Juin 1-4, 1956

Dear Mom and Dad all the rest of the “Family,”

It dawned on me the other day that somehow in the struggling shuffle of getting settles and accustomed to the “European” way of living that I have not so far hardly mentioned just what it is like. At first thought, it sounds almost impossible to take up such a literate, intangible, difficult task for my basic intelligence, but I would like to offer you maybe a slight inkling of what I am experiencing.

Sometimes, even now, after having spent almost 31/2 months here, I have to tell myself over again that I really am in the “Fairy land” of France and that all of the many people I see every day all speak French and NOT English. Getting adjusted to all of these people was, and sometimes still is, a stint calling for quick wit, open minds, tact and the universal phrase of “pardon!” I have found that being a student in this vast city of Paris that there are many many advantages and experiences available to me and all of the other fortunate foreigners using the same opportunities. The French are always willing and glad to help anyone who is earnest and interested in them. Being a member of “Hollins Abroad” has led to several invitations to teas, soirees, introductions and gatherings where we have met some very interesting and well-reputed persons of Paris. Madame Dupuis who holds a group of parties called “Amica-America” entertains in the true high style noted for the French and has helped us all in turn to get acquainted, meet some French people, and have a sweet taste of the Paris social life.

I shall never forget the quiet, upsurging anxiety that I, along with 29 other little girls, felt as we finally spotted off in the vague and misty distance the shores of England, and finally at four a.m. rejoicing to behold the busy harbor of Le Havre, forgetting our terribly cold feet and the freezing drizzle of rain; we were busy imagining just what Paris in reality was like, how in heaven’s name we would ever speak the strange sounding language of French – much less understand it! – what our new “home” and “family” would be like; if the Eiffel Tower really stood over-looking all of Paris – and many other questions, doubts, and the unbelievable realization that we had finally, at last, reached France!

After spending the first confusing, bewildering night at Rouen, where there were some terribly funny faux-pas made amid hilarious laughter and bewildered looks on the countenances of the efficient “garcons,” we set out to discover our New World of Paris.

Sue and I, clutching each other for dear life, stepped precariously into the shaky, noisy elevator and soon found ourselves being introduced to Madame and the children of “our” family for a whole year.

We found that we live in the elite 16th District on the 6th floor of a very nice apartment. (Sometimes I’m not too sure as to how nice it is, especially when the elevator is “en derangement” – meaning we have six flights of winding, dark stairs to climb twice a day. Fortunately this isn’t often the case, but we did make a “hit” with the concierge the second day we were here, as the man who brought our trunks proceeded to promptly break the contraption!)

I have considered myself quite lucky being in the cute family that I am in. There are times when things are a little rugged because of the five children running, yelling, screaming all at the same time; but Madame soon takes the situation well in hand and succeeds in calming things down – for a while, anyway. Each member of the family seems to be as different as night and day and sometimes rather hard to understand because of their almost completely different upbringing than ours. First of all, there is Monsieur who hasn’t been home too much because of business trips to various parts of France and Africa. Sue has gotten to know him better than I and describes him much better than I could as follows:

“*Monsieur is my love. He has that typical French reserve about him which always makes one just a little uncomfortable and thinks twice before saying things. He has a way of looking at you with his piercing eyes and makes you feel as if he’s weighing your thoughts one after another. The silent type who sits and listens at the table with his hands folded and elbows on the arms of his “fauteuil” and always makes at least one well-chosen remark for which everyone waits eagerly, then jumps when he says it. I can hear his “sage” French “voix” now, saying, “Su—e” in his forever kidding manner, which to everyone outside would sound as if I were being severely reprimanded. He seems to be in a world apart; there is a special little air about him that one approaches, yet never breaks. Above all, however, is the ever-lasting twinkle in his eyes and his kind, knowing smile. There is a roundness in his cheeks that makes one think he’s always laughing, and the soft line of his eyebrows, with the dimple-like creases around a firm mouth, will never escape me.”*

Then there is Madame. Ah, Madame – Madame Dufournier – toujours fresh as a daisy, young at heart, fair-haired and proper. Her own history dates back to the proud royalty of Belgium. She is always kind, congenial and smiling to guests, occasionally interrupting only for second to issue a biting “giffle” to one of the misbehaving children, or breaking off a sentence to scold rapidly and severely in what to me still is incomprehensible French, and then continuing on her merry way leading the conversations. Bringing up the five children has been her main occupation evder since her marriage at the age of 18 years; and, on the side, she allows free time to occupy her at parties and soirees with her friends and her “cousin” Pierre. Quick-witted, fun and intelligent is she, et comme heureuse je suis d’etre ice!

