

One day when he came here, he was a young man then, he saw a farmer ploughing with a horse-drawn plough, he told me the plough-share was cutting into the earth and turning it over, great tongues of it. He thought that was wonderful and said: "I'll be a farmer." That was all there was to it. But for us, the motivation isn't the same. For us, "plough-share" means power, it means a big tractor, heavy investment and ending up at the Bank.

Nobody ever urged me to come here. When I got through my "A Levels", I had to make up my mind what I wanted to do. So I told my mother I wanted to be a farmer. She said, "you can do better than that, you've got lots of other openings. You'll never make a lot of money farming." Which is true, I know, but anyway, I carried on regardless. My father didn't put me off, because, deep down, he was happy about it, but he never encouraged me. He would just take me for a walk sometimes. We would leave early in the morning, go beyond Périgueux and spend the day looking at the wheat to see how it was coming on and seeing how the pigs were doing. That was about it. That was the kind of atmosphere I lived in. If I did it, it was because I felt like doing it, felt like ploughing.

I became a farmer because I couldn't be a vet. That's all. All that brainwork, college and all that. I couldn't manage to become a vet. It was either one or the other. So I became a farmer. I was crazy about helping my granddad, bringing up the hay and straw, looking after the cows. I couldn't see myself doing anything else. I worked for 3 weeks at the "Chambre d'Agriculture" but I never went to get my pay-check. One Monday morning, I left home to look for a job. I pulled up my little car, it must have been a quarter to eight and I said to myself: "What the hell are you doing here? " I'd been sitting on my arse getting bored for 3 weeks! I drove back home and said to my dad: "I'm going to the Dordogne. I want to be a farmer." and the next day, I turned up at my grandparents!

When I first came here, I can't say it was easy because I was living among farmers and I didn't know a thing about country life. My mother-in-law who's a shrewd woman said to me: "Do you want to learn how to force-feed? If you do, I'll buy you three ducks." And I force-fed the ducks, and the following year, I fed a few more and then I found myself all alone in a kind of cowshed a little way from the house, with those ducks struggling and scratching me all over. I remember, a year after I got married, sitting in that cowshed with my hands hurting, and I was crying. "Whatever have I let myself in for? What the hell am I doing here with all these ducks that fight back?" And then, little by little, I had to learn how to kill the fowl and not faint because it had to be done.

When I sat for my "O Levels", my father took me aside and said: "What do you want to do now?" and I said: "Well, I want to be a farmer like you." He got in touch with a "Maison familiale d'agriculture" and sent me to Charente. That was in 1965. I passed the exam, I was only 18 but I was scared of being a bachelor, of never getting married, oh! Was I scared!

In these days, it wasn't popular to be a farmer. We were just changing over from old times to modern times and it was hard to keep up. You had to keep it dark with the girls. At that time they were working in factories; industry was booming. They went to work in town, in the shoe-factory, in Textiles, at Michelin or wherever. Lots of farmers were all alone, with their old parents.

I used to get bored stiff. I saw my pals who were married with kids and who weren't doing too well on the farm. So I got to thinking I had some satisfaction: the farm was doing fine, we were making money, but that wasn't enough.

My dad saw that it wouldn't take much for me to leave. So he said: "If you aren't happy here... (I knew a bit about farming, but only a bit. Industry was booming, there was no unemployment in those days)... get your licence, clear off and be a lorry driver!" So I did, and I got a job in Bordeaux with Citram. I was ever so happy! It was like being young again. I had the time of my life. My dad retired in 1980, so I came back to the farm, you always go back where your roots are.

When I first came here, it wasn't the same cows: things weren't functional. In those days, you weren't allowed to sell a cow

because she was such a dear. This one is Grisetette, she's Sebastian's cow. She only gave 6 pints of milk; poor soul, she was sweet and that was all you could say for her. She would starve you out of house and home but she would guzzle all right! As much as a good milker. A very good appetite she had. I'm not complaining because she fetched a good price. You had to suppress your feelings about the animals, even if you were very fond of them and that's a fact. It was hard for me to let some go, especially the ones I had got attached to, but I said to myself, come on, don't be soft-hearted, it's a question of money, so they must go.

I'm not mad about the land, I don't love the land, I love my animals, that's all. I don't go out and help my husband. At the moment, he's cutting wood. He forgets all about me and that suits me fine. The only thing I like to do is to look after the cows. I'll do that as much as you like. Women don't help the way they used to. I know my mother-in-law or other women of the older generation used to help on the farm but I arrived just when a woman wasn't needed so much. But to look after the cows, yes, that's O.K. When a man goes in for dairy-farming, his wife must lend a hand.

