

THE LOVE PENDULUM

BY MARION RUBINCAM

GOSSIP

Chapter 72

Aunt Harriet considered. Evidently she had not expected to tell me all this about my mother. It was the first time I had ever been able to find out anything definite at all, and I did not want to let the opportunity slip.

"Please go on," I begged. "After all, there isn't so much to tell," Aunt Harriet continued, playing with a handsome black pearl ring she wore. "It was evident your father and mother were unopposed to each other from the start. She was not born to the sort of life she had to lead with him, and she made him too ridiculous."

"How?" She hated to spend money for things. She dismissed servants, she wanted to do her own work. She hated to spend money on clothes, having always made her own. She thought it wicked to have more than three courses at a dinner—your father used to get dinners where there were 15 and 20."

"How awful," I murmured. My aunt smiled. "Of course in those days things were done differently. But your mother would not try to conform. She believed her own narrow, economical way the best. The odd part was that she looked so dainty and pretty, and when she was dressed up in the sort of clothes fit for her station, she was one of the prettiest women in the city. She could have made him her slave, if she had tried, for your father has always been susceptible to beauty in a woman."

"I suggested taking her abroad. Europe was the great place to finish off one's education. She was seasick she hated the strange new cities, she disliked the people she met. Poor girl! I suppose we should have been sorry and helped her more than we did. We were both a little impatient."

"She disapproved of so many things. Perhaps, from a strict standpoint she was right. But we all have to make allowances. Our own code of honor cannot be applied to everyone else. That's where she was narrow. One evening a very distinguished woman was present at a reception in her house—your father's house, too, remember. The woman said something which offended your mother's scruples, and she insulted her, there, with all the room looking on. Everyone your father cared about was present."

"He was furious. They quarreled and she went back home. But they made it up, outwardly at least, and you were born six months later. You lived with her in the country for two and a half years, and she died then. I went to the funeral. Your father had gone to Europe. He came back as soon as he could. I took you a way with me and you've been under my care ever since—until you ran off with Winthrop."

"I asked for more details. Strange, I could not entirely sympathize with my mother, when I know all my aunt could tell. Yet I longed more than ever to have known her."

"So when your father heard of you deliberately coming down here, he naturally thought it was your mother in you, her odd instinct for getting away from people, for burying herself in the country. I suppose you do inherit your reclusive instincts."

"We talked of other things later. She told me what she had heard of Win, which was little enough. 'I saw to it that our set dropped him,' she said. 'He runs around with quite another group—not very nice people, rather fast. I think Gwen won't drop him, of course.'"

"So it seemed that things were the same with him! If only he would see the shallowness of those people. If only he could be made to see the worth-while things of life! I felt all the old longings more strongly than ever."

Colin came again for two weeks and left. I had kept away from the village, people while Aunt Harriet was with me, knowing she would not like them. When Colin came, they seemed to avoid me—possibly feeling hurt because they had not been invited to meet my aunt. So I

was alone all the time now, except for Mother Taylor and Ella's occasional visits. A sudden and sickening revelation came to me one day when May was calling, the first visit from her for weeks. The baby was on the lawn and I called her for her nap. "Connie," I called and she did not come. "Connie Anderson! You little witch!" I ran down and picked her up to carry her to the house. May surveyed us with uplifted eyebrows.

"Connie Anderson, you call her?" "Yes, that's her name." "But of course, she's your child." "No. She's the daughter of—of a friend of mine. She was named after me."

May's mouth curled a little. "You surely don't expect us all to believe that, when she looks so much like you. We thought at least you would give her your own name—that is, Winthrop's name." I stared, wondering what she was driving at.

"What do you mean?" I asked, though in a flash I guessed—guessed from the horrible expression in her eyes.

GOSSIP

Chapter 73

Sometimes when anything peculiarly unpleasant happens, one's brain refuses to comprehend it. That was how I felt for an instant before May's cynical expression.

"What do you mean?" I asked again, though I knew all the time May took refuge in evasion, which is always the coward's trick.

"Oh, nothing," she murmured. I watched her steadily. Ordinarily I shrank, both mentally and physically, from anything unpleasant. I would always rather say I was wrong in an argument, for instance, than carry on a distasteful discussion. This implication, however, was so tremendous that I had to get at the root of it. And I was not afraid.

