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The Wall Flower
by Marion Robinson

A PUZZLE
Chapter 69

Pan's thoughts that evening were not entirely cheerful. It had been an exhausting day—the long train journey, the sadness at leaving her father, knowing it would be months or years before she saw him again—the telegram and Gloria's collapse, and the long visit from George.

It was after midnight, neither she nor Gloria were in the least sleepy, due to the nervous excitement and the quantities of coffee they had taken.

Gloria walked up and down the room, and up and down, the train of her long robe trailing behind her. She adored trains on negligible schedules, when she curled up with her feet under her on the couch in her favorite attitude, she was tangled in yards of exquisite materials and quantities of lovely color. She had a sixth sense for artistic dressing, few women possess it.

"Get undressed and into bed, and I'll begin to pack the trunk in your room, you can tell me where to put things, then you'll stay quiet," Pan suggested.

Gloria obeyed for once. While Pan packed moving quietly about the room, the other woman lay there and talked—talked of Frank and their early married life, the days of their engagement, the first happiness, the first suspicion even when she was engaged of his infidelity.

"He used to talk of freedom," she said once. "He told me that any sort of shackles made him want to go free at once, the bird beating at the bars of its cage, you know that sort of thing. I was awfully impressed, being young and in love. I thought it was wonderful to marry him, if he felt that thought that the marriage tie would be a shackle to him, so he'd want to go free."

"But he said that, of course while it was a tie and a restriction and he expected to chafe at it still the force of society was so strong we all had to obey. So he didn't mind marriage—that is, if I were the ideal wife, and didn't mind it if he was friendly with other women."

"Of course, I had that much common sense. I wanted him to have all the friendships he wanted. Love affairs were different—for he couldn't be in love with me and another woman at the same time, that's a basic principle, he couldn't love two people—enough to live with one of them with any sort of morality."

"But he had no idea of love—she talked on and on. "Psychic analysts say that the way to get rid of strange depressions and illnesses is to get the morbid thoughts out of the subconscious mind where they do a great deal of damage, into the conscious, where they either evaporate, or at least become less malignant."

And people with only ordinary common sense, which means most of us, know that getting things out of one's mind to words, and talking them out to another person, is an unbelievable relief. Gloria never thought of the subconscious, where they either evaporate, or at least become less malignant.

"I believe—you are fond of him," Pan ventured at last. "You used to say you'd eliminated him entirely, forgotten him."

"You can't marry a man, live with him even unhappily, bear him a child—and eliminate him from your life," Gloria answered. "I did think so, at least I said so. But his presence on that short trip here upset me, anything serious that happened to him couldn't help but upset me. And his death—well, it isn't as though I still love him, yet it is upsetting. There is grief, of a kind."

She was quieter now—and it was far away into the morning. Pan went to her own room, unpacked her suitcase and went to bed.

George was going with them—that was a happy thought. There would be seven days on the boat when she would see him, lunch with him, dine with him, tramp with him every day.

But he was going for Gloria's sake not hers of course.

At parting he had asked, "This makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

And Gloria had said, "Yes". The barrier was removed then—Gloria was free at last. She may not have cared about freedom before, she was interested in her business, in her huge and mixed circle of friends, all of whom amused her enormously in dancing and theatres and luncheons, and most of all in Frankie.

"But it was different now! Pan tried to think how, for Gloria was seriously interested in the unknown Santley in London. And

Gloria had changed her mind about going to Paris, she was sailing straight for England—for Santley. And George, who had been waiting, was going too, he was going to be near Gloria, to act as a force against Santley? Was it jealousy?

Pan didn't know. George had a free field if he wanted Gloria for himself, and he certainly seemed to be losing no time in taking advantage of it. That much she was sure about.

"Santley's the adorable sort that you feel you've known all your life after five minutes talk with him," Gloria said enthusiastically.

"He's serious, he never knows what to make of my wild tantrums and mad enthusiasms, he just sits with a patient amused grin and waits until I return to normal. But why he's so genial—well, perhaps that's so dependable."

"Yes, I think that's the best quality a man can have," Pan pondered. "I liked that so about Morton. I was wrong of course, but I didn't know it then. Is George dependable? I don't think so."

