



Heaven Begins Now

a Serialization of

All The Way To Heaven

by Elizabeth Sherrill

One more legality remained. In that Calvinist canton, where church and state functioned as one, a marriage license merely allowed a couple to "post their banns" -- to attach to the door of their local church a declaration of their intention to marry. The banns had to remain in place three weeks, during which time anyone with grounds to oppose the marriage was to come forward. It was November 28 when our banns were put up at the entrance to the church nearest *rue* Charles Bonnet, a gray stone structure with an elaborate wooden porch.



The Porch of the Church

There the precious document flapped in the-snow squalls of Geneva's approaching winter, a small sheet of paper tacked to the church door with a dozen others: our names, birth dates, and other statistics. For "home parish" we'd given the names of our hometowns, but when it came to "date of baptism" we'd been stumped. John was pretty sure he'd been baptized and I was pretty sure I hadn't been; under the impatient eye of the registrar-of-church-documents we'd blurted out random dates in our birth years.

Banns, the registrar assured us, were seldom challenged, certainly not in the case of foreigners nobody in the city knew. At last we could set our wedding date: Saturday, December 20, the day after the university closed for the Christmas holidays.

On the way to the trolley for classes -- there was too much snow now to bike -- I'd step up to the church door and read our names. The name of the church I never learned. Nor did it even once occur to me to open that door and go inside.

Third Floor

December 20 dawned sunny and cold after an all-night snowstorm. We had asked Mme. Brulhart and her counterpart at John's *pension*, Mme. de Marignac, to serve as our witnesses. After a honeymoon in Switzerland --it was too late to get an Italian visa in my married name -- I'd be moving into John's room at 9 *rue* Calvin.

We'd moved my steamer trunk there the day before. The de Marignacs were a proud old Geneva family reduced to renting out rooms to paying guests. Their austere townhouse was in the very shadow of somber St. Peter's Church, from whose pulpit in the 1500s John Calvin preached his stringent reforms. We'd written our families that the marriage was set for 10:00 A.M., a more seemly sounding hour than

our actual appointment at the *Mairie*, 9:50.

For days Mme. Brulhart had been in a lather of excitement. On the twentieth, she woke the entire household at 5:30 and provided a standup breakfast. When I'd put on my dark blue suit and rechecked the suitcase packed for the honeymoon, there were over two hours to wait.

Through the front window at 8:45, I saw John making his way over the snow drifts, a bouquet of miniature white carnations in his mittened hand. We set out for the trolley stop, Mme. Brulhart marching erectly between us to remind us that we still faced an hour of celibacy. White-haired, patrician Mme. de Marignac joined us outside the marriage clerk's office on the third floor. The 9:40 couple emerged, and the four of us filed in.

At a desk beneath a huge wooden wall clock sat a gray-bearded man in gold-rimmed spectacles. John and I took two straight-backed chairs across from him, our witnesses on either side of us. Without preamble the man began to read aloud from the form in his hands. The husband was to control all finances, make all decisions, have sole say over the upbringing of children. *The husband will choose the conjugal residence. . . . The church affiliation of the husband will constitute the church membership of his dependents. . . .*

Madame Sherrill

I wondered if Mme. Brulhart and Mme. de Marignac, sitting stiffly to our left and right, were recalling the same words read long ago to them and lived out day by day, I suspected, in their marriages. I clutched my carnations, answered "Oui, monsieur" to a number of questions, and signed my name -- below John's -- to the marriage certificate. At 9:56 on the clock above him, the bearded officiant rose and held out his hand.

"Puis-je etre le premier de vous feliciter, Madame." May I be the first to wish you well, Madame.

At "Madame" I glanced automatically right and left, but neither Mme. Brulhart nor Mme. de Marignac moved to take the outstretched hand. And with a start I realized that "Madame" was me. The four of us left the room as the 10:00 wedding party entered. Going down the stairs, John and I paused on the second-floor landing and put a ring on each other's finger.

In the wording of the marriage certificate, and certainly in the eyes of our two landladies, this ceremony was a preliminary only, a mere legality prior to the real marriage, which must take place in church. "We'll have a church wedding when we get home," we assured the two women untruthfully.

Since October we'd been setting francs aside for our wedding trip. In Bern, the Swiss capital, two hours by train from Geneva, we checked into the ornate *Bellevue*. We were back in Geneva the next day. In the real, non-student world, the hoarded cash had lasted less than twenty-four hours. "We'll have a church wedding in the States," we repeated to Mme. de Marignac as she unlocked the door to our room. Her stern-lipped silence told us she doubted such an ecclesiastic event would ever take place -- and in fifty-nine years it never has.