

The Other

She changes this thing in the house to annoy the other, and the other is annoyed and changes it back, and she changes this other thing in the house to annoy the other, and the other is annoyed and changes it back, and then she tells all this the way it happens to some others and they think it is funny, but the other hears it and does not think it is funny, but can't change it back.

*They Take Turns Using
a Word They Like*

"It's *extraordinary*," says one woman.

"It *is* extraordinary," says the other.

Boring Friends

We know only four boring people. The rest of our friends we find very interesting. However, most of the friends we find interesting find us boring: the most interesting find us the most boring. The few who are somewhere in the middle, with whom there is reciprocal interest, we distrust: at any moment, we feel, they may become too interesting for us, or we too interesting for them.

A Double Negative

At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child.

French Lesson I:

Le Meurtre

See the *vaches* ambling up the hill, head to rump, head to rump. Learn what a *vache* is. A *vache* is milked in the morning, and milked again in the evening, twitching her dung-soaked tail, her head in a stanchion. Always start learning your foreign language with the names of farm animals. Remember that one animal is an *animal*, but more than one are *animaux*, ending in *a u x*. Do not pronounce the *x*. These *animaux* live on a *ferme*. There is not much difference between that word, *ferme*, and our own word for the place where wisps of straw cover everything, the barnyard is deep in mud, and a hot dunghill steams by the barn door on a winter morning, so it should be easy to learn. *Ferme.*

We can now introduce the definite articles *le*, *la*, and *les*, which we know already from certain phrases we see in our own country, such as *le car*, *le sandwich*, *le café*, *les girls*. Besides *la vache*, there are other *animaux* on *la ferme*, whose buildings are weather-beaten, pocked with rusty nails, and leaning at odd angles, but which has a new tractor. *Les chiens* cringe in the presence of their master, *le fermier*, and bark at *les chats* as *les chats* slink mewing to the back door, and *les poulets* cluck and scratch and are special

pets of *le fermier's* children until they are beheaded by *le fermier* and plucked by *la femme of le fermier* with her red-knuckled hands and then cooked and eaten by the entire *famille*. Until further notice do not pronounce the final consonants of any of the words in your new vocabulary unless they are followed by the letter *e*, and sometimes not even then. The rules and their numerous exceptions will be covered in later lessons.

We will now introduce a piece of language history and then, following it, a language concept.

Agriculture is a pursuit in France, as it is in our own country, but the word is pronounced differently, *agriculture*. The spelling is the same because the word is derived from the Latin. In your lessons you will notice that some French words, such as *la ferme*, are spelled the same way or nearly the same way as the equivalent words in our own language, and in these cases the words in both languages are derived from the same Latin word. Other French words are not at all like our words for the same things. In these cases, the French words are usually derived from the Latin but our words for the same things are not, and have come to us from the Anglo-Saxon, the Danish, and so on. This is a piece of information about language history. There will be more language history in later lessons, because language history is really quite fascinating, as we hope you will agree by the end of the course.

We have just said that we have our own words in English for the same things. This is not strictly true. We can't really say there are several words for the same thing. It is in fact just the opposite—there is only one word for many things, and usually even that word, when it is a noun, is too general. Keep this language concept in mind as you listen to the following example:

A French *arbre* is not the elm or maple shading the main street of our New England towns in the infinitely long, hot and listless, vacant summer of our childhoods, which are themselves different from the childhoods of French children, and if you see a Frenchman standing on a street in a small town in America pointing to an elm or a maple and calling it an *arbre*, you will know this is wrong. An *arbre* is a plane tree in an ancient town square with lopped, stubby branches and patchy, leprous bark standing in a row of similar plane trees across from the town hall, in front of which a bicycle ridden by a man with thick, reddish skin and an old cap wavers past and turns into a narrow lane. Or an *arbre* is one of the dense, scrubby live oaks in the blazing dry hills of Provence, through which a similar figure in a blue cloth jacket carrying some sort of a net or trap pushes his way. An *arbre* can also cast a pleasant shade and keep *la maison* cool in the summer, but remember that *la maison* is not wood-framed with a widow's walk and a wide front porch but is laid out on a north-south axis, is built of irregular, sand-colored blocks of stone, and has a red tile roof, small square windows with green shutters, and no windows on the north side, which is also protected from the wind by a closely planted line of cypresses, while a pretty mulberry or olive may shade the south. Not that there are not many different sorts of *maisons* in France, their architecture depending on their climate or on the fact that there may be a foreign country nearby, like Germany, but we cannot really have more than one image behind a word we say, like *maison*. What do you see when you say *house*? Do you see more than one kind of house?

