

THE BRIDE'S STORY

BY

Mrs. LEONARD B. SMITH

Each year the return of the fall brings back memories of events which took place at that time of the year long ago, and which changed the course of my life.

In mid-September, 1918, my family was notified that my brother Henry, who was in the Air Force, had a serious case of "Spanish flu" and had been evacuated to Ligny en Barrois, a small town near Verdun, where General Pershing had his Headquarters. Immediately, my mother decided to leave for Ligny, and my father thought that I ought to accompany her. We both obtained special permission to travel and stay in that restricted zone and we spent about four weeks in Ligny en Barrois. We lived in a small auberge near the hospital and visited my brother every day. As soon as he was allowed to leave for his convalescence we started out for Paris, where we had planned to spend a few days before returning home. Shortly after we reached Paris we received a letter from my sister Cecile urging us to come home immediately as the "Americans" had arrived... Mother was upset; she did not like the thought that the house had been invaded during her absence and while most of the household staff was sick with the flu. I was terribly disappointed as I had been looking forward to this visit in Paris, the second in my life. But after all it was the war and we could not forget it. So, we answered the call to duty and rushed home. I remember that I went to Notre Dame des Victoires in Paris in gratitude for my brother's recovery and had no time for anything else.

In her letter my sister had described the arrival of the "Americans". They arrived on a Sunday and descended upon our home while everyone was attending mass in the village. My father had offered long before to give shelter to American troops and officers but did not expect such a sudden arrival. So when he and the family returned from church they found four American officers waiting in front of the kitchen door with their orderlies and a mountain of equipment blocking the driveway. The senior officer, a very distinguished man who spoke French very well with the help of his dictionary (I am quoting my sister) made all the arrangements with my father; so, when my mother and I, with my brother Henry, returned home in the early part of the week everything seemed to be under control, except in the kitchen. The cook, Maria, whom we had had for twenty years, could not adjust herself to the situation. Mother told her she was going to get extra help but was unable to convince her to stay, and she left. The idea of preparing full meals twice a day for 16 people did not appeal to her. Mother was on the verge of giving up, but Father was not willing to change. On the contrary he said

that he wanted to extend the best of hospitality to the Americans who had come over to help us, and nothing was going to be too good for them while they would be under our roof. Of course, my sisters and myself sided with my father in this family crisis, and to comfort Mother we told her that we would do all the work in the house, etc. We had certain notions about housekeeping but did not know anything about cooking. It still remained the big problem. Fortunately we were able to hire a peasant woman. She was not very expert in cooking but was willing and good-natured. She did not mind having the kitchen invaded by members of the family or the orderlies. She rather enjoyed the excitement, and after Mother had recovered from the initial shock, she did enjoy it too.

The fall that year was exceptionally warm. Schools and colleges had been closed because of the epidemic of the Spanish flu. For the first time in many years, the whole family was reunited. News from the war front was encouraging; there was hope in the air and in our hearts. Our daily life was entirely changed by the presence of American troops in the neighboring country and in our very home. For more than four years we had led a very austere life, and the monotony was only broken by sad or tragic news. Suddenly, the circumstances changed our daily routine. We were as busy as bees every morning in order to substitute for the sick maids. Nothing was too hard for us to do. But we were rewarded for our efforts. Each day was different from the other. During the meals the conversation was full of episodes, adventures related by our guests, sometimes rather slowly, with the help of the dictionary, but always with a sense of humour. Very often the band of the regiment gave outdoor concerts at the neighboring places, and once at Château Belgrave. There was music in the air and also romance.

The Armistice brought a very happy climax, and with it the promise of lasting peace.

The preliminary overtures of Major Smith during the musical moments (Major Smith and myself played piano duets every day) became most pressing. At first, I could not believe that this very dignified officer, apparently a confirmed bachelor, wanted to marry me. The whole thing was beyond what my imagination could conceive, and I confided my surprise and almost my indignation to my father. I said, "How could he dare to tell me he was sure that I would be his wife?". But Father said very calmly "I saw this coming. What did you answer when Major Smith proposed to you?" "Nothing definite", said I. "Then he has every right to think you will say Yes". "Anyway," said Father, "you better consider this proposal seriously. I knew for some time it was bound to come. You did not do anything to discourage it; so now don't act so surprised". I finally decided to follow Father's advice. I agreed to live a great adventure in a great country across the sea with Major Leonard B. Smith.

I have read the account which my husband has given of our marriage; it is correct but not quite complete, and I would like to add a few details. Our wedding was planned for May 27. My husband arrived May 25th; the sailing of the "Savoie" on which he had his passage was delayed. Mother and I met him in Bordeaux and brought him home immediately.

The evening of May 26 was the "diner de contrat", the marriage contract having been signed that day. Also, the civil and religious marriages had really been performed, but were not thought of as completed until the grand ceremony which was to follow the next day. The notary and the older gentlemen guests were in evening clothes, but most of the men attending the dinner were still in their military uniforms. What seemed most important of all was to observe the tradition in good eating, and this was respected in all the table festivities. After the contract dinner my husband disappeared, and my father discovered that he was making his will because he had the responsibility of a new family. Every one was greatly impressed as only a few of us realized that we were already married legally and religiously. I did not consider it myself until all the church ceremonies were over) but it took a gallant and conscientious husband-lawyer to recognize immediately his new liability. And so there came true the prophecy of a fortune teller whom I consulted in Ligny en Barrois, before the arrival of the Americans at my home. She said; "I see a man wearing a uniform coming to your house from far away. He will be much older than you are and your father will have great esteem for him. He will come back bringing you a ring and will take you as his wife to live across the sea".

I will also recount a dream that I had when I was at my home before I went to Ligny en Barrois. I dreamed that with some former school friends we were having an evening picnic at the sea shore. We were all talking about our future mates. One of us said, would it not be strange if God could give each of us a sign in the sky with stars forming the initials of her future spouse. We were all, looking up in the sky. It was a beautiful night and the sky was full of stars. Pretty soon I saw the letters L.S. I said so to the other girls. None of us could think of any one with the initials L.S. In the morning I told my family about the dream but none of us knew any eligible candidate with those initials. I did not know: how to account for it and neither do I now. I only know that the dream came true.

Dated November 1st, 1956.

Simone A. Smith