"So I stood before her calmly enough, Connie held in my arms, and suddenly quieted by the queer tenderness of the atmosphere."

May dropped her eyes and looked exceedingly uncomfortable. Yet her mean little mouth had a smile around the corners. May was the type who loved moderately dangerous adventures, "thrills" she would call them. But as her quiet life gave her no opportunity for this, she satisfied her taste for excitement by gossiping about her neighbors and quarrelling with them.

"You know you mean something, and something serious," I said. "You've said too much, and yet not enough. Better be frank and tell me what you are hinting at."

"I'm only repeating what everybody around Wellsville says," she answered, taking refuge behind any excuse she could find. "She looks exactly like you."

I put Connie down and looked at her more keenly than I ever had before. As a matter of fact she did not look like me at all, except that she was the same blonde type that I was. The baby's eyes were a delicious blue-gray—some days a clear gray without a touch of blue. Her hair was darker than mine. It would be light brown when she grew up, now it was a rich gold, with red tints when the sun was on it.

To be sure, she had the delicate white skin that was one of my best points—but it was only the rose petal skin of any well-cared-for baby. As for the rest, it is easy enough to trace resemblance to almost any grown person in the vague, unformed feature of a child! The baby and I both belonged to a certain delicate blonde type. I almost smiled at the idea of a greater resemblance than that.

"Run in to Ellen and tell her it's time for your luncheon," I said, and gave her a little push toward the door. I turned to May again. "She isn't my daughter. She's the child of a friend of mine, as I explained before. I wish she were mine—I don't see where the scandal would come in if she were."

May sat silent again—a silence that implied more than words, a silence that sneered. I felt silly standing there justifying myself, defending myself against an unknown charge. But what she said or hinted, was against little Connie as well as myself, and I felt I had to deny it.

"Friends aren't likely to let other friends have their babies away who summers at a time."

"Why not?" I asked, relieved that this was it, for this was easy to explain. "It happens in this case that Connie's mother is a poor woman and that Connie gets ill in the hot city. I had her in the country last year when she was quite small. I didn't say anything about her parents because I didn't want gossip about the poor youngster."

"She has your name—"

"Her mother is my laundress in town. Her husband practically deserted her when she was ill. I was nice to her, as anyone would have been, and she named the baby after me out of gratitude. She happens to be the sister of my maid here."

That would quiet the talk, I thought, with a feeling of great relief. But May maintained the sneer about her mouth.



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I began to laugh suddenly.

"If she were my daughter, why should I hide that fact from Wellsville? Wouldn't I have written it to Mother Taylor, so all you would have known when she was born?"

Still the sneer. This time it deepened. Again I felt the flash of intuition, the hint my mind would not accept as in May's own mind.

"She couldn't be my child anyway," I explained, desperately anxious to see that sneer go. "I was married in August, Connie was born late in March."

The sneer became a malicious smile. "Well!" said May, as though that settled it triumphantly. And then I knew the extent of all the vicious, sordid gossiping.

AGAINST THE WALL Chapter 74

So it came to me that way, so cruelly I could not but know all the ugly details. I could see them sitting about talking of it, of me, of Win. Later I learned that my picture of the scene was accurate in every detail.

The gossip was led by May and Martha, naturally, since both these women were unhappy and, with the curious hardness of unhappy women, they found a little consolation by dragging other women into misdeeds.

It came up at an afternoon tea at Ella's. Half a dozen of them had assembled to sew for charity. Such was the irony of it. For all the gossip of the town, all its scandals, all the known and half-guessed transgressions of everyone in Wellsville, were brought out, commented on, enlarged, made convincing, while they sat there sewing for charity!

There had been talk enough over the first hint that Win and I were separated, and talk before that because we were not happy together. Of course, being women, they defended the man—or perhaps I am too hard on them. After all, Win was their old friend, their own townsman. After all, too, he was "the catch" of the town, a man with youth, good looks and money, rich (according to their standards) and he was carried away by an utter stranger, a girl who was rich enough not to need his money, and who "had the pick of the big city" as they expressed it. Matrimonial opportunities are limited in a small town, where the feminine population usually outnumber the masculine. In a big city, one's choice, it seemed to these girls, had no limit.

