

CHILDHOOD IN A MORMON HOUSE

BY LOUIS W. LARSEN

MY EARLIEST memory of polygamy harks back to a sunny day when I came sauntering in from the garden and found myself, at the threshold of my mother's cabin, confronted by two strange men. I was then only knee-high to a pioneer, and these visitors loomed like a couple of giants out of a story-book. "Where's your father, boy?" one of them demanded to know. Whereupon I thrust out my hands, smeared with mud, and answered: "I been out in the garden diggin' radishes." That's all they could elicit from me. That was my story—and I stuck to it.

I learned after they had gone away that my father had been warned in the nick of time, and had bounded up the stairs and crawled back to the end of the secret closet under the eaves. Lucky for him! For our callers were United States deputies, known to us as the depts, and they were hot on the trail of the half-dozen Mormon polygamists of our little village. When they had gone my father came down to the kitchen and held exultant converse with my mother, who, from the doorway, had overheard the temporizing of her barefoot prodigy. I recall how my pride was touched by their saying that my answer to the depts had been inspired.

Thus, at a very tender age, was I conditioned to the idea that polygamy was a divine institution. Surely the Lord was on the side of these holy men who had taken plural wives! And surely the depts were

the skulking emissaries of a world of sinners arrayed against the saints! The incident confirmed my already staunch alliance with the Chosen People and impressed me, child as I was, with the principle that I should give no quarter to the enemy.

There would be long stretches of time, back in the 90's, when my father would be "on the underground." The underground, in my infant imaginings, was some cavernous place where these innocent fugitives, the polygamists, took sanctuary from the wicked hands of their pursuers. I have learned since that, at such times, my father would be hiding out in the home of a sympathetic neighbor or keeping watch from the domicile of his second wife, who lived in another village.

In the straggling town where I spent my childhood there were forty-odd families, or rather, heads of families, and six of them were polygamists. Each of these proscribed men faced the problem of outwitting the snooping deputies. I suppose their strategy was much the same. It resolved itself into the troublesome business of keeping out of sight when strangers lurked in the village, or the more delicate exigency of running for it when taken unawares. The latter were the times that provided the dramatic episodes of underground days.

Brother Nielsen, for example, was one day having his watering turn from the irrigation ditch, and was sludging about

in his corn, which stood shoulder high. Unexpectedly, his vigilant third wife wigwagged the intelligence, with a bit of red flannel, that the deys were coming down the lane.

He had no time to get back to the corral and secret himself in the haystack. The two strange men had already reached the front yard and were headed toward the fields. Waste water running across the road had been the clue that he would be somewhere in the garden, attending to the irrigation. They hadn't seen him yet, but there was no place to hide. So he ran to the main canal and immersed himself full-length in the stream, with only his nose poking out through the whipping tendrils of the willows. The officers tramped the banks of the ditch, passing within inches of Brother Nielsen—but they didn't get him that time.

Brother Rankin was another of the hunted men. I have heard him tell his story as one more example of a providential escape. He had been hiding out so long that his wheat crop was going to ruin for want of the sickle. If only he could get to his field, two miles from his home in the mouth of a canyon, he knew he would be able to put in a few licks while his wife kept watch from a knoll at the edge of the farm. So he adopted the device of incognito, wearing a faded flannel dress and slat bonnet belonging to another of his women. He knew the deys were prowling on the outskirts of the village, but he had to take the chance.

Out on the highway, sitting in the spring-seat alongside his wife, who did the driving, he looked innocent enough. But they had journeyed only part of the way when they met a strange man riding in a cart. He stopped the two "women," smiled pleasantly, and asked if they had any idea where he might find Brother Rankin. Mrs.

Rankin had a quick inspiration. Pointing eastward across a stubbled field, she said: "Brother Rankin, I believe, is one of them two men out yonder pitchin' wheat."

The stranger was cordial, almost effusive, in his thanks. He let down the bars where a trail ran into the field and struck off in the direction of the two men busy with the harvest. Half way there, he came to a narrow swamp, apparently dry and grown tall and lush with cat-tails. Being dead on the scent, it seemed too far to go around, so he essayed to drive his pony straight through. He had scarcely plunged in when the animal sank to its withers and the cart bogged down to a level that wet him to the waist. He was able to scramble back to dry ground but he couldn't do anything whatever, unassisted, about the horse and cart.

Not being in so much haste now, he took time to walk around the end of the treacherous slough. When he came to the men, he perceived that they were merely a couple of strapping lads in their 'teens. He knew he had been misinformed. "Wonder if you boys would be good enough to come and pull my rig out of that damned marsh?" he inquired. His bespattered person was an object of compassion, but the young men, who were both Mormons, could only lean on their pitch-forks and laugh.

