

The Wall Flower

By MARION RUBINCAM

GLORIA TALKS

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

Pandora Nicholson is so shy that meeting new people is a painful experience. She lives in a sort of poor relation with her Aunt Maude, her Uncle Peter, and their daughter, Gladys, who is hearty, buxom, noisy and the most popular girl in Norris City. Pandora is in this "set" too, but generally ignored and overlooked. She has been neglected and snubbed so much that she believes herself repulsively homely, too unattractive mentally and physically ever to make friends.

So when Morton Newberry begins to like her, she returns his affection to an intense degree. The little friendship becomes a love—when Gladys decides she wants Morton, possibly because he was the only boy who never paid any attention to her—goes after him—and succeeds in marrying him. Pandora is heart-broken. Then suddenly Mrs. Gates, a decorator from New York whom she had met the summer before, asks her to spend the winter with her. A new world opens to "Pan." She takes charge of Gloria Gates' home and small son, Frankie.

Chapter 12

After that first visit, Pan took Frankie to the picture gallery every day. She read his child's books about the paintings, and found the nearest public library, to get out still more volumes on Flemish or Italian art.

"We did the Dutch school today," Frankie informed his mother with an important air, one afternoon when she came in from her office.

"Oh you did? And what do you mean by that?" Gloria asked, pulling him into her lap.

Frankie explained in detail and with great seriousness.

"Such a learned old man as you are becoming!" Gloria exclaimed laughing.

"Why don't you run and play in the park while Pan acquires wisdom and culture with the old masters?"

"Now you're making fun of me!" Frankie sulked a little, looking at his mother's merry eyes and the smile that showed her dazzling white teeth. "I don't like being made fun

of!"

"Oh you don't!" She caught him back as he started to climb away. "Son, where is your sense of humor? I believe you were born without one. Shall we play mother bear and little bear?"

"Oh yes!" And the child's seriousness vanished instantly. Instead of looking like a queer little old man, he looked again like a small and boisterous youngster. The romping game ended on the floor and when Bobby appeared for tea, Gloria was sitting, flushed and laughing and disheveled on the floor, while Frankie growled at her from the bear's cave under the desk.

"What a versatile creature you are!" Bobby grinned from the doorway. "You can amuse a child as successfully as you can persuade a fat old lady to spend four times what she ought to on her house!"

"The child's the harder task," Gloria called back, fleeing to her room to make herself presentable for tea.

Gloria was alone at home that night, which was an unusual occurrence. For she was so enormously popular that she had more demands on her time than she could meet, and as she tried to go everywhere, she was usually rushing from work to play and back to work and off again on some frivolous errand, to reach bed exhausted long after midnight.

"I've committed the most heinous of all social faults," Gloria moaned that evening when the last tea guest departed. "I've accepted two dinner engagements for one evening; the worst is the people know each other and if I keep one I'll infuriate the other hopelessly."

"So you'd better keep neither. I'll call up and say you're ill, which is perfectly true, you look like a ghost," Pan said.

And she phoned two expectant hostesses and was so nice that neither minded having her well balanced dinner party upset at the last moment.

Gloria, lying on the couch, did suddenly look ill.

Their dinner appeared on its tray and was served on the little low table that did for breakfast and tea as well.

"We have a new cook," Gloria

murmured looking at the thin, little negro maid disappearing through the doorway. "I didn't know that."

"No, I got her yesterday," Pan said. "She seems all right—you're so busy I didn't want to bother you about it."

Gloria leaned back with a tired smile.

"What a competent girl you are!" she murmured. "Why do you call yourself stupid? My house and my son have been perfectly managed ever since you came here—"

"It takes no intelligence to run a house and family," Pan interrupted. "It takes more than most women give to it!" Gloria answered quickly.

"Pan, you have the knack of making a place homelike. Believe me, it's a great gift, and a rare one. Why do you envy these women who come to my tea parties, with their smart frocks and ready talk?"

"They know so much, they're so clever!"