The oldest and the only girl is the attractive Marie-Annick who is often the object of many pointed remarks, and as most normal 17 year old girls, has her share of troubles with the many courters, some of which would be a little too old for me! If the telephone rings one can surely wager that it is some handsome Frenchman seeking a free night to show her some more of the famous Paris night-life. Sometimes her soup gets salty from her sad tears arising and flowing from her eyes for various reason, either because the latest “beau” hasn’t phoned or because Madame didn’t approve of her last action and forbade her to “sortir” with her “amies.” It’s a hard job to grow up!

Yves, at the nervous age of 16, leads the conversation which interest him, patiently corrects Sue and me, and describes in brilliant detail answers to our outpouring questions. He is the “man” of the family. He can argue a theory of Descartes or spiel on and on in the subjects of metaphysics or of the latest “football” equips. It’s often rather distracting to watch his food get cold on his plate while his interest is travelling in another direction, either in talk or deep thought, or better yet, distracting little Dominique – trying to make him yelp or cry, which generally he succeeds in. His heavy eyebrows and flying, unkempt hair are distinguishing traits which add to his vigor and rugged athletic appearance. If anything needs to be fixed, done or answered, one is always directed to “demandez a Yves.” – He always knows.

Patrick is the “gentleman” of the family. He is the next to older boyt at the odd age of 14. He sits silently at the end of the dinner table occasionally dropping a few comments here and there, usually jumped upon immediately afterwards by Yves because Patrick just “doesn’t know!” If given a fair chance, he becomes a shining piece of charm and intelligence with a subtle touch of humor, more or less like that of his father’s. His interest falters from the popular sports. He keeps his eyes and ears open in favor of education, especially in the field of medicine. Differing in this way from his older brother, (besides the fact that he also knows that girls exist, of which Yves seemingly has no interest), Patrick is often beaten down and outshined by his domineering brother.

Nest in line come Jean-Francois, 12. He isn’t present too often because of his enrollment in a distant “Pension.” It seems that after analysis of several psychologists, it was decided that a private school would be best to detract his devoted attention from his mother. Every other weekend is looked forward to, when Jean-Francois arrives to spend three days at home. Each time he arrives with his shy smile, a hinted bow and warm handshake. When the time approaches for him to gather up his belongings and head back to school the tears begin to flow which show his distaste for the “pension” and his love for his mother whom he cannot bear to leave, but must.

Last, but not least of these five different children, is 8 year old Dominique. Poor little Dominique – always the center of attention, either because he has done soething out of place or because of his cute little tales and remarks that he manages to think up. Our big-little “Prince Domino.” Always demanding attention and service, and getting it. At the age of 8 he can tell you any fact which happened int eh past history of “la belle France” and can tell you who is the top tennis player from Austria or the U.S., always asking me such question that I even, can’t answer about my own country! As the object of much attention and ridicule, he often can’t decid what to make of it – whether to laugh or cry – the latter, usually. Madame has to keep an open eye and free hand at the dining table to keep his wandering mind straight and in the proper order. If a misdemeanor, a sharp slap is issued amid loud half-hearted wails. He’s sent to the door and to his refuge of “la chamber,” then ten minutes later, the affair having passed over, he returns and is showered with cooing compliments. With his hair ruffled by mama, he then continues to demand and receive in his irresistible manner.

Then there is Marie. Oh, Marie! She is a specimen of a typical, (maybe not?) French Provincial coming from the country and becoming a “domestique.” Round and fat as a butter ball, she serves the food which she can’t do at all. After the dropping of forks and banging doors, one hesitates before asking for another serving. With rosy-round cheeks anad not many teeth, comprehending her French becomes quite a feat! Such an individual one can’t forget – her jokes, her favors, her cooking and dress, all leave me with an image unique and of the best.

