

PENGUIN BOOKS

FAMILY FICTIONS

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RICHARD
HALL

Family Fictions

A NOVEL



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*For my mother, in memory,
and for Marny
and for Jack*

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Family Fictions

1

MARGARET

The Marriage

She was back now. She hadn't thought she would be, ever. There had been moments, with Charlie at the Traymore in Atlantic City, when she believed she had left Judd forever. But here she was in the taxi, meter clicking, next to his hands, whitish-pinkish, with brisk unappealing black hairs on the backs, next to his tobacco smells, his witch-hazel tartness, his discolored teeth, his strangeness. She had to keep her disappointment in check. In check and tamped down like the tobacco in the pipe he affected after dinner. She had always disliked the pipe routine, the gurgling and popping, the knocking against the heel of the hand. A pretense of being grown up, but unconvincing to her. And now she too was being tamped down in the bowl, pressed by his unappetizing hand, even as she deplored the weakness that had brought her back to this marriage, this self-betrayal.

"I'm willing to forget the whole thing, Margaret, start over." He had said that a few minutes ago in Mama's apartment on West End Avenue, Mama in the kitchen but the swinging door wedged open so she could hear. But Mama couldn't hear all the meanings, couldn't register the fear and hurt under the magnanimous offer. He repeated the statement now, as they rode down Seventh Avenue to Guiffanti's, and she heard even more—the sneer congealing over the wound, the princely overtone that implied he was doing her a favor. Overlooking her transgression. But there was more to it even

than that. She hadn't sorted it all out yet—they were passing Penn Station now, the Baths of Caracalla—but she would.

Of course, he had done her a favor eight years ago in marrying her over everyone's opposition. His mother had objected on principle, though she would have opposed anyone. His father had been neutral, limiting his attention to correcting her Texas accent and telling her what sights to see in New York. And his sister Hattie! Luminous, auburn-haired Hattie had told him right off that he could do better. All that had come out slowly, after the wedding, though she had sensed it before. She, Margaret Barish, just wasn't good enough for Judd Schanberg, the Prince of Wales.

And now she, who was so beneath them, whose family was provincial, ignorant, had walked out on him. The brown wren had flown away. Charlie Rysdale had learned her secrets right off. He had taken her aside last year after one specially horrible Sunday dinner, whispered, smiled, stirred her emotions with a giant ladle. And of course he was just her type—tall, with a ruddy complexion, foxy face, blue eyes and flaxen hair. Like Rudy Vallee. The kind of boy she always had a crush on back in Gideon, a private crush since none of them ever paid her the least mind. The night after that talk with Charlie she had dreamed they were heading into the dark together, along a pathway of bright doors which gradually turned into the covers of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*.

At those Sunday dinners nobody saw what was happening. Not Judd, much too confident of his prize-winning status. Not Hattie, who should have noticed something since she was married to Charlie. Not even Selma, who missed hardly anything concerning her two precious offspring.

Only she and Charlie knew, eyes locking, smiles lurking, during those endless dinners. Yes, significant glances over the matzoh-ball soup and the brisket of beef, secret meanings over the individual salt dishes and butterballs with crisscross paddle marks and radishes cut into little red flowerets. And over the finger bowls—she'd never seen anything like those finger bowls, dirtying two dozen extra plates just to rinse off a little grease.

.....

No, she still didn't have it figured out, why she was here, pulling up at Guiffanti's, sliding across the leather seat, putting her hand in that fleshy pink one. Everything in their lives was always sealed with dinner at Guiffanti's. Their first date. His proposal. Celebrating Mag's birth. Then Harris's. Maybe because it was near Judd's office on Broadway, across from the Everlasting Light, or because he never got Italian food at home. Maybe because the owner always called him by name, "Mr. Schanberg, good to see you, sir, and the missus."

And that routine started now. "Hello, Jimmy." His hearty, big-man voice, democracy at work, then a handshake. As Jimmy conducted them to a table, smiling like Uriah Heep, the joking and joshing continued, proving to her again that in hick towns like Gideon they didn't know how to talk to restaurant owners, how to order from a menu where peas were called *piselli*.

