



A quiet retreat in thunderous Manhattan, the famed church is on a street once known as Lovers' Lane

A window dedicated to Joe Jefferson, the actor



The rector, Dr. Ray, has married 30,000 couples



Hundred

By ROBERT STEIN

New York's Little Church Around the Corner, spiritual home of theatrical folk, has been the romantic scene of 100,000 weddings in the last century

AFTER marrying a young couple recently, Dr. Randolph Ray, rector of the Little Church Around the Corner in New York City, received an unexpected shock. As soon as the ceremony was over, the groom's parents walked blushing up to the altar and asked the rector to marry *them*.

Dr. Ray's eyebrows descended to their normal elevation only after the older pair explained that they had been wed in a civil ceremony 25 years before, that their marriage had been extremely happy, but that they had always regretted not being wed in the Little Church Around the Corner. Could the rector bless their union and make them an "official" Little Church couple? With an understanding smile, Dr. Ray consented.

Such requests reflect the earnest belief of romantic-minded couples all over the world that a wedding at the Little Church is gilt-edged insurance against marital troubles. Since the first wedding at the church 100 years ago this year, more than 100,000 dewy-eyed brides and grooms have marched up to its altar—a record unmatched by any other church in the world. Over the years, lovers have walked up the Little Church's middle aisle on the last lap of trips that began in every state of the union, as well as Argentina, Switzerland, Hawaii and Italy.

Sentiment clings to the Little Church as naturally as ivy to the staid walls of an old university. More than 30,000 couples who have taken their vows there are linked in a unique "alumni" organization called "The Family of the Little Church Around the Corner." Just as a Harvard man would never dream of sending his son to any other college, Little Church alumni almost invariably bring back their children to be baptized or married. Not long ago a couple ushered three youngsters into Dr. Ray's office. "After you married us," they told him, "we moved to Australia. We've waited 10 years to come back and have our children christened here."

Other Little Church alumni have made the nostalgic pilgrimage back to their marital alma mater from Trinidad, Abyssinia, Germany, China, Japan, Ireland, South America, Spain and Russia. Each year hundreds of couples trek back on their silver or golden wedding anniversary, and some go through another ceremony to renew the vows that launched them on married life. Often these "re-marriages" take place at the famous Brides' Altar, built with funds contributed by newlyweds and studded with jewels donated by grateful brides from their engagement rings.

For an institution that inspires such sentiment, the Little Church is located in a strikingly unromantic setting. Almost in the shadow of the Empire State Building, the tiny house of worship stands on a small green oasis in Manhattan's roaring business district. Hemmed in by skyscrapers, the low brick buildings seem as out of place as Whistler's Mother in a roomful of Picasso paintings.

Completely in character with this old-fashioned

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Years of Happy Marriage

exterior is the Little Church's attitude toward marriage. It is neatly summed up in the title of a book written several years ago by Dr. Ray. The title: *Marriage Is a Serious Business*.

The rector, stern and autocratic, looks and acts like a sixty-three-year-old version of James Mason. He firmly believes that the Little Church's record for lasting marriages is a result of the stiff requirements couples must meet to qualify to be married there.

Paradoxically, the "marryingest" church in the world has set up more barriers to wedlock than almost any other. Dr. Ray refuses to marry couples under twenty-one without parental consent, or divorcees or elopers of any age. Even those who pass this preliminary screening undergo close questioning by the rector to determine whether they are approaching marriage with proper sincerity. Among the long list of blunt questions couples must answer are these: "Are your backgrounds and interests similar? Do you really know enough about each other? Are you honestly in love?"

Not long ago a couple told Dr. Ray that, although they were deeply in love, they were getting married with one reservation.

Wanted an Out—Just in Case

"If I know I can get out of it," the prospective groom explained, "I won't get that terrible ball-and-chain complex so many married men have."

His intended bride added: "If we feel we have to stay married, we might not be happy."

Dr. Ray shook his head vigorously. "Marriage has enough hazards," he said crisply, "even when both partners are determined to make a go of it. With your attitude, I can't allow you to gamble with the Little Church's record."

Each year Dr. Ray unrelentingly turns back 500 to 1,000 couples this way. In recent years rejections have risen so sharply that the New York City Marriage License Bureau now posts regulations warning couples that the Little Church will not marry divorced persons or elopers.

"The cure for marital failure," Dr. Ray insists, "is not easy divorce but hard marriage."

But the tall, gray-haired minister is not completely inflexible in his views. During World War II, he was firmly opposed to wartime marriages, but in cases where the couple had known each other for a long time, he made an occasional exception and consented to perform the ceremony. One of these was the marriage to a childhood sweetheart of a nineteen-year-old bride, Kathryn Hoffman Ray—the rector's own daughter.

At other times Dr. Ray has reversed his stand on hard marriage and actually pushed couples to the altar. A woman of thirty came to ask his advice. She had been engaged to the same man for more than five years. Each time they set a date for the wedding, his mother took suddenly and inexplicably ill. Out of long experience with "smother love," Dr. Ray tersely advised her to set a date and stick to it. The day of the wedding the groom's mother called the church and weeding complained that she was too sick to attend. "Madam," Dr. Ray replied dryly, "you argue with energy and persistence remarkable in so chronic an invalid." The wedding went on as scheduled—with the groom's mother sobbing sonorously in the background.