"How the devil did ya come to git in there?" one of them asked.

"I was told Brother Rankin was over here and I wanted to see him for a moment," the deputy replied.

"Oh, ya was wantin' to see Brother Rankin, was ya? Well, in that case ya kin just leave your cart and horse in the tullies till they rot!"

The boys cackled gleefully as the chagrined catchpoll went back across the field the way he had come.

II

Yes, the Mormons were in pretty close league in their defense of the driven polygamists. The depts were not merely harassing a few marked men; they were persecutors of the entire church, and defense of the system was a common cause. Every loyal member had something at stake. It was only the occasional and traitorous bearer of tales who would connive with the deputies.

It was chiefly this hazard of disloyalty that made it so necessary to keep plural marriages in dark secrecy. When one of the brethren took on a new wife, knowledge of it was kept as far—and as long—as possible within the circles of the families concerned. But marriage after a time has a way of proclaiming itself from the house tops, and it was only a matter of months when the tongue of gossip began to wag.

The new plural wife was a kind of mystery woman. Often she would live for a long time with her own parents. In other instances she would be domiciled in a neighboring town. Or she was sometimes invited to live under the same roof with the first wife. This latter fashion of triangular cohabitation was, naturally, the exceptional thing. I knew at least one polygamous family, however, in which the arrangement was sheer domestic bliss. The two women in this case were about the same age. They shared the one dining-room, but each had her adjacent boudoir for privacy when the shadows lengthened and the evening hours drew nigh. This ideal set-up was not disturbed until the coming of children made it necessary to build a second house.

Even the children of the first wife were not always in the know respecting a newly acquired spouse. For youngsters will talk

—and gossip spreads. Their sire's occasional and unwonted absence had to be explained somehow by their loyal mother. At last would come the embarrassing day of exposure. Johnny and Anna would see their papa with a strange woman, perhaps showering on her some unaccountable attentions. Then she would be presented to the gaping children as an aunt. But soon or late, she would be known to them as the wife that she was, and her off-spring as their half brothers and sisters.

I was intimately acquainted with a rather populous family of a neighboring town. One of the girls was called Dolly. One day she told me how she came by the name. She was the child of a third wife and was born after the Manifesto of 1900, by which the Mormons formally renounced polygamy. Her mother's cottage was just across the street from the home of a son of her father by an earlier wife, and this son was also married and the father of a boy, a toddler three years old. There was no way, it seemed, to keep this lad from going over to the grandmother's and having a glimpse of the infant daughter, about which no word was by any chance to be permitted to leak out. Now, it was inevitable that the youngster would sooner or later speak out of turn about his grandmother's baby and thus set a dangerous rumor afloat. So they hit upon the notion of having the three-year-old boy call his infant aunt Dolly. Any casual reference to a dolly which he might make could not be incriminating. The moniker clung; the lady, herself a mother now, is still known as Dolly.

In some instances, secrecy would be preserved for an incredible time. I know of one case in which the polygamist's third wife had been formerly a widow and was the mother of five children at the time of her second marriage. As these grew to ma-

turity, they found themselves becoming well acquainted, through church and social contacts, with the boys and girls of the first wife. After a time an attachment sprang up between a pair of them: the widow's Samuel was in love with Lucy of the other family. What to do? The young folks ought to know. Well, they were told that they stood already in the relation of step-brother and step-sister. But love brooks no such artificial bars as that; they were married.

Children born of polygamous unions after the Manifesto presented their sponsors with an especially urgent need to keep the matter dark. The law would now swoop down with a merciless vengeance. I attended the funeral a few years ago of an eminent polygamist whose posterity ran into the hundreds. The three wives who survived him were conferring with their sons about the order of the cortège and the seating at the last rites. Suddenly a strange woman was ushered into their midst, bearing an infant child in her arms. "I am one of Brother Butterfield's wives," she said calmly, "and this baby is his daughter." Knowing the deceased and understanding his expansive views on procreation, the mourners could not too hastily proclaim her an impostor. She had her rightful place at the funeral. Later she presented documentary proof of the marriage and took her share of the estate.

There is another instance, rather generally known in Utah, of a young man of post-Manifesto birth who broke the will of his vastly rich deceased father and copped himself a fortune. Previous to the death of his sire both he and his mother had borne another name. The "legitimate" children challenged his alleged relationship, but he proved his case. Overnight, he thus rose from the ranks of the nondescript to a place of wealth.

