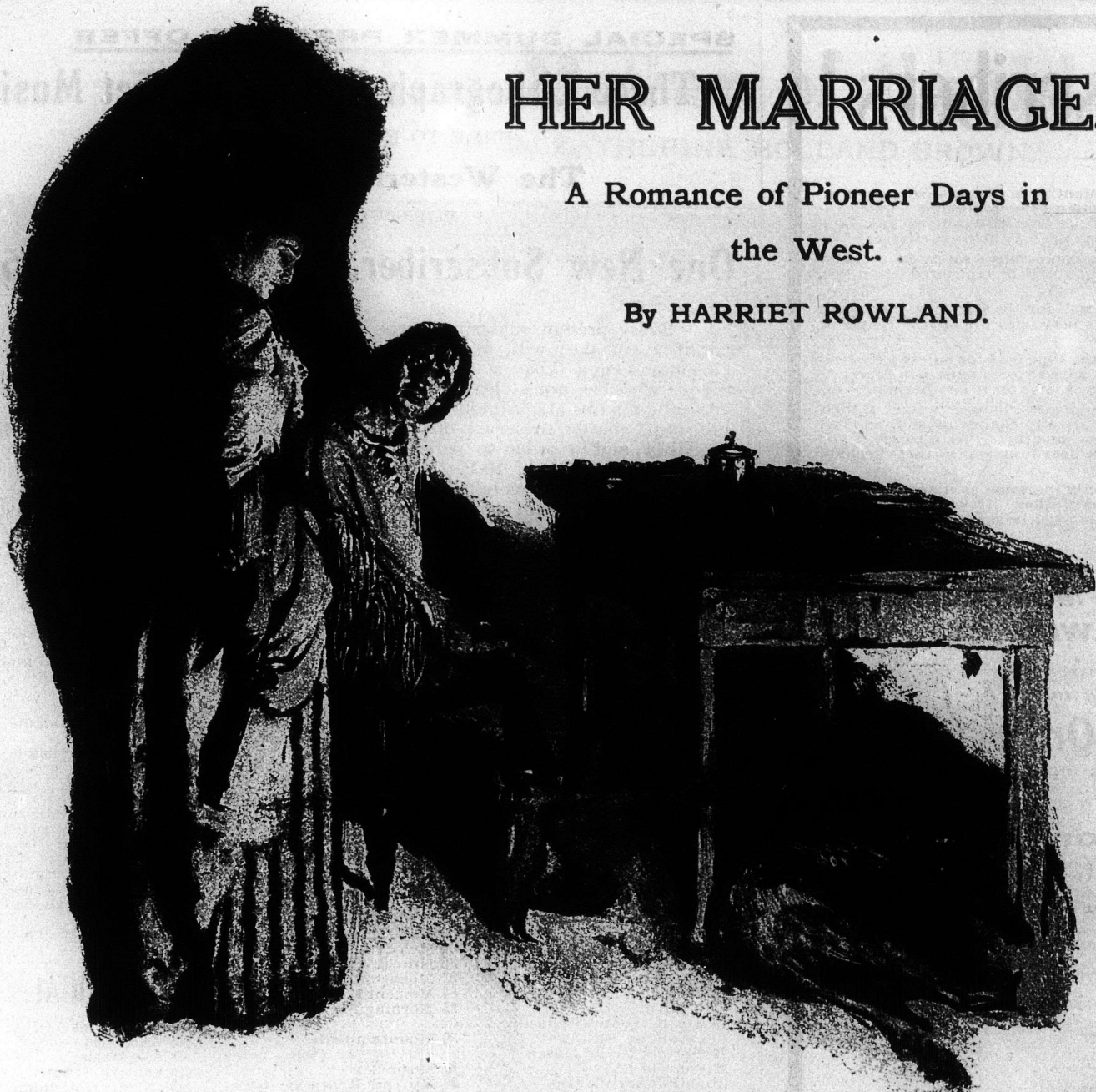


HER MARRIAGE.

A Romance of Pioneer Days in
the West.

By HARRIET ROWLAND.



"Through the Smoky Haze He Saw the Girl, a Pistol Dropping from Her Nerveless Hands"

ALMOST two centuries ago young Jonathan Chapin, marrying the prettiest girl he knew on the Eastern coast, journeyed West to hew a home out of the unbroken forest.

The girl was brave and capable as well as good to look upon, and they prospered, wresting, as years passed, a small farm from the wilderness, living simply, healthily, happily. One daughter was born to them—Lilias—a fragile, exquisite creature, whom they shielded with passionate tenderness until she entered her fourteenth year, when the father was killed by a tree swerving unexpectedly from the course marked out for it by his axe. The helplessness of woman and child was tragic with no man's strength to aid in the arduous labor of the farm, to shield from dangers menacing through the surrounding forest, but the mother struggled bravely until chance—was it chance?—sent a young hunter to her door for shelter from a storm. Morning showed several feet of snow, drifts higher than the tiny cabin, and a lowering sky promising a heavier fall. The lad, for he was in his twenties, stayed with them until spring. Then he grew restless; but after a short absence returned, sharing their frugal home for three years. He was cheerful, willing to help in their necessity.

During that last winter with its extreme cold the mother's vitality, sapped by years of anxiety and hardship, failed, and she felt death near. Great as was her physical suffering, it was nothing to her mental agony at leaving her child, her tenderly-guarded darling, alone in the world.

Calling the man to her bedside she sent the girl from the room on the pretext of preparing food, and fastening her still beautiful eyes on his, said with difficulty:

"Roger, I am going to die—nay, seek not to interrupt; I know it. I

am desperately ill; help cannot reach me in time. I feel my illness to be mortal. How can I leave my child, my lovely Lilias, unprotected?"