Naturally they resented me, naturally they were glad to believe the worst of me!

Led by the unhappily married Martha, they talked of my own matrimonial unhappiness, putting it down to my own extravagance, my frivolity. I "led Win a dance," as they said. Knowing it was Win who led the mad dance I reluctantly followed. I almost smiled at this.

Then I came back ill, and their consciences hurt them. This made them, not penitent, but uncomfortable. But they had more to gossip about—Win was not with me. They regarded me as dangerous, they thought I wanted to attract more men in the town. If one of my old friends called, it was a week's scandal. Husbands were carefully kept as far from me as possible. Martha, hating her own husband was the most anxious of all the wives!

we were married," was her answer to that. "Then you do believe it? Why do you think then that I should hide the fact? Do you believe she is Winthrop's child?"

"I—I—how should I know? They all say different things."

"Some that she isn't! Some imply that Colin is—well, why repeat it? I didn't even know Colin until a little while ago."

"Well they do talk," Mother Taylor was at last relieved that the subject was up for discussion. "It seems that all believe she's yours, but she was born too early. It's as bad for Winthrop as you. And you didelope suddenly."

I sat silent, hurt, angry, wretched, disillusioned. At one blow my lovely quiet country village was taken from me. Instead of a refuge of peace and quiet, it was a howling monster that wanted my happiness my good name, my very life.

"What wicked people they are!" I said finally. "Mother Taylor, you know better, you certainly don't believe this nonsense, do you? I'll bring Mrs. Anderson down here. The only way to convince these people there's no scandal is to produce the child's real mother. She may look enough like Mrs. Anderson to make them believe, and stop this talk."

I was against a wall, the whole town fighting me. I suddenly hated them. I wanted to run. But I wouldn't.

THE FIGHT Chapter 75

"At least I'm glad to know they don't like me, and why," I said finally. "It clears the atmosphere, doesn't it? I could not understand this curious antagonism. I've felt it ever since I came back."

"Why did you come back?" Mother Taylor demanded suddenly. "There were lots of other places to go. Your aunt goes away all summer, why don't you go with her?"

A vision of the restless summer my aunt led, came to me. Parties the same as those in the winter, except they were often held out-of-doors and one wore cream lace and chiffon instead of tinsel and brocade. Otherwise there was little difference between her summer and her winter life.

"I like it better here—or did. Heaven knows, my Aunt and the people she sees, talk enough scandal and gossip!"

"Doubtless they deserve to have scandal talked, my mother-in-law remarked with her lips pursed up. "Doubtless they do," I answered. "But from all I hear, they talk it, and deserve it as much down here. Big cities are always immoral," said Mother Taylor with an air of great virtue.

"Little towns are infinitely worse," I exclaimed with sudden fury. "At least in New York and the other big cities they vary the gossip by talking of interesting things, boots and music and politics and travel and things of that sort. Here they seem to talk scandal and nothing else, except how to bake cakes and run a house."

"The scandal's worse in the city!" "It isn't, it couldn't be," I interrupted, thinking of the sordid, ugly details of some of the talk I had heard. "It's worse here because it's narrower. So in the city, if I leave my husband or my husband leaves me, there is a lot of talk and speculation and some rumors may be unpleasant. But after all, they conclude, it's my affair and not theirs, and in a few weeks it's accepted and forgotten. My friends stay with me and Winthrop with him. Here they never let it die down. It's always a new subject."

After a moment I added: "Besides, I thought it would be nice to stay near you."

This produced an odd effect in stead of softening, mother Taylor stiffened as though a rod had been tied to her back.

"Even if you think my house is hideous and full of a lot of trashy furniture."

I turned and stared. My own harmless little remark to Ella had gone back to her this way. It may have been tactless to say I thought her house, to full of chairs and tables, that it made me restless. But I would have told her as soon, had there been an occasion for it. Naturally I would not volunteer such information.

"Yet I said it privately to Ella. I had told Ella many things much more serious in confidence, as Ella had told me many serious things too."

I would not have dreamed of violating the girl's trust in me. Yet she must have repeated what I said, otherwise it could not have gotten back so.

she asked finally. "No," I said quietly. "If I had any good reason for bringing Mrs. Anderson I would, but she would find it hard to leave her family."

Another silence.

