

La Cegogne,
Mourmelon-le-Grand
Marne, France
~~April~~ 5, 1948.

May

Dear family,

I have the most beautiful ~~largest~~ bouquet on my mantel. Cile brought home a bunch of red, yellow, and grape-purple tulips, mixed with hyacinths, bleeding hearts, and some kind of trailing white flower that ~~xxxx~~ has a leaf like a large wandering Jew. Mrs. Roussel, whose house she visits often, gave them to her to bring to me. I expect it has some connection with Hews's having taken her oldest son around Paris when he and Gilbert Christelle were there for half a day between trains on their way into the army. The youngest son has quite a crush on Cile, and she plays with him and his sisters quite a lot. So it seems as tho we are really very much involved with the Roussel family. I must get Cile to show ~~me~~ Mme. Roussel sometime so I'll know who she is. I certainly am enjoying her flowers.

All the gardens are perfectly beautiful now. The lilacs are beginning to fade, but there are tulips everywhere, and columbine, and bleeding hearts and hyacinths, with borders of forget-me-nots, marguerites, and pansies. The huge clumps of peonies are starting to show color, and I've seen one or two blossoms. They'll be in full bloom in another week. Anybody who has even the tiniest scrap of earth before his door has coaxed something into bloom, and the loveliest thing of all to me is the blaze of color that the tulips make- tulips of all sizes, double, single, fringed, and all colors and shades of every color. Hews took quite a lot of pictures when he was here Sunday. I hope they are as lovely as the gardens.

The first of May is Labor day in Europe. (That's why all the demonstrations on the first of May always.) It was a school holiday here, but there were no demonstrations or public gatherings of any sort. Instead, everyone marked the first of May in the traditional French way. The lily of the valley is the May day flower, and rightfully, one should go to the woods early in the morning to gather the tiny, sweet flowers. Here there are very few growing close, and it's necessary to go all the way to Rheims mountain, which stretches blue along the horizon, to find the woods thick with lilies-of-the-valley. So, instead, early May day morning, the flower vendors, who have been there, come to town with baskets full of ~~xxxx~~ small clusters of the pretty things, and sell them for very little. Tradition says that lilies-of-the-valley in the house on May day bring good fortune, so everyone offers them to their friends and loved ones. I didn't find out about that soon enuf to take any to Maman, unfortunately, but she understands that I don't know about these things, and she forgives me. Solange had the day off, but about eleven o'clock she came knocking at the door. "Madame McCann," she said, "I don't know if you know about it, but it's the custom in France that the bonnes offer the mistress of the house ~~xx~~ a bunch of muguet on May day, to bring good fortune to the house." And with a sweet smile, she held out a little bunch of lilies-of-the-valley to me. I wore them on my lapel all day, enjoying the lovely fragrance, and the kind thought that had brought them to me. And now they're in a glass on the mantel near the bouquet from Mme. Roussel, making the whole room fresh and sweet with their fragrance.

I've also had a lesson in protocol from Eliane this week, that is already proving helpful to me. I noticed that everybody seemed to say "Bon jour, M'sieurs, dames," to everyone else, and so did Hews, so early

in our stay here, I, also formed the habit of saying "Bon jour" to everyone whose eye I caught as I passed along the street. I got an occasional startled stare in response, but mostly it was a cordial "Bon jour, madame," ~~xxxxxx~~ and sometimes I found I had started an interesting conversation that way. Saturday, Eliane went with me to the station to meet Hews, and we walked back. When we approached town, I saw a little girl I recognized, and called "Bon jour" to her. She didn't answer, and I made some joking remark about it. "But no," said Eliane, "You shouldn't have said 'Bon jour' to her unless she spoke to you first." I was amazed. "You mean I shouldn't say 'Bon jour' to everyone." "Oh, no," said Eliane. "It's all right for you because you're a foreigner(she was being polite) and everybody expects you to do things differently, but the younger ~~xxxxxxx~~ person is supposed to say 'Bonjour' to the older one first." Hews and I were both very much interested to find we'd been affronting tradition all this time. There was a good deal of joking and laughing about the whole thing, but underneath, Eliane was dead serious about trying to persuade me to change my ways. I finally got the system clear in my mind. The younger person says "Bon jour" to the older-- except, that the unmarried girl or woman must speak first to the married woman, regardless of their ages, and no woman ever speaks to a man first. When you pass a large group of people, it must get very complicated, trying to figure out the respective relationships. Or maybe there's another system for that one. I must remember to ask Eliane about that. Oh, yes, the person who enters a room or shop says "Bon jour" to the group at large, and anyone leaving offers a general "Au'voir, m'sieurs, dames." The whole thing, like almost every other phase of life here that I've described, is very rigidly observed as a tradition. It's just the way to do things, and if you deviate, you're 'mal eleve'. As Eliane said, people have been making concessions for me because they realize that other countries have different traditions. They're very kind here. However, since she told me about this, I've been trying to watch myself. When I see someone who, according to Eliane, is required to speak to me before I condescend to utter a friendly sound, I look straight in their eyes, and smile, and then they don't dare pass me without a "Bon jour". And Papa's friends, who I know from the Sunday morning apperitif in the cafe, seem to love it. They give me the biggest smiles back you ever saw, and a very hearty "Bon jour!" Learn something new everyday!

