

The Wall Between

Written for The Western Home Monthly By Tina Forrester Best

IT WAS the last night of her holiday, a night she would long remember for its beauty and witchery, its haunting loveliness. A full-orbed moon flooded the world with silver, and threw long shadows over the pines that fringed the mountain lake. A faint breeze stirred the air, bringing with it the mingled fragrance of rose and honeysuckle.

Janet leaned from the window that she might enjoy the wonder of it all. From the wide verandah below came the murmur of voices and the merry ripple of careless laughter. Strains of music from the hotel orchestra floated up to her, and she could hear the tripping feet of the dancers in the big pavilion.

It was a night for love and laughter, and Janet felt strangely alien to it all. Some element had disturbed the calm flow of her existence, and for the first time in her life, the full force of her position came to her. She was alone in the world. To-morrow she would leave here, go back to the work she had chosen, and of all the throng below, who would really miss her? She has made many friends during her fortnight's holiday at Crystal Beach and the Willow Inn, where she had boarded, but even the best of these would soon forget her.

And it might have been different. For the first time, she allowed herself to dwell on the fact that her isolation was the fruit of her own deliberation. Years before she had been offered love and a

home, and she had refused both. Life was full of opportunities then, and she was young and ambitious. Marriage to her offered no incentive to development or accomplishment. It would kill individuality, she had said. This was the answer she had given John Stevens, and he had accepted her choice so conclusively, that she had never seen him since. He had left their small home town for other parts, and she, herself, had gone to a larger place to follow her plan of life.

So well had she succeeded, that she was now practically business head of a large retail house, and drew a salary that many men could envy. Others had asked her hand in marriage, but she enjoyed her work and independence too well to sacrifice it for any man.

And yet, to-night, as she watched the couples on the moon-bathed beach, life seemed strangely empty and unsatisfying. What was it she had missed? She had money, social position, cultured companionship and absolute freedom to do as she willed. Why, then, this unrest, this sense of incompleteness?

She rose presently, and began to disrobe for the night. Her train left early in the morning, and she needed added sleep.

As she loosened her heavy coil of burnished hair to give it the usual careful brushing, she leaned forward to the mirror with a little exclamation of dismay. A gray hair! Not only one—there were several in the thick meshes.

To Janet, with her splendid pulsing energy, age was a thing to be dreaded, and gray hair was the forerunner, the herald of old age. As she sat there staring at her reflection in the glass, she felt as if the first knell of vanished youth had rung. She looked down the long vista of years, and saw herself old and alone, no longer wanted in the business arena where she had been so successful. The young and modern were given preference here. Strange she had not thought of that last before. Then she picked up the brush again, and drew it vigorously across her head. Such forebodings were too morbid, absolutely absurd. She was only thirty-two. Let the years take care of themselves. It would be long before she would be laid aside.

But the thought had come to stay, and she went to sleep to dream that her hair was snow-white, and that she had lost her position because of it. She had sought other employment, but everywhere the answer was the same: "We want up-to-dateness. Your age is against you." Finally, when she had lost everything—money, position, friends—she met John Stevens. He had appeared before her suddenly, to gaze mockingly at her shabby clothes, her unkempt appearance.

The dream changed, and John Stevens was married. She saw him bending over a child's cot, soothing its fretful cry. A beautiful woman stood beside him, and a mad jealousy seized her as she saw her watching with love's recognized possession in her eyes.

She awakened with a start. The clothes were thrown back, and the wind, which

had risen through the night, swept chillingly through the room. In the adjoining room a child's cry sounded plaintively, and a man's voice could be faintly heard. Janet smiled to herself. This accounted for her dream; she had been half awake. Some one had come in on the late train, and she wondered sleepily who it was.

When she awakened again, the sun was shining. The baby's cry had changed to a prattle, and Janet lay there listening to its soft little voice, smiling at its gurgling laugh, its funny little questions. She could hear the mother's answers, and she knew by her happy, contented voice that here was a woman whose life was complete.

Suddenly, the sense of utter aloneness possessed her again, but with different effect. She knew, now, the reason of her unrest, her feeling of unfulfillment. She had grasped at what she thought was the kernel of life and had found only the empty shell.

An hour later, she had dressed and breakfasted, and stood talking to the hotel manager while she waited for the bus which would convey passengers to the station.

"You'll be back next year, I hope, Miss Archibald," said the manager. "We like to see our patrons returning."

"I hope so," replied Janet. "I've enjoyed myself very much."

Her eye fell on the register, and she paused abruptly. There, in startling vividness, was the name: "John Stevens, wife and child."

She stood staring at it, unconscious that the manager was watching her curiously. Room sixteen! Then they

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