The countryside will be whatever the environmental regulations say it is to be and that's that.

When you force the land, it always gets its own back some day or other. You change things, you upset things, you do away with the hedges to get more surface area, you do away with the meadows, you dig ditches where the old folk hadn't dug, you impede the course of things just a little and then, some day or other, nature reacts and reveals her real nature, her real power, and we're all back where we started from.

In the old days, they didn't force the land like us, they couldn't, they didn't have the power, they didn't have the technology, but on the other hand, they knew the land better, even the weather. The old folk have a way of telling what the weather will be like that is quite different from ours. We just dial 0836680224 and when we see the first swallow we say: "Well, spring is here again!"

In the old days, it was "give me a hand and I'll give you a hand". "I help you today, you help me tomorrow". All one big family. That is to say everyone got on well with everyone else, they joined forces and helped one another. Nowadays it's every man for himself and god for us all. And things have changed because the young don't take to the land any more.

The land feeds us and eats us up. That's what my grandparents told me and I used to wonder what they were driving at. But I've thought it over and it's quite true. The land feeds everything and eats up everything.

It's quite true; you do talk to the wind and weather. When it doesn't rain or when there's a storm, you talk to them all right. But when you do, it's not a good sign, I'm telling you! It means you're going to make some nasty remarks, otherwise you seldom do. The relationship is not at all a friendly one. You talk to the animals too, even if you couldn't really call it talking.

Sitting there on the tractor, you think about the job, about what you have to do, or about meetings and things you are in charge of and a little about anything and everything. You try to escape. You think about what you would like to do but don't always have time to and you say to yourself: "I'll have to find the time."

Myself, when I'm driving the tractor, I often think about the kids, about the future and what would be best for them, well, lots of things connected with them. Last time, I was thinking about how to convert the attic and drawing up the plans in my head and I was thinking about genealogy too. We're lucky there are roads all around us. So we get people hooting their horns and waving. You have fun noticing what sort of car so-and-so has, that so-and-so is a lousy driver and that somebody else has overtaken him.

In those days we didn't have supermarkets. There was the postman who came round every morning, the baker twice a week and the grocer - we used to call him "China" - came every week. He used to drive round in his Renault van, old Boniface, every Thursday morning, and he would have a bite to eat with us. My grandmother

would bring out a big wicker basket full of eggs and give it to the grocer who counted them out by the dozen. He would sell her his stuff and quite often it was he who owed her a little money. If I took a basket of eggs to the shop at Ribérac today I can't see Edouard [French supermarket] giving me any cash and that's a fact!

We have to hang together if we want to get the work done, but the atmosphere isn't what it used to be. Take the way they used to celebrate threshing, for instance, and all the rest of it, that's gone forever. We live in a different world. Mechanization did mutual aid in. You help each other a couple of days and that's that. In the old days, the harvest used to last a month or a month and a half. But just like you wouldn't want to drive home tonight in a cart, it's the same with us, we wouldn't dream of picking maize by hand. You've got to keep up with the times.

Before the seventies, my mother and I used to milk the cows by hand. We had the knack of it and own wrists didn't hurt. That was the way it was then, but nowadays everything has to be speeded up so, we don't have the time. We are more like company managers: we spend a third of our time either sitting at a desk or doing paperwork. People used to be out in the fields all day long. The older generation would leave at sunrise and come home at sunset. Not us. It may be pleasant to have first class machinery, air conditioned cabins and all, but we pay a lot for it, however you look at it. We can afford to start later in the morning, but on the other hand, we do our farming on paper. It's just another business and we have to manage it.