"He is," and Gloria's voice was all enthusiasm again. "He's the best friend I've had—except perhaps Santley. Santley never had the numbers of chances to be a good friend, George has, somehow, always lived around the corner from me."

So if Pan thought she could gain any information about the state of Gloria's feelings she learned nothing. Gloria was equally enthusiastic about both men.

When they reached the dock, finally with 20 minutes to make the boat, Gloria was in a state of collapse. There had been so many details of her business to wind up, so many interviews with this new and important client who was down to see them of with a basket of roses in one hand and a thick letter of last minute instructions in the other—so many parties Gloria had to attend, that the night before sailing she never went to bed at all.

And Pan had to close up the house, send off the maid, who left a day ahead so they picked up from canned soups and delicacies in the kitchen, as they had when Pan first arrived. Then there was Frankie and Frankie's clothes and last minute shopping for needfuls and Gloria insisting on stopping for medicines for Frankie.

"I've been worried to death," George remarked. "I should know by this time that Gloria never misses a train, or a boat, but she at times makes it by a hairsbreadth. Come along and explore the boat, and get your lungs full of sea air before we strike rough water, then you won't be ill."

But Pan found that some are born to be sea sick and some are not. She was not, and Gloria was in such a state of collapse that she had to stay in her cabin anyway for three days. Frankie never missed a train, or a boat, but she at times makes it by a hairsbreadth. Come along and explore the boat, and get your lungs full of sea air before we strike rough water, then you won't be ill."

SAILING
Chapter 70

"Pan was so busy that week that she had little time to indulge in too many thoughts about herself or the state of affairs she thought existed between Gloria, George and Santley.

"I'm awfully excited over meeting Mr. Collins," she said once to Gloria. "After seeing his miniature and that large photograph you have and hearing so much about him, I almost feel I know him."

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"You're going to take this trip as a rest cure," George said, tucking a steamer rug around her.

But Pan found it hard to stay still after the first day or so. She liked the marvellously clean white boat, with its polished brass fittings, the tiny cabins with cretonne curtains swinging at the port holes and the ingenious devices to utilize space.

"I take a regular swim in my hot salt bath every morning," she told George, who astonished her by describing the real swimming tanks with warmed sea water, that the largest liners carried. "A little sea within a sea," Pan laughed.

When Gloria was comfortable in a chair or in her berth, and George was in the smoking room playing bridge, and Frankie off with his new friend, she wandered the decks by herself, too shy to go out of her way to make friends, but pleasant and unconscious with those who spoke to her. She liked to lean over the rail, watching the blue, green water swirl along the sides, she liked the rise and fall of the ship as she rode the waves—the easy swaying motion that was such agony to some passengers.

George came to her one evening as she leaned over the rail. In mid-ocean there is often a phosphorescent quality to the water, it was so now, and the waves were faintly illuminated as the ship cut the water.

"Want to come and dance and be happy?" George asked.

"No thanks—I'm happy as it is Gloria's dancing."

"But not happy! Pan, tell me did Santley cable her again—after the first message?"

"No. And she expected another—she would write details I suppose."

"If so she would not have had time to get his letter. She expected well, another cable, I think. Did she?"

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"No, she was waiting for word again. I know that, she phoned every day from her office to find out if a cable had come. She wrote a letter saying she was sailing—of sent a cable, I don't know which."

"Well, then I suppose he'll meet the boat train. But I can't see why she's worried."

And he wandered off, frowning and forgetting to ask her again if she wanted to dance.

COMMENTS
Chapter 71

George Ridgeway's evident worry of course upset Pan. She decided to go to the dance and stay near Gloria, meantime thinking of some way to get into her confidence.

They danced in the big lounge hall outside the dining saloon, a place decorated, steamship fashion with many palm trees in tubs, and with white paint with gilt trimmings. Gloria, whose daring colored gowns and striking complexion had made her promptly the most talked of woman on the ship, was dancing with George.

Pan slipped into a wicker chair and waited. She danced a bit of coast, George, a strange portly gentleman whom George had known slightly, a young man, who was going to "hike it" through Europe, one by one they came up and talked to her of danced.

