

MARRIAGE OF LEONARD B. SMITH AND SIMONE ALIBERT

BY

LEONARD B. SMITH

In the first world war I was in France as a Major of Field Artillery in the United States Army, commanding a battalion in the 127th Field Artillery. For several weeks my battalion, detached from the regiment, was billeted on the estate of the Chateau La Tour Carnet, at St. Laurent de Médoc, Gironde, a medieval feudal castle, at one time the residence of the Black Prince, with a tower and underground dungeon, a moat, drawbridge and portcullis and a large self-sustaining estate. The chateau was in a poor state of repair. I myself, with my little staff and our orderlies, was billeted in the Chateau Belgrave, adjoining La Tour Carnet, a modern residence and estate beautifully kept up. The proprietor of Belgrave was my future father-in-law Marcel Alibert, and it was there that I made the acquaintance of his daughter Simone, who later became Mrs. Smith.

Monsieur Alibert was a retired banker and was a prominent figure in the wine industry of Bordeaux. He was the Treasurer of the Syndicat des Grands Crus du Medoc, and was himself the owner of four wine producing estates, two of them crus classes (Belgrave and Camensac).

After a few weeks at Saint Laurent my regiment was ordered to the artillery school at Clermont-Ferrand. My battalion, again detached from the regiment, was billeted at La Cendre, a little village a few miles South of Clermont-Ferrand, and the rest of the regiment at Cournon, a larger village somewhat nearer to Clermont-Ferrand. In the meantime the armistice intervened and the artillery school at Clermont-Ferrand was discontinued. I think that we were only there for a week or two, and my regiment was then ordered back to Bordeaux to await transportation for return to the United States. I was billeted for a short time at St. André de Cubzac, and then for several weeks at the Château Genicart, at Lormont, on the East side of the Gironde River. Genicart was not far from the Château Belgrave, but the Gironde River, four miles wide, intervened. Restrictions on officers' travel were quite severe, and if I should go from Genicart to St. Laurent de Medoc by way of Bordeaux, the usual route, I would be stopped at the railroad station by the military police and asked to show the authority for my travel. I wanted to spend my week ends at Château Belgrave, and I found that at Lormont there was a little ferry to St. Julien very near to Château Belgrave, and on this ferry there was never any military police. I reported this to my regimental commander, Colonel Samuel M. English, and he gave me permission to spend my week ends at Château Belgrave, but warned me that if I got

into any sort of trouble I was not to bring him into it in any way. I promised, but fortunately the contingency contemplated never arose. I thus spent several week ends at Château Belgrave, and my regiment was then ordered back to the United States, sailing from Bordeaux on Christmas day, 1918.

By this time my proposal of marriage had been made but was held in suspense by Monsieur Alibert pending investigation into my standing in the United States. His investigation must have been quite thorough, as it lasted for several months, but fortunately it seems to have resulted favorably as the engagement became official.

On arrival in the United States my regiment was sent to Des Moines, Iowa, for muster out. I received my honorable discharge from the Army on January 22, 1919, and returned to my law practice in New York City.

In May 1919 I returned to France for the wedding. On account of the war-time restrictions on ocean travel, I met immediate difficulty in getting a passport. I was informed at the passport bureau that if I were given a passport to go to France to get married, then my wife and I would have to come back to this country, making three ocean passages, which they would not allow. They said that it would be necessary for my fiancée to come alone to this country and be married here, which would necessitate only one ocean voyage. Of course I knew that the Alibert family would never allow their daughter to embark on any such voyage or any such marriage.

All this time the waiting room at the passport bureau was crowded with dressmakers, drummers, salesmen and petty business people wanting passports, and all that they had to do was to present a letter from their employer, and the passport was immediately issued as a matter of course. The fact that I had been in France as a major in the Army and wanted to go back to France to be married was something to which the little people in the passport bureau paid no attention at all. It made me furiously angry; I immediately dropped negotiations with the passport bureau and took the matter up with my friend and college classmate Frank Lyon Polk, who was then Acting Secretary of State in Washington during the absence of Secretary Lansing at the Peace Conference. I laid the facts before Frank Polk and he sent me a letter which I presented at the passport bureau, resulting in the immediate issuance of my passport. But of course none of my family could go with me, and I sailed for France all alone for my wedding.

Being a protestant I could not be married in a Roman Catholic church, but the village priest at Saint Laurent, Abbé Gaudin, had declared that regardless of the regulations he was going to give Mademoiselle Alibert a grand celebration of her wedding, and that if he was afterward disciplined for it he did not care. For five

years Mademoiselle Alibert had played the organ and trained the choir in the church, and she was also president of the "patronage" or working girls' club in the village. She arranged little trips and entertainments for them, and helped and advised them in their personal problems. The priest recognized what she had done for the village.

The wedding festivities lasted for three days. On May 25 some wedding guests began to arrive at the house, and on the morning of the next day, Monday, May 26, took place the signature of the marriage contract before the notary, who came to the house in his evening clothes for the ceremony of signature. On the afternoon of the same day, May 26, the civil marriage ceremony was performed by Monsieur Mothes, the mayor of Saint Laurent, at his office in the village. My witnesses were my cousin Henry Selden Bacon and my friend John Van Beuren Mitchell, both of them captains in the United States Army, who had come from Paris for the wedding. Monsieur Mothes was a man of peasant origin, but who had made a career for himself. He performed the marriage ceremony with dignity, and at the end made a graceful little speech about this international marriage and the future before it, which Monsieur Alibert considered very creditable to him.