So thus ends my rather poor commentary on such fine and interesting people. If only I had the ability to place them all individually before you so that you could enjoy them, too. Of course, Paris contains nothing but people, people from all walks of life; funny, sad, strange, pitiful, happy. One meets these individuals on any rue, the Champs-Elysees, in a café, restaurant, Pigalle, Montmartre, the Opera, and, occasionally more so, in the famous Metro (!) Since I am a regular commuter every day in and out from the Latin Quarter, I have inevitably become vaguely familiar with the system and used to the unusual types one is apt to encounter en route. After I adjusted myself to the French habit of staring “avec les yeux froids,” I began to enjoy watching the “show,” sometimes finding it embarrassing because I can’t control my laughter or silly sense of humor. Looking about me I often find that my neighbors have chosen either to stare or laugh back. How could any one not laugh at a man who was balancing himself precariously and at the same time intently reading the latest news in the “journal.” Upon closer inspection I humorously observed that the paper was definitely lacking in something. The top and bottom third had been torn off somewhere in the shuffle and been stepped on by several careless passers-by. At any rate, you must admire his curiosity! This is only one tiny example, bot of course, there are others who aren’t so amusing at all: filthy dirty, grimy, greasy, smelling of the odorous vin, gruyere, and garlique. At rush hours the crowding is such that a path to the metro’s opening doors in time for a rushed descent is nearly impossible. Quelle une vie!

Education. That is one sure thing. One gets it from all angles and loves every minute of it. (Well, . . . practically) Naturally, the established center is the Sorbonne which is a part of the vast University de Paris. As we walk to and from our courses in the old Latin Quarter, we participate in the fascinating world-wide traffic which continues night and day along the Boulevard St. Michel where students and travellers from all corners of the world promenade – sometimes dressed in their native costumes, speaking their own strange languages, or mingling with others and communicating in the beautiful language of French. Inside the well-worn hallowed halls of the Sorbonne where world-famous scholars once tread, I also come with a certain humility and follow the morning courses offered for the “etrangers” – “les Cours de la Civilisation Francaise.” The hour-long lectures are heard in a huge amphitheatre where the hundreds of students gather and sit on very hard wooden benches. Differing from the American customs, the attention is focused toujours on the sometimes temperamental but brilliant Professeur who naturally speaks the native tongue of le francais. After the discours, the Professeur is always greeted with enthusiastic applause which is a custom, along with handshaking, of which I approve. It is a true sign of gentility.

As for the night-life, I’m sure that it does exist, at least I’ve heard tell. Really now, I have seen a bit of it, and to me a country girl waddling around from New York, Paris holds its fascination for me. For the most part, save the “American bars,” the “caves,” “boites,” – better known as “dives” – are truly rustic and have a charm unique to them along. Any kind of entertainment called for on special nights may be found in the respective sections of the city. I like Pigalle, Montmartre, and the Latin Quarter with all of their thick, soupy atmosphere, -- that is, when I’m with a nice strong, tactful date. No remarks intended towards the “Lido,” the “Sheherezade,” “Moulin Rouge” or such – but I’ll let you know when I get to attend one of these places. Naturally, and as it is publically known, the food in many of them is excellent. The reason I happen to know is because there are places less expensive with less fancies that have (I’m told) the same food.

As for the food at “home,” I have no complaints, especially since it’s already paid for, and maybe because I’m always and never failing (unfortunately) to be hungry. (But that’s what I was sent over here for, wasn’t it? -- to be “broadened”?? At any rate, it still amazes me to find the many ways the French think up for serving potatoes!! As for becoming a connoisseur of all the special wines and vintages, I can at least tell if it is “vin ordinaire” or not. It sort of gives me a funny feeling to find that little Dominique can drink his wine better than I can . . . Disgusting!

It is really incredible to discover that June is here, whizzing past at an unbelievable speed, bringing July first closer at every turn. Before you know it, I’ll be off to merry England, on to the stylish continent of Europe, and even a bit of Africa, then soon back to Paris for another short term of fantastic education at the Sorbonne, only to discover a few days later that the Atlantic bound ship is impatiently blasting its sonorous, sorrowful whistle!

Paris is now in all of its magnificent glory under the deep blue and white spotted Parisian skies. It is so WONDERFUL11 I wish I could, and had the time and space to ramble on and on about all of its thousands of assets and wonders. BUT – also, I shudder with the though of exams hovering about my shoulders, attacking me closer and closer with only a week and a half to go. Wish me luch . . . He! As if I don’t have that already!

I do think of you all quite a bit, but to tell the truth, not too much - - - but hope that all of your shining faces will be all aglow upon my return.

With sincere love,

Hemmie