Gloria was surrounded, as usual by more partners than she could dance with—the ocean going friendships which flourish so well on the decks, and are forgotten a moment after the bustle of landing.

Pan watched her friend with the pride a mother might feel who chaperones a popular daughter, at a dance.

"Much too low in the back, I think," a voice behind her was saying. "And the idea of a pannier skirt, she must think this is a masquerade dance."

Pan turned slightly to look. Three very prim elderly women were sitting behind her, obviously discussing Gloria, who wore the only fashionable skirt evening dress in the ship, the panniers were all the rage! Only Gloria could sense the new fashion note as soon as the fashion makers themselves became aware of it. Only Gloria would dare exaggerate the style a trifle, the pannier a little too wide, the short underskirt, a wee bit too tight and short, the silver lace overskirt a little too long and full, only Gloria would have thought of cherry satin and silver lace together—and only Gloria could have carried off this daring combination of style and color.

"She looks—not pretty, striking I should say," another voice answered making an obvious comment as though it were quite original.

"An actress, I suppose," said the third lady.

Pan turned back smiling. Why Gloria's curiously white skin, dead black hair and eyes should "make people think her an actress, was always one of the puzzles. Could not anyone have a theatrical combination of complexion and coloring?"

"Gloria is rarely judged for herself," Pan said to George a moment after. "She dazzles everyone so, she either blinds them to her real sweetness or startles them so they disapprove."

"Have those old hens been pecking," George asked with a grin. "I hate people who are too prim and proper," said George, who was coming in fact, I had written that I intended coming sometime. That was when I first had this order to go for furniture. But I was vague about it on purpose, because I have learned never to believe in an order in my business, until I save a signed contract or part payment in advance. I was afraid if Santley expected me, and I didn't come, it would be a greater disappointment than—well, if he didn't expect me at all."

"I see," said Pan, who didn't at all.

I would have written or cabled had started a letter at by office in fact, when his message came that—that Frank was dead. And then, well, that made things different."

"Did it?" asked Pan wondering.

"Yes—because you see Santley's been in love with me for a long time."

"I thought so!" Pan said triumphantly.

"Oh! I should think everyone would be—George is, even Bobby."

Gloria gave her a curious glance and murmured only:

"Bobby's an irresponsible child who is in love with half a dozen women at once."

Then she went on: "It began—Santley, I mean, I the early days of our marriage to Frank. He was around the consul

She didn't believe it—until years after she saw it for herself. This evening she was wholly wrapped up in Gloria, who seeing them waiting for her impatiently turned away with her partner and sat down some distance off.

Her clear laugh came back, one note too shrill.

"She's dead white and frightfully upset and nervous," Pan said. "She's always like that underneath when she seems so very excited and happy."

"I know. I wish you'd try to find out what the trouble is," George answered.

He picked up Gloria's cape—a voluminous affair of black fur set with great blocks of white fur to make a checkerboard pattern around the bottom—and went off to take Gloria for a walk on the decks.

"What a cape," came the women's voices, two of them in chorus this time. That must be ermine and seal—stratoculus I call it," said the other.

"Expensive though, those odd things always are, she must be rich."

"Humph! I wonder who the man is, he's always with her—she has a son, that pretty, serious faced little boy, I think—"

Only a too-prim and proper woman could have had the ugly thought this one proceeded to impart to her friends. Pan rose, frowning, and walked off. She was too young not to be annoyed by the petty gossip that flies about every ship, inevitable in so small and isolated a community.

Her cheeks burned with anger. Her Gloria, who was so brave and sweet in every way, who had gone through such unhappiness, who had fought her way out of one trouble big enough to wreck most women's lives, who stood now on the threshold of something new and unknown—to be talked of so!

When Gloria returned to her cabin Pan was packing her trunk. They were to land next day.

ARRIVAL
Chapter 72

Pan began her search for information, dilly dallying up a suit in the wardrobe trunk as she did so.

She reached Cherbourg early in the morning, and Southampton in the afternoon, and she had dinner in London," she began, hoping Gloria would say that they were to dine with Santley.