My husband and I used to breed chickens, quality chickens. One day, a man came round and said: "Listen, you shouldn't be doing that, it doesn't pay, you could do much better breeding layers." You know, those people are after the money. They get round you and they look after their own interests rather than yours. They know that if they've pinned down a customer, that customer will have to purchase his feedstuffs from them: they've got you, and then too, they even found us some second-hand buildings, which we bought. And so those fellows told us: "Now, you're into layers; Laying hens; you'll see it's worth while, you're on to something good". Fine talkers they were, and we were too stupid. We listened to them, we had these buildings put up and we switched to layers. We did it for perhaps twelve or thirteen years and we had 18,000 laying hens. At the beginning, it was so so, we broke even. Then, after two years, we came a cropper. Each egg cost us 36 centimes, after we'd added up the purchase price of the hen, its food and drink, the electricity and all the other expenses and we sold the eggs for 22 centimes. We would work day and night. In the morning, when we got up, we knew that however hard we worked, what little profit we might make would all have been eaten up by evening. I was depressed. Things were going badly. So I said to my husband: "Listen, the business is eating money; our own land will have to go next and we've had such a struggle to keep it after my parents and grandparents. There's only one way out: door-to-door selling. Come on! A wire basket, and we'll sell the eggs from door to door". "Are you crazy?" he said. I told him he would see who was right and then off we went. He refused to get out of the car, but at least he drove me around and that was something. We supplied the regiment stationed in Périgueux as well as the Hospital. Wherever we called, they took my eggs. I don't know whether they felt sorry for me or what, but everybody took some. They were guaranteed new laid: laid one day, delivered the next and we got on our feet again in 6 months. My husband said "I'd never have believed it" You had to keep moving on, to see more than what was just under your nose and think up everything you could to save yourself.

We have so many problems: we want to have a little comfort. I never take a holiday. I'm a fool. I could if I managed things a little better but you want to enjoy yourself a little now and then, so you do. We have a meal out three or four times a year. My parents never did, not once in their whole life. It's not because your bank account is in the red, a little fun won't make it much redder.

We come from a very privileged background so we didn't see country life the same way as the farmers hereabouts. We became farmers by dint of hard work and by living in the country. We learned

what it was to slave away from one year's end to the other. We learned everything all by ourselves. We are quite apart I assure you. We take holidays. We don't mind leaving other people in charge of the farm. In the beginning, my wife used to go on holiday all by herself and I stayed on; until one day I found I could afford to hire somebody. We used to go away because it was only fair and it made a change. We were fed up with having nothing but cows and pigs and tractors to look at all the year round and it felt good to go away for a week. It's true that at first some of the other farmers used to say "He won't last out ten years". That's how it was and we knew it. Well, we've lasted twenty-seven years already.

In 1992, I had a spot of bother skiing. I broke a knee, so I was obliged to stop working. But I had someone to replace me. He was a bloke who'd helped us around that time to build the pigsties. He had come to replace me for a week but I thought he was doing such a good job that I rang him up from the health centre and told him "I've just broken my knee, they say I'm in for eight months. I've got to keep you on". He said: "No problem!" We got on so well together that I doubled my sow population so as to be able to take on a helper. That's why we increased the number from 45 to 100. I wanted to work with somebody else. I had had enough of being alone.

January and February is perhaps the time when you can relax a bit if you've finished ploughing. You take a little more time off, that's about what it comes to. You take your time over meals and then hang around a bit if it's raining hard or whatever and you come home a bit earlier in the evening. Instead of getting back at 8, well, you're back at 7. That's just about all, and it doesn't amount to much.

Our real friends are not necessarily country people. We are perhaps a little different from the others. When we were just married we knew a few couples among the farmers, but as for going out with them and talking about farming all the evening, no thanks! We spend the whole day and the whole of our lives farming, so we feel like talking about something else, getting interested in something else and listening to what other people have to say.

I'm 40 and a woman with children. I put make up on every morning, even if I'm only going to the hen-house because I consider that it's not just because I live in the country that I'm not going to blow-dry my hair. I'm not always what you might call spick-and-span, but it's unusual for me not to put make up on, quite unusual. I put on a little scent or whatever and then I get going...

Sometimes I tell people I'm a peasant. I like the word "peasant" because it sounds a bit like "clod-hopper" and people are embarrassed when they hear you say: "What do I do? I'm a peasant!" And then, sometimes, I don't mean we're snobbish or anything, but when we're all dressed up and going places, it isn't written all over our faces that we are farmers and when people see us they are sometimes a bit surprised. When I am on my tractor, working at the edge of the road I watch people driving by and laugh my head off. They are driving by, when they see a tractor, that livens things up a bit and then, hallo! They give a little start and say to themselves: "Well! Well! It's a woman!" But it's true I do want to have a good appearance, even if my feet are all muddy, the top half looks all right.

What I'm going to say may be a little foolish, but we don't have the cows we used to have. Our cows belong to another generation. They've got used to our way of farming. Actually, we've got engineers whose aim is precisely to produce top-class cows. Today, thanks to genetics, they can produce a cow that will give you milk, and if you want a high fat content as well, they'll cross it with a bull from Canada or somewhere and that's what you'll get, and after that, when you stall them, you give them the granules required for a given production and it all goes through the milking machine. That's how we come to produce more than our quota and chuck away 20,000, 40,000 or in some cases 80,000 pints of milk because our cows are competitive. They function all right; they do the job. It's like a factory. But I don't want cows that give more than 16,000 pints. I'm not too keen because it would cost too much. I'll take on cows that give 20,000 pints but only if I'm given an extra quota of 100,000 pints. Today I hang back a bit, I mean; I'm playing for time. No need to rush into things.

