

Le Jour De Merci Donnant by Art Buchwald

[In 1953, during my tour of duty with the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara, my tough sergeant from Marseilles said to me, "Why do all the American recruits refuse to eat anything but turkey on this day?" I told him I was sorry but my lips were sealed. He then poured honey on my head so the ants would get me. That's when I broke down and talked.]

One of the most important holidays is Thanksgiving Day, known in France as Le Jour De Merci Donnant.

Le Jour de Merci Donnant was first started by a group of pilgrims (Pèlerins) who fled from l'Angleterre before the McCarran Act to found a colony in the New World (le Nouveau Monde), where they could shoot Indians (les Peaux-Rouges) and eat turkey (dinde) to their hearts' content. They landed at a place called Plymouth (now a famous voiture Américaine) in a wooden sailing ship named the Mayflower, or Fleur de Mai, in 1620. But while the Pèlerins were killing the dindes, the Peaux-Rouges were killing the Pèlerins, and there were several hard winters ahead for both of them. The only way the Peaux-Rouges helped the Pèlerins was when they taught them how to grow corn (maïs). They did this because they liked corn with their Pèlerins.

In 1623, after another harsh year, the Pèlerins' crops were so good they decided to have a celebration and because more maïs was raised by the Pèlerins than Pèlerins were killed by the Peaux-Rouges. Every year on le Jour de Merci Donnant, parents tell their children an amusing story about the first celebration.

It concerns a brave capitaine named Miles Standish (known in France as Kilomètres Deboutish) and a shy young lieutenant named Jean Alden. Both of them were in love with a flower of Plymouth called Priscilla Mullens (no translation). The vieux capitaine said to the jeune lieutenant: "Go to the damsel Priscilla (Allez très vite chez Priscilla), the loveliest maiden of Plymouth (la plus jolie demoiselle de Plymouth). Say that a blunt old captain, a man not of words but of action (un vieux Fanfan la Tulipe), offers his hand and his heart -- the hand and heart of a soldier. Not in these words, you understand, but this, in short, is my meaning. "I am a maker of war (Je suis un fabricant de la guerre) and not a maker of phrases. You, bred as a scholar (Vous, qui êtes pain comme un étudiant), can say it in elegant language, such as you read in your books of the pleadings and wooings of lovers, such as you think best suited to win the heart of the maiden."

Although Jean was fit to be tied (convenable a être emballé), friendship prevailed over love and went to his duty. But instead of using elegant language, he blurted out his mission. Priscilla was muted with amazement and sorrow (rendue muette par l'étonnement et la tristesse). At length she exclaimed, breaking the ominous silence, "If the great captain of Plymouth is so very eager to wed me, why does he not come himself and take the trouble to woo me?" ("Ou est-il, le vieux Kilomètres? Pourquoi ne vient-il pas auprès de moi pour tenter sa chance?") Jean said that Kilomètres Deboutish was very busy and didn't have time for such things. He staggered on, telling her what a wonderful husband Kilomètres would make. Finally, Priscilla arched her eyebrows and said in a tremulous voice, "Why don't you speak for yourself, Jean?" ("Chacun a son goût.")

And so, on the fourth Thursday in November, American families sit down at a large table brimming with tasty dishes, and for the only time during the year eat better than the French do.

No one can deny that le Jour de Merci Donnant is a grand fête, and no matter how well fed American families are, they never forget to give thanks to Kilomètres Deboutish, who made this great day possible.