After the civil marriage we went over to the church and Abbé Gaudin married us in a religious ceremony in the sacristy, not in the church itself, which the church regulations at that time did not permit.

The next day, May 27, was the great day, with a high mass in celebration of the wedding.

At that time there were still American troops stationed in Saint Laurent, commanded by Captain Coleman, commanding Company B of the 312th Engineer Regiment of the 87th Division. He very courteously offered to my best man, Harry Bacon, to send a guard of honor for the wedding under command of an officer, which offer, of course, we gratefully accepted.

Saint Laurent is a small village, but the Eglise de Saint Laurent is a large and ancient church, quite a prominent feature in the countryside. The rear part of the church was built in the 14th century in the Roman style of architecture, and it has been added to in subsequent centuries in the Gothic style. The result, though a mixture of styles, is impressive and beautiful. For a week the young girls of the village had been working in the church decorating it for the wedding. There were flowers everywhere in the church, great quantities of them.

I was of course staying in the Château Belgrave. On the morning of May 27 I stayed in my room until 11 o'clock A.M. and then came downstairs. My parents-in-law, bride and bridesmaids were all

lined up in the conservatory. I went along the line of bridesmaids, shaking hands with each one, and when I came to my bride I kissed her and gave her a bouquet. That was the protocol. She gave me a boutonnière.

The wedding guests began to arrive at the house, the older men in evening dress, white tie and tails, although it was only 11 o'clock in the morning. The younger men wore cutaway coats.

My brother-in-law Henry Alibert, who was still in the army and in uniform, was Master of Ceremonies. When it was time to go to church he stood up in the great hall of the Château and called out the names of two gentlemen and two ladies to go in the first automobile. They went out to the car, and he then called the names of two more gentlemen and two more ladies to go in the second automobile and so on until all the wedding party and guests had taken their places in the automobiles. This made a procession of I think about twenty automobiles, which then proceeded about two miles to the church in the village of Saint Laurent.

The Church of Saint Laurent faces on a paved square in the centre of the village, and this square was absolutely jammed full of people, standing-up, who had come from all the countryside of Medoc to see this international marriage. There were spectators in all the windows of all the houses, and perhaps on the roofs, and the church itself was of course filled to capacity.

The guard of honor of American troops, commanded by 2nd Lieutenant Robin Dashield, was drawn up in two lines facing each other, extending from the door of the church down the steps and across the sidewalk to the street. As the automobiles arrived, one after the other, their occupants descended from them, and the wedding cortège proceeded between the two lines of soldiers into the church and took the places reserved for them. My bride and I were seated up in front of the audience at two prie-dieux immediately facing the altar.

By this time I was in a sort of coma, but my bride was completely composed and self-possessed, she was mistress of the situation. She said to me sotto voce "Put your hat on on the floor and put your gloves in your hat". "Stand up". "Kneel down". "Sit down". "Take your hat", and so forth. I obeyed, although she had promised to obey me.

The ceremony was very long, with two priests, with little boys swinging censers, and the Suisse, with his gorgeous uniform and halberd, who paraded up and down the aisle and stood at attention during the ceremony. There was a great deal of music, with the organ (played by some one else) and the choir (directed by some one else) with a solo sung by my wife's sister Marcelle, and a solo sung by a

young man, a cousin of my wife, Antoine Lanneluc Sanson.

When the ceremony was concluded, I led my wife to an altar, where she laid down her bouquet of flowers, and we then returned to the Château Belgrave, where there followed a luncheon that lasted for three hours, with an address delivered by a young man, a friend of the family, who was noted for writing very good literary French.

It was beautiful weather, and after lunch we all went out and walked in the park and garden, took photographs, and played with a little monkey which my wife's cousin Louis Alibert had brought back from Africa, where he had served in the army as a mehariste.

We had a light supper, and about nine o'clock my wife and I left by automobile for Bordeaux. By that time the party was in full swing, people were playing the piano, dancing and singing, and as we drove away in the car the sounds of revelry gradually died out in the distance. I believe that the party lasted until early in the morning, and most of the guests did not go back to Bordeaux, but were put up for the remainder of the night in the neighboring châteaux.

After a honeymoon at St. Jean de Luz and a short visit at Château Belgrave we sailed for New York, where we have lived ever since, of course with frequent visits to France, where Mrs. Smith has a very large family connection. The history of our married life is given pictorially in five large photograph albums, containing hundreds of photographs of all the events in our lives where I was able to take them. Our family consists at present of five children and two grandchildren, most of them widely scattered. The only one who still lives at home with us is our youngest daughter Simone Madeleine Smith, who is called Monette to distinguish her from her mother.

During and after World War I there were thousands of war marriages between Americans and French girls, but I have never heard of another one which resembled mine.

In 1921, during our first visit to France after the birth of our oldest child, we had lunch in the home of my wife's uncle Paul Alibert, and there was present her cousin Louis Alibert. During the luncheon Louis Alibert remarked that the Frenchmen were not so friendly toward the Americans as they had been during the war, because there had been in the Department of Gironde 2,000 marriages between French girls and American soldiers, and the Frenchmen were jealous of the Americans. I said that they ought not to feel that way, because the Americans who married the French girls had merely taken the place of 2,000 Frenchmen killed in the war. He said yes, of course that was so, but the trouble was that the Americans had taken the best 2,000 girls. I had no answer to this.

Dated November 1, 1956.

Leonard B. Smith