When I say that farming today is only a question of economics you

can believe me. When I hear our county official tell me that it is all love of the land and an art of living, I say he's taking me for a mug. No doubt it's true in a way; I repeat I'm happy to hear the birds when I get up and see the swallows when I'm haymaking. I'm happy to see a cloud of dust when I'm harvesting and enjoy a wisp of straw whirling in the wind. I'm happy to go and see the chickens every morning because I breathe in the fresh air, but it's all a question of economics nevertheless. Every day, it's a headache to keep the farm going.

Nowadays farming is business. We farmers are just like company managers. But we do have the advantage of being out of doors. We live in the open air and we're free. Tomorrow morning, for instance, if I feel like going to the café at Ribérac to have coffee and read the paper for half an hour, I'll do it.

It's a great satisfaction for me to belong to the cooperative and mutual benefit societies. A cooperative is like the king of the community. We don't live on top of one another but we all deliver our produce to the same place and the people who sell it are employed by us. And whether you are a big farmer or a small one, you're paid on the same basis. My father, who was head of the cooperative, always told me that the only way out of their difficulties was for farmers to band together and head in the same direction. As long as farmers head in the same direction, they make it. We must stand up for ourselves and stick together.

The banker trusts us and we trust him. The banker knows who he is dealing with, and we trust him too. It's true that my father used to go to the bank to invest money whereas I go there to borrow it. I'm my own boss, but it's the bank that is the real boss.

You may get a CAP inspection with only a day's notice. They call you up the day before to prevent you from cheating because when those blokes are taught how to draw up those CAP files, they are warned that the farmer is a born crook. One of the inspectors said to a farmer who lives a mile from here: "Sorry, old chap, but when I went on my training course, they said, "Watch out! Farmers are never on the level." So the bloke comes along with that idea. Of course, to be honest, if there was less fiddling, the good ones wouldn't pay for the bad.

Every year, they do random inspections but sometimes it's not done at random, sometimes farmers are given away reported. You get one, two or three fellows coming along with their surveys to see whether what you've written down is correct. They use a decametre, or a least they've got a contraption with a thin wire that runs along the ground and measures the exact area of such and such a parcel of land, and if you've forgotten the tree or if you've forgotten to take away ten inches from 300 ft for the fence, or if you've left out the little stream, then that makes less than what was written down, and less means a big fine. And those fellows get so much for every file they draw up on you. They use satellites and helicopters today and those blokes turn up with a contraption on the roof of their car and bang! Up goes the satellite, they get the picture straight away and they say: "No, sir, look, the satellite gives me this area. You've made a mistake of one acre out of 500! What do you think you're up to, one acre out of 500!" Or they say: "Look, that land is supposed to be fallow and you've grown hay on it so you are liable to a fine; that makes so much less".

In the seventies, the government told our parents to produce. Today, in the year 2000, the government tells us not to produce and we're paid not to, but after all, you've got to have something to live on. That's the way it is: you get a rent allowance and we get a CAP allowance and the bloke in town who doesn't do a bloody thing all day gets unemployment benefit and we're all dependent on government aid, whether we like it or not.

It's very unpleasant to be dependent on aid. We farmers don't hold with it because it turns us into speculators and that's not in character for a farmer. A farmer does his job as well as he can with all the technical skills he can acquire and he's content to live on the sale of his produce.

We're happy in our work. If we have some fine wheat and maize to show for it, and a handsome cow, we're pleased to show her off,

she's all our own work; we should be glad to sell her for what she's worth. But today you can never sell at the true price, far from it. So, to make the price up to what it ought to be, they give us a subsidy and townspeople frown on subsidies. They disapprove of them and can't see why we should get them. I know that I, personally, would rather not be given a subsidy on my maize or wheat. If the government, right or left wing, or centre, managed their affairs the way we manage ours, we'd be one of richest countries in the world.

I honestly think that they're out to kill French agriculture today. France is going to be the Club Méditerranée (holiday resort) of Europe.