The young man replied earnestly that he would essay anything she wished to relieve her distress.

Before the girl returned they had agreed that he should try to reach the small settlement miles below on the river, bring back a priest and marry her ere the mother's eyes closed in death, that she might die with less anguish, feeling her child to be left in a husband's care.

"For I trust you, Roger," she concluded faintly, exhausted by the pain of speech.

"You may," he replied simply.

The journey must be made on snowshoes; he could not return before the third morning.

"I shall live until I see you again," she said firmly. "I will not die until my Lilias is safe!"

She kept her word. The third afternoon brought youth and priest, and a few words gave Lilias a protector.

"My own, own dear child," whispered the mother hoarsely. "Roger must be everything to you—father, mother, husband. You must learn to love him, and obey him as you have obeyed me. He will be kind to you, beloved." Her agonized gaze entreated the young man; and as his blue eyes met her dark ones steadily a look of peace passed over her face and she died, her strength spent by the effort of will that alone kept her alive until the marriage was solemnized. On the following day the priest left them after assisting at the simple burial.

When Roger re-entered the cabin the living-room was vacant; there were but two other rooms, his own a narrow closet at the height of the huge chimney, and the large one occupied by mother and daughter at the left. Knocking softly he pushed open the door of the latter, seeking the orphaned girl. Her small face shone dimly through the gloom like a white flower at twilight, the dark masses of

hair looked too heavy for the slender neck to uplift, her delicate hands were caught in a tense clasp.

"Lilias."

She did not reply save by turning her large eyes upon him, and he saw a pulse leap in her throat. A sudden wave of tender pity swept over him, setting his heart to beating violently, flushing his face with scalding heat, for with sympathetic insight he realized that the child was sick with terror of him; even as he gazed the scarlet of her lip paled to a bluish white, her figure grew more rigid.

Although he had lived with them three years the young girl always had seemed remote. She was a fanciful creature, timid, thinking her own thoughts, living her own life apart, while physically so near. They were strangers; her mother had sufficed, and she seemed scarcely to have realized his presence. He, on his part, had never ventured to look upon her as a man might look upon a maiden in the enforced intimacy of a three-room cabin: sanctified by her mother's adoring love, he had never dared to think of her as a possible wife. She seemed more like a child, beautiful, exquisite, not to be touched by a man's rough hands—than a woman to share his life.

"Lilias," he repeated gently, "will you listen to me?"

She bowed her head mutely, the frightened eyes clinging to his face. Across his vision flashed the memory of a fawn he once surprised in the forest. It had stared at him with the same fascinated fear until a movement on his part broke the spell and it had fled like the wind. This frightened fawn could not flee—that refuge was denied.

"Try to believe me, Lilias," he continued simply. "You are a sacred legacy to me from your mother, who was my friend. The priest's words have made you my honored wife"—she shivered—"but I swear to you by her dear memory that I shall never claim you as my wife unless I can teach you to love me. Do you understand?"

She bent her head in assent, faint color creeping back into her ashen lips.

"I shall never cross the threshold of this room again until you bid me. Try to trust me; do not be afraid. Here is your father's pistol, you know how to use it; I will place it here, with bullets and a powder-horn, flint and steel, on this shelf by your bed; you will feel safer so. I—I would I could bring back to you her who is gone."

He turned toward the door. Her lips parted, her small hands twisted together.

"You are kind to me," she stammered.

"As I shall be all my life," he answered gravely.

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The winter days passed swiftly; the girl busied with household tasks, the man hunting, chopping wood, occupied with the countless duties incident to life far from the conveniences of civilized centres, saw each other only at mealtime and during the evening's leisure. How Roger anticipated the hours spent before the glowing logs, talking of the great world, unknown to the girl, that stretched beyond the forest! He had traveled much for so young a man, and time slipped by unheeded as he described the peoples and customs, of other lands. He spoke no word of love, but set about the task of winning her confidence, of interesting her in himself, of becoming necessary to her happiness—after that love would come unforced. He was a blue-eyed, fair-haired, ruddy man of strong build, who would win by untiring persistence rather than by a brilliant coup, who cared not for what effort victory cost so that at the last it was his beyond question.

One day when a hint of softness in the breeze suggested spring, Roger, hunting in the forest, was struck down by a mass of ice and snow falling from a rocky height, and lay insensible beneath it. A few weeks earlier he would have frozen to death ere consciousness returned; now the cold was less intense and he struggled back to life. But as he strove to rise he found to his horror that he could not lift his body from the ground; the blow had injured a nerve, paralyzing his legs, and he was powerless to move.

An icy hand clutched his heart as the consequences to Lilias flashed before him; for the first time in his life he tasted fear. Not for himself: every man must die, and his gun insured him painless death—but the girl! He pictured her glancing from the window in surprise at his absence; at first not anxious, but as night settled down on the cabin, as days passed, with distressing suspense, with overwhelming fear, and her utter helplessness appalled him. She, too, would die—not swiftly, with steady finger on trigger as he would, but lingeringly, in agonizing pain and terror.

He struggled savagely to rise; raged, cursed, prayed, with fierce demands for help; then lay back, exhausted, to plan—for he would not die, leaving her alone!

The distant howl of a wolf acted as a spur, and setting his lips he rolled over on his breast, dragging himself along on his hands, with useless legs trailing on the path. His progress was slow and painful, the rough, snow-covered ground, the weight of his large body taxing his arms and hands to the point of torture; but it was progress. He never forgot the nightmare of that grim passage through the forest, accomplished only because Lilias's safety demanded his utmost, but while sunset hues still stained the sky he reached the clearing, then—unspeakable relief!—the door, the last few rods being made hideous by mournful howls no farther away than the edge of the timber.

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Once before a severe winter had brought wolves about the cabin, but

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