Curiously, the Little Church Around the Corner was launched on its way to fame as a wedding center by a funeral. For the first 20 years of its existence, the Church of the Transfiguration—Little Church's official designation—was a quiet, unpublicized house of worship just off Fifth Avenue on East Twenty-ninth Street, once known, aptly enough, as Lovers' Lane. Then, just before Christmas in 1870, an aging English actor named George Holland died in his Manhattan home. Holland's best friend, the popular American actor, Joe Jefferson, rushed to the fashionable Church of the Atonement on Madison Avenue to make funeral arrangements.

The minister shook his head. "We cannot bury an actor from this church," he stated firmly.

Jefferson stifled his anger and asked if the minister could recommend a church that would consider burying a lowly actor.

"Well," the clergyman replied, "there is a little

marriage climaxed an intense courtship during which the chef wooed his bride-to-be by slipping love notes under the clams he sent over for the rector's supper.

Sentimentalists to the core, actors everywhere soon made the Little Church headquarters for their spiritual needs. A list of parish members since 1870 reads like a Who's Who of the theater: John Drew, Maurice Barrymore, Minnie Maddern Fiske, Dame May Whitty, George Arliss, Otis Skinner, Dustin Farnum, Edwin Booth, Florence Reed, Richard Mansfield. More recently Little Churchgoers have included Raymond Massey, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Vinton Freedley, Katharine Cornell, Peggy Wood, Jane Cowl, Bobby Clark and Walter Hampden.

As a result, Dr. Ray's is probably the only church in the world with stained-glass windows dedicated to actors and actresses. There are memorial windows for John Drew, Richard Mansfield, Edwin Booth, Mary Shaw and a particularly large one for Joe Jefferson.

The Jefferson window, based on the parable of the good Samaritan, shows Jefferson in the tattered clothes of Rip van Winkle—his most popular role—supporting George Holland wrapped in a shroud. They are struggling toward the Little Church's lich gate where the Saviour awaits them with outstretched arms. Underneath is the inscription: "God bless the Little Church Around the Corner." One of the insets, with scenes from the Rip van Winkle legend, created a mild furor when the window was unveiled in 1925. It shows Rip and Hendrick Hudson's men playing ninepins and drinking from huge steins!

Under Dr. Ray, the Episcopal Actors Guild was founded in 1923, with George Arliss as its first president. The Little Church still houses the headquarters of the guild, where theater people gather to discuss their problems, arrange workshop training for young performers and provide care for the needy and aged members of the profession.

Early Signs of Dramatic Flair

Dr. Ray's interest in actors predates his rectorship of the Little Church. As far back as his boyhood on a Mississippi farm, he showed dramatic inclinations by cloaking himself in a long white apron and soliloquizing to an audience of chickens. Later, after successively abandoning plans to become a doctor and a lawyer, he turned temporarily to writing. He wrote thrillers for several pulp magazines and finally got a job as a reporter for the Brooklyn Eagle. In his spare time he yielded to the persistent acting bug in his blood by playing in amateur productions.

But even after he decided to enter the clergy, young Randolph Ray could not forget about acting. When he became rector of the Little Church in 1923, he was mindful of the professional actors among his parishioners. Determined to give his sermons and wedding services the proper dramatic force, he began taking lessons in diction from the veteran actor, Philip Ben Greet. This instruction may be responsible for the distinct British accent that flavors Dr. Ray's speech.

Even today, wedding ceremonies in the Little Church are as carefully staged as a Broadway production. But, as in all theatrical performances, the players sometimes miss their cues. Last June, Otalie Kruger—daughter of (Continued on page 68)