I'm convinced that France is destined to become a garden, a place for relaxation and holidays. Everything is being organized for it. So many people have said to us: "Why don't you fix up that old house; turn it into a self-catering cottage or a hostel. It would give us a pain in the neck. People taking pictures of me feeding the chickens –no thanks! If you want to see clowns, go to town! We care about peace and quiet too. We are quite ready to explain things; we aren't savages, but I can see what sort of people we get here all right. We have a good laugh and it's true we can see we're different from townspeople. But I have a feeling we know them better than they know us.

In town, we get the feeling that everything is artificial and we think townspeople are just spoilt children. They've got all the conveniences, all the shows and concerts and the underground. They've got day nurseries for the kids and all the big colleges. In the country, if you want to go to the pictures, you drive 30 miles in your little car. If you have to go to hospital, it's 30 miles away. If you want your children to get a college education, you've got to send them away from home. You're coming to grips with Nature all the time; you're up against the real facts and problems of life.

The great majority of townspeople have roots in the country. We won't find a Parisian whose parents or, at any rate grandparents or great-grandparents, weren't country people. It's true that at one time, when you came from the country it meant you were a clo-dhopper so townspeople tended to look down on you. We are mostly townspeople in my family and it was out of the question for me to marry a German or a peasant, so you see roughly how it was.

They ask us to spread sludge from towns and townspeople's refuse on our fields. No one will guarantee what it all contains. The government never guarantees anything. What are we supposed to do with all your sludge and refuse? What do you townspeople do with them? Do you ever think about it? And the liquid waste from towns, where does that go? And the dustbins? But the townsman doesn't worry about anything, apart from his little job, getting back home, doing his bit of shopping at the supermarket... The farmer who pollutes has to pay, but townspeople never do.

They say farmers are always complaining and well they may, because, believe me, it's not all a barrel of laughs. You buy a machine, say, and it costs you an arm and a leg. Well, it takes you 5 years to pay for it; you try to hire it out so that it can bring in a little cash and you can speed up the payments, but during those five years the machine has done a hell of a job, you might as well replace it. It goes on for ever like that, you get a new machine, which means more credit and as you've got to work, it wears out and you sell it and buy another and so on all your life, there's no end to it. You might say it's like running after the wind... and as for catching up with it...!

At that time my father-in-law was a Farmers Union delegate and he had two employees. When we set up on our own, three of us were wage-earners and we were quite well-off. We didn't earn a lot but we had no worries, whereas today we earn less. We've got more and more machines that get more and more sophisticated, so as to save as much time as we can, we are not on the land so often now, we work harder and earn less and less. Makes you think, doesn't it?

We work just to pay our way because our expenses keep increasing. They're enormous! Prices keep going down for everything we sell. They say we get subsidies but subsidies don't compensate for

less income, far from it. They do help a little, of course, they pay our taxes. But things have become quite impossible. I'm looking forward to retirement because I'm sick and tired of it all. We small farmers just don't count; you could almost say that small farms like ours that aren't productive are nothing but a nuisance. And nobody does anything to help us. Quite the opposite! They'd rather see us dead first!

The markets have become international and we've got to conform to international prices if we want to sell. We are under American domination: the price of corn has been fixed in Chicago for a long time now, and that's the way it is.

We live in a society where there are people who never earn a penny. There are sixty million of us, and how many are earning only the minimum wage? How can they possibly afford to pay 70 francs (10 euros) for a chicken, buy petrol at 30 francs (4,50 euros) a gallon, pay off the instalments on a car in ten years and pay the rent on top of all that? So they're obliged to eat cheaply; chickens at 15 francs (2,50 euros) and so on. And so you must have farmers who produce chickens at 15 francs. And what about the farmers themselves, what do they have left to live on if they follow the trend? They are the ones who should refuse to stand for it.

Young people are fed up with the land. They see their parents slaving away and they see they've got to work hard and you get nowhere. You know, young folk like to have their Saturday and Sunday off. If they don't get the weekend, it's no go; whereas we never had that, but we've survived. We never say that such and such a job is a bloody nuisance, wouldn't dream of it; we're farmers to the core, farmers right to our fingertips so we should never say a thing.

I shall soon be fifty and I say to myself: "I'll clear out, I've slaved long enough and I've got no kids to take over from me." I can afford to do it, but when I come back two years later the farm will have gone to the dogs, just like a car when you don't change the oil. "Oh, she's running fine; let her rip." No, it's not for me. I've got to hold the road and keep course. My farm has got to look great and be worth something and when I feel like installing a young fellow here –our youngsters may not want to be farmers, but others will – Then I'll be proud to show him what we've done.