The recognition of polite forms had even penetrated thro to the children. Cile told me this afternoon that she was going over to Mme. Roussel's house to get the flowers she'd been asked to come by and pick up. "Come right back," I said. "It's almost supertime." "Oh, I will," she said. "I'll just stay long enuf to be polite. You know, it isn't polite to go in and take something they give you and just go right off. You have to kind of stay around a little before you leave. So I'll just stay long enuf to be polite and then, I'll come right straight home."

Cile and Annette and I took advantage of Thursday to walk thru the fields all the way to the station to pick up some packages. Dorothy stayed behind to play with her little Nellie, who, she insists, wont ~~xxxxxx~~ laugh for anyone but her. The others and I got rained on a little, but it was a very interesting trip. We found a dead hedgehog on the road-- the first one any of us had seen. Cile and Annette were fascinated. There was never anything so prickly! However, I was able to persuade them not to bring it home, and we gathered huge bunches of buttercups and tiny, wild marguerites instead. Rain and all, it was a very nice afternoon, and specially, according to them both, because of the hedgehog we saw.

Roland came home yesterday, out of the army at last after his two years' service. He got out just after Gilbert went in. When there are as many boys in the family as that, there's always one who's off in the army somewhere, it seems. That's your compulsory military service, and it certainly hasn't kept France out of any wars. In fact, I'm rather inclined to think that if they hadn't had so much army to give them a false feeling of security, ~~they~~ their big boys might have worked a little harder to avert wars. Men with big muscles always want to use their muscles instead of their heads, and countries are the same way.

Anyhow, Roland's home again, and planning a future. His Jeannine's mother wrote the family a letter before he left the little town, saying she hoped that Roland was really serious about Jeannine, because the girl was putting her heart on him so, and so many soldiers made a big fuss over girls and then forgot them when they left town. As a widow, she felt particularly responsible for Jeannine's happiness, so she hoped the family would understand her writing as she did. The family did understand. Une brave femme, agreed Maman and Papa. Marriage here, even a love match, is so very much an affair of family still. We all agreed that Roland was not the kind to fool a girl, and he certainly wouldn't have brought her to meet the family if he weren't serious about her. Even so, recognizing the proper course of procedure in such a situation, Papa made his plans to go up to Besancon for Roland's discharge, and formally represent the Christelle family. They stayed there for two days after Roland was discharged, and while I haven't the full and detailed story yet, I know it was all very dignified, and very correct, and that Papa had a very fine time settling important family affairs in a way to make Jeannine's mother feel that Jeannine was entering a family where she she could be proud of her inlaws. Which of course, will probably make her try a little harder when it comes to a dot for Jeannine. Even in love matches, there is still a marriage settlement made by the parents, to start the young couple off in their new life. Papa and Jeannine's mother agreed that considering everything- Jeannine's age and Roland's recent return to civilian life--they should be married in a year. It's not too definitely settled yet, the date, etc. You don't do things that way. Everything moves slowly and dignifiedly, and there is still room for a changing of minds, but not much.

This has to be all. Mme. Peyrion of the fish market, told me there might be fish this morning. There was some yesterday, but I didn't get by before the afternoon, and they were all gone. When the fish do come, they're very good. They're apt to be fresher than the one's you find in the French market. I guess it's the cool climate. Last time, there were some big colin, or whiting, and I bought a kilo and made us a very fine courtbouillon, creole. Maybe ther'll be some nice little frying size fish today. I have enuf oil on hand for that, and the children love it.