III

Polygamous courtships naturally were a very colorful feature of the clandestine practice of plural marriage. The audacious men who went in for it had to develop an utterly new technique of wooing. There was no precedent this side of Jacob. The sanction of church authority was, of course, the obvious key to the approach. The brave aspirant could easily engage an unsuspecting girl in a casual discussion of church doctrine, leading deftly to the prospect of eternal glory. She in turn—if he were a man of parts—would utter a profound giggle and remark on the beauty of the plural principle. From there on it was a simple step, I fancy, to the plighted word.

The American conception of the Mormon polygamist as a dour and sanctimonious graybeard is all wrong. Most of the men who got plurally involved were in their young manhood or middle age when they took the fatal steps. Beards grew with the passing of the years, but long enough after the heyday. It is my notion that many a buxom and desirable girl was eager to become the second or third wife of an adventurous young Mormon. True, there is the less lovely picture of doddering fellows who craftily snared young maidens meant for a better fate. But my observation has been that the practice of polygamy was almost wholly voluntary, that the same love lure which tugged at the heart strings of the first wife was the fatal charm that enmeshed the second—or the third.

One polygamist I knew married two young women who were inseparable companions. There was no break in the intimate comradeship of the girls during the wooing of the second or for a long time after her marriage. Wedded life found them just as chummy and clinging as ever,

still following their old whimsy of wearing identical bonnets and dresses. At home or abroad, they were always together; arm in arm, whether sitting in the church or going down the street. They lived under the same roof, coöperating in the household tasks and taking their meals at the same table. Naturally, their man was proud to have them so friendly and congenial. All the villagers pointed to the trio as a model polygamous family.

Then one day something happened to disrupt the triple union. The first wife drove the second out of her home and forbade her thenceforth to use the husband's name. The outcast woman became a forlorn recluse, residing for many years, just across the block, with her only child. There was only bitterness between the erstwhile friends. What it was so abruptly silenced the cooings of the love nest, no one ever knew—no one but the two women and the man they tried to share.

In many cases, Mormons married pairs of sisters. It has been the common view that they preferred this arrangement for the reason that sisters should be more inclined to live agreeably in the delicate relation. It is my opinion, however, that such marriages were not so much the result of deliberate choosing as of opportune association. The younger sister, being much around the home of the older and married one, would become well acquainted with the husband and thus expose herself hopelessly to incipient courtship.

Polygamy, incidentally, was a godsend to the spinster. She could always go out and get herself a man. The younger and more luxurious girls were quite likely the first choice of the aspirant to glory, but failing a sufficient supply of them, it was something to know there was an old maid just around the corner. It fell particularly to the lot of the senile to absorb this for-

lorn element of the population. These older girls always put their adventuring into marriage on pious grounds, eschewing all romance and pretending a high degree of spiritual purpose. Courting, in such a case, was merely a matter of gospel conversation.

As I have said, coercion of the fairer sex was quite rare. The sporadic cases, however, of marriage by duress are colorful memories. A woman of my acquaintance, now a member of another church, recites the lurid story of the attempt her father once made to marry her off to a friend and neighbor. The alliance was repugnant to the girl and she stoutly rebelled. So, failing in all the devices of coaxing and badgering, the irate father at last held her prisoner in one of the rooms of his home. To make sure she would not escape, he allowed her only a nightgown in the way of apparel. For many days he kept her thus confined, hoping and praying for capitulation. But one night the girl escaped through a window and ran barefoot in the snow to the home of a neighbor. Her father retrieved her long enough to administer a sound spanking, but she never married the man of his choice.

Another woman, whose story I got from the lips of her own daughter, didn't fare so well. In her case it was no less a dignity than the local Mormon bishop who had asked for her hand. She was an attractive youngster, while the chief official of the ward was an aging, pudgy fellow, who already had more wives than he could well provide for. The father was flattered at the prospect of alliance with a notable, but the girl pointed her thumbs down, protesting the deal with all the vehemence of outraged youth.

Now, it happened that she was the fiancée of a worthy young man. The day had been set. So, together, they planned

ways and means to thwart the two meddling old brethren. An elopement was arranged. She would escape through a window and meet him at the corner, where he would be waiting with a bob-sleigh and a fleet span of horses. He waited in vain. She didn't keep the appointment. Her father had been too smart. This was one marriage that was put through without the bride's consent. She became the fourth wife of the bishop.

IV

Polygamy sometimes lent itself to the artful uses of the adventurer. Religion was not always the motive, though it served invariably as the excuse. There is the story related to me by a boyhood acquaintance, whose father had made the polygamous principle the excuse for high-jinks. This father, as a young man, came from somewhere in the East, back in the days of Brigham Young. Figuring that Zion looked like an interesting place, he found employment with a prosperous farmer and settled down. Now, this farmer had two very lovely daughters, and the wayfarer began at once to lay his plans.