Dr. Ray talks to Roy Andersen and his fiancée, Elaine Chesley

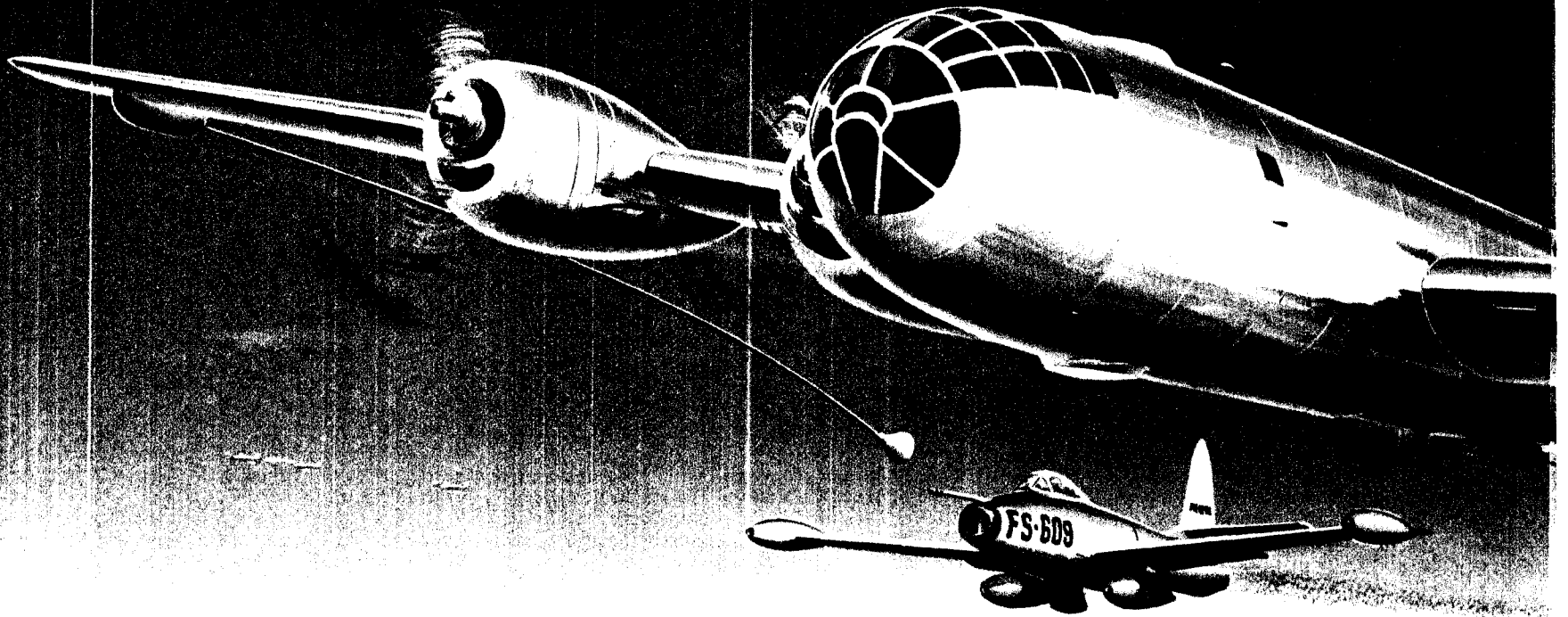
church around the corner which does that sort of thing."

At the Church of the Transfiguration, Jefferson explained his mission to Dr. George Hendric Houghton, the black-bearded founder and first rector. Hesitantly he added, "My friend was an actor."

Dr. Houghton looked surprised. "I only know," he said, "that your friend is dead and my services are asked."

After George Holland's funeral, word spread around the backstages of Manhattan theaters that the Little Church Around the Corner actually welcomed actors. Many of them went there to be married, and their fans began to follow suit.

Soon the Little Church was marrying as many couples in a month as it had in its first 20 years. One memorable early wedding involved Dr. Houghton's own cook, Christine, and the French chef of a fashionable restaurant next door. Their



AERIAL TASK FORCE

THE squadron leader was in the ready room when the pilots came in from gunnery practice. There had been shifting winds at 30,000 feet and they were still fighting the pressure of the jet controls.

"Hi, Pappy," said Smitty, "what gives in the upper brackets?"

"They going to convert us into B-36 pilots?" asked Keefer.

"Them truck drivers," muttered Kaplan.

Pappy's name came from experience and his job, not from his age of thirty-one. He had just returned from two days at Air Force Headquarters in the Pentagon at Washington and he stood now before the blackboard which covered half of the wall. With a piece of chalk he scratched a big letter "A."

"A," said Smitty, "A for Able. For what else?"

"A for Aerial Task Force Able," said Pappy quietly.

"Aerial Task Force Able," repeated Smith. "I read you loud and clear, Pappy, but it don't make sense. What's an aerial task force?"

"Get off the gauges, Pappy," advised Kaplan. "You're in the clear at twenty thousand. What's Aerial Task Force Able?"

"The Aerial Task Force," said Pappy, still quietly, "is something the boys are talking about; something you'll hear a lot more about. It's a jet fighter outfit—with tankers attached for mid-air refueling. Enough tankers to send jets across an ocean or keep them up in the air as long as they need to be."

Half the squadron had been on a mission ferrying jets to Germany the year before, battling weather and winds and the short fuel capacity of the F-80 Shooting Star from Maine to Newfoundland, to Greenland, to Iceland, England and the Continent. The squadron had longer-range jets

now and they knew that refueling jet fighters in mid-air was, of course, an accepted fact, successfully tried and proven. But . . .

"Look," said Pappy, "an aerial task force is like any other task force. It is an assigned complement of men and weapons designed to accomplish a given task."

"Such as?" asked Keefer.

"Such as," said Pappy, "such as— Okay, I'll give it to you. It could be anywhere—Alaska, the Far East or Europe. Since most of us know the European theater best, we'll set the scene there."

"Suppose the old gent across the way decides to move. He's no piker. He cuts loose with half a million fighting men on the ground—12 armored divisions backed up by 36 infantry divisions, split three ways and all three columns driving toward the western coast of Europe."

"Our ground troops fight as long as they can and

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