

## French House

Return with me seventy years when I was in my high school class of 1941. When I graduated, I got a job as a rodman on a surveying team planning a new Army base called Camp Miles Standish. It was to become the debarkation point for troops heading for Europe. War had not been declared but apparently preparations were being made.

I enrolled in Brown University in the fall, looking forward to four years of college life. The attack on Pearl Harbor shattered those dreams for me and the rest of America. I enlisted in the Navy Air Corps and returned to school waiting to be called-up.

In college, tuition waits for no man so when the Dean's office called with a job offer I was there in a jiffy. French House at Pembroke, Brown's sister college, needed a waiter and busboy for its evening meal. The job included dinner, so to this habitué of the student café, the offer was irresistible.

French House was a large Victorian, much like a sorority house. It was occupied by the French Club where French majors banded together to hone their language skills.

My knock on the door was answered by a tall young woman, dark haired, and rather stern looking. (I was to learn later she was a Ph.D. candidate in French Literature and had taken the job as house-mother to pay the bills, much as I was doing.)

"Hello, I'm Paul from the Dean's office, answering your request for dinner help."

"Ah," she said, "parlez-vous Francais?"

"En peu," I answered, recalling my fractured high school French. One sentence was enough.

"Bon, I'll speak to you in English."

"Only French is spoken by the girls. Please come in. Have you had experience waiting on table?"

"No, but I'm a fast learner."

"You will work five days a week, five to seven-thirty each evening. Your meal will be served each evening at five. You will prepare the

vegetables, set the dining room table, serve the meal, and bus the dishes. Comprenez-vous?

“Oui, and what do I call you?”

“I am Madame and the girls are mademoiselles. No need for first names.”

“Now for a crash course in table management,” and she proceeded to demonstrate the etiquette for setting a table, serving dinner, clearing dishes, and other subtleties of the waiter craft.

Places were set for ten girls and for Madame who sat at the head of the table. There were lots of giggles at my ineptitude but it was all good-natured and Madame was there to see that the girls minded their manners. After a few evenings I caught on and felt quite comfortable. The girls were effervescent, chatting away in French, looking in my direction occasionally, so I guess they found the man in the house interesting.

For my part, I wasn't above a bit of flirting and returned a few curious glances but was left to fantasize about anything meaningful behind them.. However, my mother was French, so *cherchez la femme* was part of my heritage. Sadly, these pampered creatures were far removed from the college strata that I occupied. Their social activities were governed by parietals designed to limit opportunities for *l'amour, toujours l'amour*. A parting kiss at ten o'clock was about the extent of the pre-war sexual revolution at Pembroke College. These girls appeared to be as sequestered as the nuns in the nearby Catholic school. As for the Brown freshmen, most of us were enrolled in Celibacy 1,2, a common course at the college.

There was one girl who, in male talk, would be described as a doll – blond hair, peaches and cream complexion, exuberant and with a smile and laughter that lit up the table. I took to her immediately and was soon hovering over her a tad longer than the others, eliciting giggles from the girls, blushes from Blondie, and a sharp “Paul!” from Madame. On occasion I would hum, “Thank Heaven for little girls” which also brought a sharp rebuke. There was to be no “lollygagging” at the table (or anywhere else, for that matter).

I arrived for work at five o'clock for my early meal and prepared the table for the dinner hour at six. My arrival was usually accompanied by music, either piano or violin selections or a chorus of lively French songs. It took me a while to realize that the girls were putting on recitals for my benefit. One of them would peek into the kitchen to see if their audience was enjoying the show. Madame probably guessed what was going on, but looked upon it as a harmless perk of my job.

I received my orders to report on January 10<sup>th</sup> to Boston Navy Yard for active duty. I notified Madame that January 5<sup>th</sup> would be my last day at French House.

On the evening of the fifth, the door was opened by the blonde angel all dolled-up in a party dress. The other *jeune filles* were behind her, each in a beautiful gown. I was confounded, fearing I had intruded on a party. Madame was wearing a stylish dress which, to me, changed her persona from the severe headmistress to an attractive woman (she was only 24 years old).

“Paul, the girls are giving you a going-away party with a French meal they have cooked for you. I am invited to dine with you.”

At first, I didn't comprehend. I was in shock. To walk through a door as an employee and emerge as an honored guest didn't compute. The girls were to serve me. The surprise was complete; I had entered a topsy-turvy world.

A small round table was set for two in the drawing room. Fine linen covered it; the silver setting and exquisite china reflected the soft light, adding to the ambience of the scene. Old Glory and the French Tricolor, side-by-side, were the centerpiece. There was even a bottle of wine, for goodness sake. A keepsake menu was on my plate:

*FRENCH HOUSE  
Pembroke College  
January, 1943*

*Bon Voyage, Paul!*

*MENU*

*Vichyssoise  
Salade Nicoise  
Sauce Parisienne  
Gratin de Pommes de Terre Crecy  
Oignons Glaces a Blanc  
Carottes Etuvees au Beurre  
Champignons Sautes au Beurre  
Tarte Normande aux Pommes  
Cotes de Provence Coquilles St. Jacques, a la Provencale*

Bon Appetit

Two of the girls served the meal, accompanied by entertainment worthy of the best dinner-show in town: classical pieces on the piano, a violin trio, and the girls singing French songs. The unexpected farewell dinner brought tears to my eyes. It was delicious, and it pleased me that the glory of French cooking had not been neglected in the girls' training. I loved them all.

I left French House with a box of bonbons and savoring a kiss on the cheek from Madame. Shouts of *Au Revoir, Bon Voyage, and Bonne Chance*, rang in my ears as I closed the door.

Sixty-nine years later, I sit in my living room holding a dinner menu dated January, 1943. Soon I am humming :

“Thank Heaven for little girls,  
They grow up in the most delightful way.

No matter where, no matter who . . . without them,  
What would little boys do?”

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