His first step was to proffer to organize and lead the village band, an occupation that led inevitably to an active part in ward affairs. He soon professed interest in the creed of Mormonism, and the spark was steadily fanned to a flame of conviction by his devout employer. He was baptized anon and became an ardent member of the church. Meantime, he had kept a watchful eye on the two girls.

One day he approached the older of them with a proposal of marriage. She was flattered and honored. Being a "foreigner" and handsome, he had become something of an idol with the lassies of the town. He could have had his pick of them all. Of

course she would marry him—and of course her father was proud to have the young convert taken thus conclusively into the fold. The couple was given a parcel of land and they set up housekeeping.

Several years later and after the first child was born, he came to his wife and said: "Mary, I've been thinking a lot lately about this principle of plural marriage. It looks to me like a wonderful thing. Have you by any chance ever . . ."

"Why yes, George," she interposed. "Me and my sister Rosa have been speaking about it ourselves. We think just the same as you do about it."

"Mary!" he exclaimed in an outburst of affection, taking her in his arms.

So another marriage was presently arranged. In good time a child was born; and in almost as good time Mary gave birth to her second baby. The young polygamist found himself the responsible head of two flourishing families. Since he could not provide Rosa with a home of her own, she was required to share the humble quarters of her sister. They were agreeable enough, each remarkably thoughtful of the rights and sensibilities of the other. But that fact in nowise lessened George's task of providing. As the burden grew, he began gradually to lose interest in his two pretty women. For several years more he struggled on, and then one day, after Mary had told him she was to be a mother for the third time, he turned up missing.

Rosa died several years later and left her daughter to the care of Mary. Long afterward, the surviving woman heard that George had returned to the East and that he had left a wife and baby when he had first come out to Deseret. When she was far past middle life, she was married to a staid old widower. She was fond of telling her children that they would not belong in the next world to their errant

earthly father, but rather to the pious man who had taken his place.

I would say that most of the plural courtships and honeymoonings were covert affairs, mercifully concealed from the eyes of the first woman. What she didn't see, she would not sorrow about—not so much, at any rate. There must have been, however, the occasional man so intent on his wooing as to be forgetful of the aggrieved onlooker. One of my earliest memories goes back to a bit of gossip between two women, which I chanced to overhear. I had pricked up my ears at a mention of "poor Martha," whom I knew as one of our neighbors.

This Martha was the first wife of a highly respected citizen and church official. I gleaned from the gossip of the two women that she had been cruelly dealt with. Only the day before, it seems, the thing had happened. As I got the story, her husband had chosen the breakfast hour as a proper time to induct his newly wedded second wife into the family. She was a frivolous, blushing girl of sixteen, younger than at least two of Martha's children. As they sat about the table, this mother and her sons and daughters had to witness the grotesque scene of their husband and father holding this infatuated child-wife on his knee while the two ate their food from the same dishes.

I had heard something not meant for my young ears, for the mysteries of polygamy were never wittingly discussed in the presence of children.

Rivalry between the polygamist and the more eligible single man for the hand of an attractive girl is a part of the lore of the old days. I recall the story of Hannah Eggertson—who was the sweetheart of Joel Marsh—as I have heard it several times related by an old wag who was mixed up in the affair. Every villager who

knew this young couple, it seems, expected that one day they would be married. In the Sunday-school and at the social affairs of the ward they were always together—a pair of confirmed sweethearts, by every token of young love.

One evening a surprise party was planned for a member of the Eggertson family, and Joel was there to cavort with the guests. Hannah was the same adorable girl she had always been, as chattering and playful as ever Joel had seen her. After the others had gone from the place, he lingered, as was the custom, to say good-night to her. But for some strange reason she had disappeared and left him on the hands of a much perturbed mother. No explanation was offered, and young Marsh was far too bashful to inquire about the vanished daughter. Confused and disappointed, he at length edged his way to the door and made a fumbling exit.

A little way up the lane he bumped into several of his comrades, who were waiting to poke some fun at him. "Did you tell Hannah good-night—or goodbye?" one of them taunted.

"What do you mean?" he answered.

"What did she tell you, Joel, anyway?"

"She didn't tell me anything."

"Oh, in that case, I guess she went straight upstairs to bed. Hannah's a married woman—didn't you know that?"

Young Marsh was ready to fight, but the bantering fellows seemed so sure of their scandal that he paused to listen.