Mama had put it just right. "Too big for their britches." This was after their first visit to the Schanberg apartment, after observing the servants and the statuary and the gleaming checkerboard floors. She herself had been impressed for a while but it had worn off, like the glitter and foreignness at Guiffanti's. Now she knew. Judd enjoyed having a wife, but it didn't fit him quite, always a little self-conscious and show-offy, part of him withheld. Unlike Charlie Rysdale, who had guessed her secrets and told his own right off, so easy and confident, probing at her with his blue eyes set in that ruddy, foxy face until she had surrendered noiselessly, the flues and gates of her body opening even as they sat on her mother-in-law's Louis Quinze fauteuils with the others all around.

And Charlie stood up for her at the dinner table too, taking her side on the poll tax and the Scottsboro Boys and especially the Sacco-Vanzetti scandal. "It's a national disgrace," he said about that, again and again, his big Adam's apple bobbing, his eyes flashing, but nobody cared. She always chimed in, bringing up Dreyfus for comparison, but even that didn't wake them up. Nothing could wake them up, she realized at last, looking at Hattie with her black beauty-mark mole, at Selma with her organdy headache band, at old Henry staring fish-eyed at his food. And then her gaze had met

Charlie's, as usual, and sparkling, unsaid things had passed between them. Us against them. Outsiders against the Schanbergs. Artists against Philistines. Only she and Charlie intended to vote for Roosevelt instead of Hoover.

Jimmy Guiffanti was holding forth on the menu now. Judd joked and boomed. It was all so familiar. One more ritual in eight years of rituals. That's why she'd married, she had laughed to Charlie at dinner in Atlantic City (not eating at their hotel; Charlie couldn't afford it). "I needed someone to tell me what to do." She didn't add that Judd and his take-charge manner had made her feel comfortable, safe, at first. Charlie wouldn't have appreciated that. Her feet had hurt during that dinner, and the other ones, in Atlantic City. Charlie wouldn't rent a roller chair, so they had hoofed it up and down the Boardwalk in the heat, only her celluloid sunshade protecting her. Judd, of course, would have hailed a chair right off, peeling the bills from the wad in his pocket. Not that she minded the tiredness, which couldn't compare to the fact that, after running off with Charlie, she'd never have to go to Guiffanti's again, never have to endure Sunday dinner with the Schanbergs, never have to note Judd's modesty at bedtime. Charlie wasn't modest at all. He liked to stand around in the altogether, even next to the window, when his body, gold and hairless, caught the sun and reminded her of Mercury. And for those five days at the Traymore, when they had defied everybody, he had almost been Mercury, messenger of the gods, with word that she was beautiful.

She'd been pudgy as a girl, undefined, awkward; in the relay races they put her in the middle where she'd do the least harm. She had grown into a wide-hipped, full-breasted woman, still awkward and poorly coordinated. And there was her skin, the color of the bare patches in the side yard where the grass wouldn't take. Sometimes people asked her if she had Mexican blood. But Charlie had changed all that in Atlantic City, keeping the light on, making her look. She had watched his pale, sinewy hands trace the veinery on her breasts and thighs, proving his lust, giving her the gift of vanity, which she had thought would never be hers. "You're beautiful, Margaret," he had said over and over, and at last she believed him.

Judd ordered veal *parmigiano* and spaghetti and wanted her to do the same. But she wanted chicken *cacciatore*. His eyes flickered at her as Jimmy walked off, but what was that little revolt compared to the other one? She tried not to eat the bread sticks but there they were. Suddenly there was nothing to say, even when Judd remarked, falsely casual, "Hell, Margaret, I'm willing to let bygones be bygones."

Charlie had been a little distracted in Atlantic City, except in bed, but that was understandable. This wasn't Sunday dinner, when their conspiracy was the only freshness in the room; this was the wide world of adultery and abandonment. Charlie was playing hooky from Hattie and from his ad agency, where he handled the Auburn account. He didn't believe they could separate so easily from their mates. Her children would be pawns in any settlement. And she realized, when the subject of the future came up, that he had no clear view of it. He really had no concrete plans except to go to Paris and write a novel. Where the money would come from he didn't say. Of course, he had told her about his ambitions during their first talk, matching them with her own literary hopes, and that had been the strongest bond, the bond that had replaced all the others. She would go to Paris with Charlie. They would live in Montmartre. Charlie would write a novel, but secretly, at night while he was asleep, she would get up and write her own on her Remington Noiseless, though she wasn't sure what it would be about. But here at the Traymore, which Charlie complained was costing him twenty dollars a day, the trip to Paris, the novel-writing, seemed far away and getting farther.