But Gloria said nothing, she slipped her lovely dress from her shoulders, and put on her one sombre garment, a black "katin kimono"—lined with orange, however edged with silver braid, for Gloria had to have some color about her.

"You promised to cable when you arrived," Pan went on. Gloria was to cable her arrival to her new client, and also whenever she found a particularly good piece of antique furniture.

"Um hum," Gloria responded, mouth full of pins as she loosened her mass of hair.

In desperation Pan asked outright: "Did you cable Mr. Collins you were coming?"

"No," Gloria answered. "And didn't write."

"This seemed to end the talk. Pan felt she had been inquisitive enough, in fact, she would never have dared this much by herself, and Santley's silence was a snub."

She felt very badly. Her cheeks reddened a little, she was looking much better as a result of a week of seas air and rest, she even had a bit of real color in her face these days.

Gloria who could see her from the mirror, suddenly began to laugh.

"During you're as transparent as a sheet of window glass. Tell me did George put you up to all these questions?"

"I'm so sorry—Pan began to apologize.

"Never mind, I don't. But did George—?"

"Yes, he was worried," Pan said forced to tell, yet feeling as though she were giving away her friend.

"He was so worried—she went on.

"Poor George! Well, he's worried so much over my real trouble, I suppose I might spare him worry over an imaginary one. But I won't!" And she gave herself an impish little smile in the glass.

She went on, turning around to watch Pan laying away white silky things in layers of tissue:

"I'll tell you, if you'll not give it away to George. I believe you will though, he's clever at extracting information."

"I meant to cable Santley I was coming. In fact, I had written that I intended coming sometime. That was when I first had this order to go for furniture. But I was vague about it on purpose, because I have learned never to believe in an order in my business, until I save a signed contract or part payment in advance. I was afraid if Santley expected me, and I didn't come, it would be a greater disappointment than—well, if he didn't expect me at all."

heard gossip. He saw the effect everything on me.

"He tried to pull Frank up in more ways than one. He went into him once—well, anyway, that's nothing to do with this. He hesitated to persuade me to break away because of a scruple—a fear that I'd think it was only that he wanted me, until it was—evident that my health would go under if I stuck any longer."

"When I spent that month in Cornwall, before I sailed, after it was separation, he told me he loved me. He wanted me to get a divorce, and marry him. I wouldn't—possibly because of the feeling for Frank—"

"I had the feeling for Frank—because there was a charming girl devoted to Santley, and it seemed a shame—well, for a lot of reasons. I hated the divorce idea anyway."

"But now I'm free, you see. I don't know about that girl, he must be in love with her really. But, as he has talked and written a lot of love for me, he may think he must ask me to marry him now. Somehow, a cable from me saying I was coming, would look as though I half expected—no, he must be free to make his choice."

"And I think he has—"

But her face had become drawn and white as she said it.

THE NEW CITY
Chapter 73

Little by little Pan worked it out for herself.

She knew now, at least, why Gloria was so anxious about a second cable. She expected some word from Santley, not about Frank that was all told in his first message. But some word, some sign that the bid feeling still lived that he was still in love.

"Not a real declaration of affection," Pan thought to herself. "That would be impossible so soon. It's no matter of convention, of course—I suppose it's just the good taste of the thing."

Pan, having broken away from a family who were ruled by convention rather than intelligence, was now terribly afraid she might make any judgments of life by convention. So she sought to back up everything she thought or did by intelligence.

"Still," she decided, "he'll soon know that Gloria is in town—they will have all sorts of friends in common."

That, as it happened, was not true. Gloria had lived in almost every other part of the world but London, here she had but one or two friends. Santley knew an entirely different set of people, mostly men in his own profession and club men.

"Of course, he must still be in love with her," the girl decided, turning about in her berth restlessly. "And of course, she'll hunt him up. She wants to see him and she's so impulsive."

Then she began feeling sorry for George. For if Santley was in love with Gloria, if Gloria cared for him more than George—but did she? Pan wasn't sure—but if she did, of course, poor George was quite left out.

She went to sleep feeling very sorry indeed for George.