"I suppose since you find it so unpleasant here you'll be going back to the city?"

"No," I answered again. "I had thought of that, but I shan't. I've just finished fixing up this house. I'm perfectly comfortable here and Connie is improving every day. It's cowardly to run. It looks guilty too, so I'll stay. More than that, Colin is coming again—if you'll let him have a room in your house."

COLIN Chapter 76

I'm inclined to think that for all her apparent disapproval, Mother Taylor enjoyed the prospect of this silent fight between the village and myself. She took a certain grim pleasure in it.

Down in her heart there was a large amount of admiration for me because I would not run away, because, I dared to stay on there and calmly face the criticisms of the little town. Once she had disapproved of me. Mother-like, she had taken every excuse to defend her son so I was the target for her displeasure. Winthrop's faults had become such that she could no longer overlook them—therefore she had to find a reason for them. I supplied her with the excuse for him. Someone had with the confessed, so I was the one.

But Winthrop's faults had become so glaring that not even I could deny an excuse. So Mother Taylor came around to my side, and now was ready to take my part against the village even against her son.

She would not admit this, of course, even to herself. But she showed it when she said cordially: "Of course Mr. MacReady can have his old room again at my house. He's a very nice man, no trouble, and I like him about."

I half smiled, thinking how Colin had gone out of his way to make Mother Taylor like him, and glad he had succeeded.

But the dear woman could not resist one final conversational dig. "He's an artist and you admire his taste," she remarked, pulling her little black cap around her shoulders ready to leave. "He says he thinks my furniture is wonderful."

"Does he? He has excellent taste," was all I dared answer to this. And she went home, feeling she had much the best of the afternoon's argument. And I smiled again, watching her small figure trotting down the street.

"Pardon and wonderful" was Colin's full description of the horsehair and carved knob furniture, the paper roses, dollies, antimacassars, china dogs and other decorations of her funny, overcrowded house. But Colin had said it with that nice humorous smile; there was nothing really critical in his comment.

So Colin came back. "Is life here as mad and festive as ever?" he asked, looking down the deserted, sunbaked street. "Quite mad and festive," I answered smiling. "It will do you good, Colin, you look worn out. I'll send you home to Mother Taylor's to bed before nine every night?"

"But how about those dinner and card parties? You know we went regularly last time I was here."

"I've decided to cut that all out," I answered with but the slightest hesitation. "But Colin knew me so well he caught the inflection in my voice."

"What's the trouble? They weren't as cordial as they might have been, I noticed that. Every time one of the men looked your way, some village damsel would promptly come up and rescue him. Do they think you're a vampire, Connie, because you've come from the city?"

I laughed at this. "Not as bad as all that," I answered. "And though they didn't like the boys to pay much attention to me, their objection wasn't as obvious as you make it out."

"Well, perhaps it's my jealous eye," said Colin by way of explanation, the little humorous smile deepening around his ugly sensitive mouth. "Connie, I'm frightfully tired. The city is beastly."

"I'm sure it is. I've told Ellen to have lots of iced tea and those

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FRIENDSHIP Chapter 77. "Don't talk about falling in love even jokingly," I answered gently. Colin put down the glass, and began mixing another drink. He had a favorite combination of powdered sugar, which he allowed to melt first on the ice, and bruised mint and hot tea poured in until half the ice had melted. He settled back again with this. "I'm not sure I'm joking," he said. "If you were a coquette I couldn't talk of you like this, or if I didn't know you so well." "It would be even worse to talk of it seriously," I answered. "It would be—rather disastrous—wouldn't it, if you were in love with me?" Colin sipped his tea and continued to regard me with solemn green eyes. "Proper that I'm not seriously in love with you. Is that I'm here. If I were in love with you, I assure you, I would never come near you. I made that mistake once." "With Muriel?" I knew that was the name of a girl with whom he had once been in love. "With Muriel," he acknowledged. "She was married. You told me once you were too sensible to fall in love with any married woman." I said. "What a genius you have for making people comfortable and quiet, he sighed. "Yesterday at this time I was a nervous, perspiring wreck. I'm lord of the earth this now. You give me cool things to drink, and a cool quiet picture of yourself and the youngster to look at, and a cool porch to lounge in, turned the cake plate. "It was one afternoon before the fire in my living room in town—when I was so

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