Judd was looking at her now, waiting for her to speak first. She could see his pride, puffed out like a lion's mane around his head. And she knew the words he wanted, words that would heal his hurt, reassure him. They were just little puffs of sculptured wind. But she wasn't ready. She had come this far, agreed to this dinner, but she had made no promises. She had said that she would see.

She really meant that she had to find out about the children. Judd's first threat was real enough. He had told Charlie, over the phone, when they came back from Atlantic City, that if they stayed together he, Judd, would put him in jail. They had gone to the

Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue and, sure enough, Judd, with the aid of the family law firm, had sworn out an affidavit for Charlie's arrest. Adultery and kidnapping. A nuisance charge, spiteful, but two policemen had arrived, taking Charlie through the lobby. He had spent the night at the precinct station. And Judd had called her immediately, hoarse with venom. She was an unnatural mother. A scarlet woman. She would never see the children again. A governess had been hired and she would not be allowed to visit. All the building people had been warned against her. She had hung up the phone gasping. His accusations weren't true. She was not a bad mother. She carried the impress of her children everywhere. Even in adulterous hotel rooms she had not abandoned them. They were her own self writ small.

But Charlie, out of jail next morning, had pointed out that Judd could do whatever he wanted since she was the guilty party. "I told you it wouldn't be easy," he'd said, in a voice she didn't like, his sharp face full of self-pity and indecision. But self-pity and indecision weren't what she needed on that particular morning when she might lose her children.

If only she didn't need either man! The women she really admired were brave and independent—Ruth Hale Broun, Edna Ferber, Emmeline Pankhurst, Lucy Stone. Why couldn't she be like them? She was only brave in her thoughts. Yes, fierce in her mind and timid in the world. How many times had she spoken out in favor of free love? But when the time came . . .

Judd had finished his veal and was ready to discuss the children in general terms. "Harris is a *pisher*, what can I tell you? He pisses in his pants ten times a day." He laughed without affection. She hated those expressions, old words from a dead culture, so un-American. Harris was not the boy Judd wanted. Brown like her, with slumbrous eyelids, badly coordinated, slow to walk and talk. But he made up for that by being affectionate. He always had his arms out. She suspected he would go through life with his arms out.

"And Mag, how is she?"

Judd smiled in deep consanguinity, silvery smoke streaming from his nostrils. "Beautiful. She's the boss."

It was true. Mag ruled her father, her grandparents, everyone. She was probably ruling the new governess now. "She's gonna be a handful, whoever marries her," he added. "I feel sorry for him."

The phrase rang in her memory. Mama used to say the same thing in Gideon, before Papa died and they moved to New York, into Uncle Harris's big apartment on West End. "I feel sorry for the man marries you, always got your nose stuck in a book, look at those chickens, didn't I tell you to mind them?" And maybe Mama had been right because the man sitting across from her now had married her and he was sorry. Maybe the books had won out, as Mama had foretold, because that was the secret of Charlie's appeal. He had seduced her with book titles, suborned her with Victor Hugo and Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell and his own unwritten masterpiece. The books, the books had led to disaster.

"And by the way, Mag told us about your little visit to the kids last week."

"She told you?"

"She told Aunt May. Aunt May told Hattie." His eyes twinkled malevolently behind his wire-rims, causing her to wonder at the distance, the barriers between them. Their marriage had never been more than a truce, really.

She shouldn't have called to the children but she couldn't help it. She'd been walking along Riverside when she saw them on the playground below the Soldiers' Monument. She had run down the steep path, watched them on the monkey bars, then followed their shouts to a middle-aged woman sitting on a bench. Aunt May, they called her. The new governess. She had called out softly to Harris and he had raced screaming toward her, arms out. What a heavy little sack of love he was. Mag had taken her time, climbing without haste from the top bar. By then, of course, Harris was monopolizing her and it was difficult to enclose Mag too. There had never been room enough for both, really. Still, she had to be fair. She put down the boy and hugged her daughter, registering the squirmy strength of the body, the decisiveness of the elbows, the haughty questions. She had drawn them behind some shrubs, keeping an eye out. Harris wanted to know when she was coming

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