"Well, this is what I saw with my own eyes, Joel. When the game of cross-question was on, Jim Olson sneaked in the back door and went on upstairs. I heard a rumor about Hannah being Olson's second wife but I didn't think there was anything to it—till tonight."

No one outside of the immediate families seemed to know how the conquest of

Hannah had been brought about by the triumphant Olson. The girl was apparently happy enough; there was no reason to believe she had been either tricked or coerced. It was just one of the vagaries of feminine inclination that no person has ever been able to fathom.

Men who went in for polygamy seemed to imagine they were just as much in the open marriage market as were the younger and single fellows. Their wives willing, or oblivious, they could go a-courting with the utmost freedom of selection. It is written in the chronicles, or at least is a part of the frontier saga, that the older chaps used to rush up to the mouth of Emigration Canyon, east of Salt Lake City, whenever they got wind of a new train of covered wagons arriving from the plains. Their object in meeting the newcomers was to get a line on the unmarried women who might later be the objects of their pious approach. But it is fair to suppose that the single men had their pick of the valley-tan girls.

The typical polygamist was the man with two wives. I have often heard it said, however, that the ideal number, from a spiritual standpoint, was three. Not a few of the more devout Mormons went that far in burdening themselves with the woes and responsibilities of multiple matrimony.

Some, of course, had four or five, and a number of hardy skippers ventured on the proverbial sea with a half dozen or more. I think it was the disillusionment which usually came with the second plunge that caused the majority of polygamists to stop right there.

The husband usually garrisoned his wives in homes of close proximity. He had to divide his attentions on some reasonably fair basis, and the shorter trails conserved his time. If he was a farmer—and most of them were—he would build his two or three houses within shouting distance of each other, grouping them in some manner about his barns and corrals. He was the foreman and disciplinarian. He set the tasks and kept the activities of his little colony always humming. When he whistled the boys jumped out of bed and went about the morning chores, and the girls got busy with the household work. Then there were the long hours in the fields, all hands heaving to.

The children of polygamous families learned to work. They had to work, to put the project over. No man, single-handed, could have supported several families on the stony acres of my nativity. If there was any of the dawdling luxury of the harem in Utah, it must have been far away from the struggling hamlet that I knew.

PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

BY GEORGE MILBURN

ONE day early last June I and Mr. Harpending was driving home from New York City in the Pierce. He goes in about once a week to contact his publishers and the movie people and salve the "book-club" judges, etc. More than likely he will take in a party if his Mrs. is not along with him. But I guess she is just as bad, and would do the same to a certain extent.

We was almost to Mamaroneck when we see this hitch-hiker standing beside the highway giving us the thumb. The cars was all going right on past him continuous without stopping and, as Mr. Harpending never has had me stop for hitch-hikers before or since, I did not even slow up. All of a sudden I feel him poking at me with his cane.

"Hold on, Spicer," he says. "Let us stop and pick this lad up."

So I eases out to one side and stops. Here this guy comes running as hard as he can. He has all this gear hung on his back. He opens the door panting hard and climbs into the back seat beside Mr. Harpending. He was not a bad-looking young man, though he was dressed in a funny-looking way. I presume that the way he was dressed was what attracted Mr. Harpending to have me stop the Pierce and pick him up. He was a slim, dark-complected youth. I would estimate him between five-and-one-half or six feet tall. He had on leather riding boots and "khaki" riding breeches and a short sleeved silk shirt with collar

open at the neck. Also on his head one of these little caps like artists wear, set over on one side of his head. He had a blanket roll and "knapsack" fastened on to his back with shoulder straps and he was carrying a leather brief case in his hand. I could see him in the mirror and he appeared to be a nice-looking kid in the respect of everything except his upper teeth, which was set forwards quite a bit.

Mr. Harpending give him one of those cold, fish-eyed looks which he can give you and make you feel like you have got "something" hanging out of your nose. "Where are you headed for, young man?" he inquired coldly.

"Westport, Conn.," the hitch-hiker said, very polite.

"Well! And how did you come to be going to Westport, Conn.?"

"Sir, I am on a 'literary pilgrimage,'" the youth rejoindered. "I am going to Westport to call on Oliver Harpending, the great American novelist, whom I am informed lives in that vicinity. I have travelled two thousand miles to see him."

"Ah!" quoth Mr. Harpending, evicting considerable interest, but no surprise. "You can drive on now, Spicer!"

"Is this Harpending expecting you?" queried Mr. Harpending with a slight smile playing upon his lips.

"No, sir, he is not," the young man admitted, "but I think when I tell him that I have come two thousand miles to see him, he will be interested in seeing me."