"They know a very limited amount about most things, but they've been trained to talk as though they knew more than they do—that's their only cleverness. When they buy a house, they hire me to paint and furnish it, because they haven't originality or taste. When they want clothes, they go to my equivalent among the dress-makers and have clothes made for them, as they have their homes designed for them. Their amusements come ready made in the form of theaters and half of them have orders with book-sellers to send them the fashionable books each week, so even their ideas come ready made!"

Pan laughed at this. She piled wood in the fireplace when the meal was over, and going to Gloria's desk, began sorting the business and social letters that were piled on it, making a pencilled list of future engagements. Later she found a blank book, and by writing in days and dates, turned it into an engagement

book.

"I'll buy a real one tomorrow," Gloria suggested, watching her.

"This will do, why spend unnecessary money?" Gloria laughed a little. There was a silence while Pan worked busily, making a special pile of letters to be answered.

Suddenly Gloria remarked, "I heard from my husband today."

Chapter 13

The girl had often wondered about this mysterious "husband." She had a natural curiosity and a great deal of sympathy for Gloria when she thought of it.

So she kept still now, hoping her friend would go on. So as not to disturb her, she kept on with her writing, carefully making up the blank book with days and dates for months ahead.

"He thinks he may come over to America," Gloria went on.

"Is he—I mean, I didn't know he was—away," Pan murmured.

"The last I saw of him and of Europe was when I left him," Gloria said. "And I hope I never see a foreign country again as long as he's living there."

She was quite changed when Pan glanced at her. She looked old around the mouth, which had hardened into a tight line. The fine wrinkles about the eyes were plain now, though they were usually hardly noticeable, her skin was so firm and clear. But Gloria was the curious sort that could age 10 years in as many minutes, and then could throw them off as easily as she could lose her head, under the exhilaration of excitement.

She wanted to talk now—the fire, the comfort of the couch, the warmth of the rug Pan had thrown over her knees, the quiet little listener, drew her on to confidences.

"The odd thing was, that yester-

day I passed the minister that married us."

"He stopped me and asked me how Frank was! Fancy, it was like raising a ghost! I couldn't hurt him, so I said he was very well. He asked where 'we' were, and I said that Frank was in Paris on business, just now."

She stopped and laughed a little. "He probably is, but his business would be mostly with some of the Folies Bergere chorus girls."

"When were you married?" Pan ventured to ask.

"Ten years ago—when I was old enough to know better. But Frank was—awfully charming then. He was in the consular service and we went to Tunis. Oh, my dear—a golden sun and a burning sapphire sky, houses painted pink and white and

green and every sort of gay color—and such a garden! You can't imagine how beautiful a tropical garden can be—"

Her voice trailed off. Gloria began talking spasmodically, starting sentences, half finishing them, staring into the fire while her eyes saw the terraced gardens, the dazzling white roads, the shaded courtyards of the houses, the smart young men and women who wintered in northern Africa.

She told Pan stories of the gay, irresponsible life there, young men

who loafed and flirted, young men who slaved for promotion "as much as one can in such a climate," she added.

"And the moonlight! It was too much for poor Frank's head, which was never strong when there was a pretty woman around. I did such a silly thing the first time I found him out—we'd been married five months. Such a moon—I was giving a huge dinner that night—and

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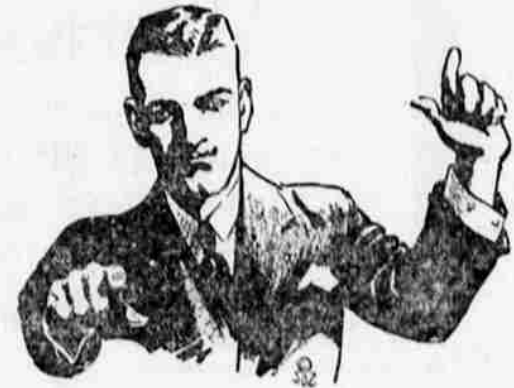
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