

The Wall Flower

By MARION RUBINCAM

THE GUEST

Chapter 45

None of Pandora's new clothes had arrived yet, of course. She was in one of the hideously unbecoming "made overs" from Gladys's discarded wardrobe. Besides, she was a little tired from working.

Gloria laughed at her and scolded her for working too much and insisted that she come into the living room and have tea. No one could refuse Gloria, so Pan went, though she was cold all over with nervousness at the idea of meeting anyone.

"I'd—I'd rather stay back here," she stammered. "Really! All your friends are so clever—what will they think of me—and I look so—"

"You look like a baby lamb that's been left shivering in the cold," Gloria laughed. "Come! Besides, George isn't at all clever."

Gloria followed her, feeling, not like a neglected lamb, but much more like a terrified rabbit that wanted to run to cover, but did not know where to go.

A strange man rose as she entered the room. He seemed to pull yards of himself up from the low cushioned chair by the fire. The girl was too shy to look at him, she shook hands with her eyes down, as she always did.

Gloria had curled up in her usual corner of the couch, the low tea table

in front of her.

"Tuck yourself into the other corner, Pan," she ordered as she began pouring tea. "George, butter us each a muffin. This angel lamb has been baking me muffins for breakfast and tea too. She's spoiling me so that—"

"It won't hurt you to be spoiled a bit," the man said with a little smile at her. "You go it so hard."

Pan took the cup of tea and curled one leg around its heat. She dared look up for the first time. Gloria had been lurching with one of George's friends and was full of amusing gossip and news.

So Pan studied this guest, and half listened to Gloria at the same time. Years later she remembered this first contact with Gloria's group—the woman with black hair pulled smoothly back from her white forehead, the fine tilt to her chin and throat as she leaned back against the cushions, her slim almost flat figure in a tea gown of flame red and Chinese blue. Only Gloria dared such a color combination!

Then George Ridgeway! Pan thought he might be nearly 40, but as a matter of fact he was 34. That was because of the gray streak in his hair, a single white lock that went up from his left temple and lay flat against hair that was thick and dark and lustrous, sometimes straight, sometimes with a

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faint suggestion of wave in it. It made him most distinguished looking, and it made him seem older.

He had large blue eyes that appeared darker than they were because they were deep set and shaded by thick, dark eyebrows. He had the large forehead of a man of intellect, a nose that Pan thought would be improved if it hadn't the least hint of a hump in the center (this Irish blood, he told her later!) and a mouth that puzzled her for a long time. For George Ridgeway's eyes were caressing, his voice low and rich, but his mouth cynical.

For the rest, he was thin, very tall, he liked to lounge far back in the deeply cushioned chair with his feet straight out over the carpet, a cigarette held limply in one very good

looking hand—where it usually burned itself away in a curl of blue smoke, it rarely went to his lips.

Pan caught herself before her staring became rude. But George was the first man of this type that she had ever seen, a man of culture and intellect, who dressed well, talked well, had his nails manicured because of a somewhat fastidious temperament, who rode, danced and played tennis, and liked best to rough it for months over a mountain trail.

After a time George looked at her and their eyes met—which confused her so she made an excuse to see about getting more hot water in order to leave the room for a moment. Coming back, in the hallway she heard:

"If it isn't a burden on you." It was Ridgeway's voice. "You overdo things as it is. She looks 14, not 21."

A murmur from Gloria. Then: "She's a queer, quaint little creature. Exquisite eyes, full of a strange, mute appeal. I'd like to get

it on canvas."

But Pan was so unspoiled that it never occurred to her that this was about her. She entered the room quite unconscious that she was being talked about and curled up quietly in her corner again.

Gloria's tea parties were usually large. A woman entered now, so smartly dressed Pan wanted to hide from her, and began talking rapidly

to Gloria. Pan took one of the big cushions, pulled it into her lap and put her arms around it—almost hiding behind it as she sat with feet curled up beneath her.

"I know," said George, coming and sitting beside her. "There are people who terrify me as I long to get under a pillow—but there's too much of me. Are you staying with us all

winter, little lady?"

Pan was suddenly able to smile at him.

Tomorrow—The Tired Man.

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