out before him. Then, his hand trembling slightly, he poured some liquid into a glass of water and drank it down swiftly and eagerly. Presently he staggered across to the black leather couch by the window, and threw himself heavily down upon it.

There Laura found him when she softly opened the door and looked in. She put a pillow under his head and carefully tucked a comforter about him.

Then she kissed him, with a light, birdlike touch on the forehead, and left him to sleep till twilight.

Fortunately there were no callers during the rest of the afternoon, and the few telephone calls were of no consequence. But a little before six the first of the doctor's evening patients arrived, and Laura hurried to the door.

She drew back slightly when she saw the man confronting her, though, in some way, she knew at once who he was. Tall and emaciated, his somewhat staring eyes shifted about evasively. His face had a sallown, unclean look, with its dark half grown beard. He looked like some god-forsaken tramp, but without the average tramp's mark of evil and shiftlessness.

An odd, suffocating feeling for the man had come over the girl. It was like a surge of maternity, a brooding reaching out pity, which brought the tears to her dark eyes, and kept her there in the doorway, looking at him, tongue-tied.

His voice was brusque, almost rough, and he did not even look at her.

"I wish to see Dr. Carpenter," he said, and then as she neither spoke nor moved, he looked up frowningly, and saw her standing there with the tears glistening in her eyes, and the look of dawning motherhood like a beatitude on her face. He drew back a step, the frown flickering uneasily away. His gaze shifted from the girl's face, only to come back there abruptly.

She said, with a catch in her voice:

"Oh—I am so sorry for y—"

She stopped, a look of horror coming to her face, as though she had inadvertently allowed forbidden words to escape her. Suddenly she was the calm self-composed Laura again.

"I am sorry," she said slowly, "that the doctor is asleep."

"Very well," said the man surlily, and he turned abruptly upon his heel.

"Please wait a minute," she urged, "for he is expecting you to-night. Won't you wait, please?"

He wheeled about quickly. "How do you know who I am?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Wh-why, my uncle told me," she faltered.

"Told you what?"

"That you were to come to-night."

"So you know me by sight, do you?"

"No—I never saw you before."

"Except in print," he sneered bitterly.

Laura shook her head.

"Indeed I have not," she said, "I only know that my Uncle Dan is expecting—Mr. Holt—at this hour."

She felt him studying her face keenly.

"Very well, I'll wait then," he said, gruffly, and he strode past her and into the front room, closing the door behind him.

Out in the hall, she was seized with a sudden emotion, and stood leaning against the wall a moment, her eyes closed, her breath coming swiftly.

"The poor man!" she whispered. "The poor man!"

X.

Holt moved restlessly about the doctor's reception room. For a time he stared out of the window, his fingers picking nervously at the window sash. Outside a drizzly rain was falling and the snowfall of a previous day was rapidly melting into dirty slush and moved along the asphalt with the wind.

Something in the dull steady dripping of the rain set the man's shattered nerves ajar. He pulled the shade down abruptly. Then he turned on the light in the room, picked up a magazine and threw it down again on the table. Nervously he paced up and down, and presently stopped before the portieres of the alcove, and drew them back with an impulsive sweep. At the same moment, the doctor on the couch turned about,—he murmured and sighed heavily.

A curious change came into the face of Holt, as he looked at the doctor lying there inert and unconscious. A look that was strangely gentle and tender, that in a moment robbed the eyes of their wildness, the mouth of its bitterness, illumined the man's face. It came over him suddenly that here was the only person in his bleak life who cared what became of him, the only person whom he himself had come to love. Emotion, such as this, was so new and strange for him in these days, that his hands clinched and unclenched spasmodically.

The doctor opened his eyes and looked up at him blankly.

"You are ill!" said Holt, huskily.

The doctor blinked. Then he felt feebly about for his glasses and found them dangling by their string. He was sitting up now, and adjusting them securely on his nose. Suddenly he seemed to shake himself, threw out his chest and came to his feet sturdily.

"Stuff and nonsense! Never felt better in my life. Er-hum! Er-hum! Now, let me see —"

He was at his desk now, his fingers still tremulous he was steady by bringing the tips together in his characteristic way.

"Holt, you're the very man I wanted to see. Er-hum! It was good of you to come out on a night like this. Very good of you indeed, but you won't regret it. Have a seat, won't you?"

Holt seated himself a trifle uncertainly. He was very pale, and kept a wary eye on the doctor's face, as if he still doubted the doctor's words that all was well with him. Indeed the doctor seemed quite his old self now, and beyond a slight twitching at the corner of his lips, there was no sign to indicate that he was otherwise than as usual.

"You know," said the doctor, warming to his subject, "that I have always advocated and prescribed for you the getting back into professional harness. I've wanted you to renew your law practice, and now—now I have brought you a client!"

Holt sat up abruptly. He was scowling angrily and a sneer curled its way across his lips.

"Very kind of you, I'm sure, Dr. Carpenter, but unfortunately, I'm otherwise engaged at present. As I've told you before I'm out of that—permanently."

"Stuff and nonsense! You're only just beginning again. Now, Holt, stay where you are. There's no use rushing off in a huff. Here's your old doctor friend in a pickle and nobody but you can help him out."

"You? Some affair of your own?"

"A family affair—yes."

The other was silent a moment, and when he did speak it was in an unwilling, surly tone.

"Of course—that makes a difference, and I'll give you what advice I can, but—well, the truth is, I simply will not appear in the Courts again as a lawyer—even for you."

"Well, we'll try and get along with the advice then for the present," said the doctor cheerily. "Now, it's a very delicate case. Er-hum! My niece, Miss Laura Laurence, wishes to sue one Weston Chambers for breach of promise."

Holt drew back as if the doctor had struck him.

"You expect me to—interest myself in a case like—that!"

"Like what?"

"Per! The very notion disgusts—is preposterous!"

"No, it isn't," said the doctor, gently, "not if you knew the circumstances, and if you'll keep your seat and patience long enough, to let me tell you the details of the case it may be you will reverse your own judgment."

(To be continued)