When are we going to return to our *ferme*? As we pointed out earlier, a language student should master *la ferme* before he or she moves on to *la ville*, just as we

should all come to the city only in our adolescent years, when nature, or animal life, is no longer as important or interesting to us as it once was.

If you stand in a tilled field at the edge of *la ferme*, you will hear *les vaches* lowing because it is five in the winter evening and their udders are full. A light is on in the barn, but outside it is dark and *la femme* of *le fermier* looks out a little anxiously across the barnyard from the window of her *cuisine*, where she is peeling vegetables. Now the hired man is silhouetted in the doorway of the barn. *La femme* wonders why he is standing still holding a short object in his right hand. The plural article *les*, spelled *l e s*, as in *les vaches*, is invariable, but do not pronounce the *s*. The singular article is either masculine, *le*, or feminine, *la*, depending on the noun it accompanies, and it must always be learned along with any new noun in your vocabulary, because there is very little else to go by, to tell what in the world of French nouns is masculine and what is feminine. You may try to remember that all countries ending in silent *e* are feminine except for *le Mexique*, or that all the states in the United States of America ending in silent *e* are feminine except for Maine—just as in German the four seasons are masculine and all minerals are masculine—but you will soon forget these rules. One day, however, *la maison* will seem inevitably feminine to you, with its welcoming open doors, its shady rooms, its warm kitchen. *La bicyclette*, a word we are introducing now, will also seem feminine, and can be thought of as a young girl, ribbons fluttering in her spokes as she wobbles down the rutted lane away from the farm. *La bicyclette*. But that was earlier in the afternoon. Now *les vaches* stand at the barnyard gate, lowing and chewing their cuds. The word *cud*, and probably also the word *lowing*, are words you will not have to know in

French, since you would almost never have occasion to use them.

Now the hired man swings open *la barrière* and *les vaches* amble across the barnyard, udders swaying, up to their hocks in *la boue*, nodding their heads and switching their tails. Now their hooves clatter across the concrete floor of *la grange* and the hired man swings *la barrière* shut. But where is *le fermier*? And why, in fact, is the chopping block covered with *sang* that is still sticky, even though *le fermier* has not killed *un poulet* in days? You will need to use indefinite articles as well as definite articles with your nouns, and we must repeat that you will make no mistakes with the gender of your nouns if you learn the articles at the same time. *Un* is masculine, *une* is feminine. This being so, what gender is *un poulet*? If you say masculine you are right, though the bird herself may be a young female. After the age of ten months, however, when she should also be stewed rather than broiled, fried, or roasted, she is known as *la poule* and makes a great racket after laying a clutch of eggs in a corner of the poultry yard *la femme* will have trouble finding in the morning, when she will also discover something that does not belong there and that makes her stand still, her apron full of eggs, and gaze off across the fields.

Notice that the words *poule*, *poulet*, and *poultry*, especially when seen on the page, have some resemblance. This is because all three are derived from the same Latin word. This may help you remember the word *poulet*. *Poule*, *poulet*, and *poultry* have no resemblance to the word *chicken*, because *chicken* is derived from the Anglo-Saxon.

In this first lesson we have concentrated on nouns. We can safely, however, introduce a preposition at this point, and before we are through we will also be using one verb,

so that by the end of the lesson you will be able to form some simple sentences. Try to learn what this preposition means by the context in which it is used. You will notice that you have been doing this all along with most of the vocabulary introduced. It is a good way to learn a language because it is how children learn their native languages, by associating the sounds they hear with the context in which the sounds are uttered. If the context changed continually, the children would never learn to speak. Also, the so-called meaning of a word is completely determined by the context in which it is spoken, so that in fact we cannot say a meaning is inescapably attached to a word, but that it shifts over time and from context to context. Certainly the so-called meaning of a French word, as I tried to suggest earlier, is not its English equivalent but whatever it refers to in French life. These are modern or contemporary ideas about language, but they are generally accepted. Now the new word we are adding to our vocabulary is the word *dans*, spelled *d a n s*. Remember not to pronounce the last letter, *s*, or, in this case, the next to the last letter, *n*, and speak the word through your nose. *Dans*.

Do you remember *la femme*? Do you remember what she was doing? It is still dark, *les vaches* are gone from her sight and quieter than they were earlier, except for the one bellowing *vache* who is ill and was not let out that morning by *le fermier* for fear that she would infect the others, and *la femme* is still there, peeling vegetables. She is—now listen carefully—*dans la cuisine*. Do you remember what *la cuisine* is? It is the only place, except perhaps for the sunny front courtyard on a cool late summer afternoon, where *une femme* would reasonably peel *les légumes*.

La femme is holding a small knife *dans* her red-knuckled hand and there are bits of potato skin stuck to her

wrist, just as there are feathers stuck in *le sang* on the chopping block outside the back door, smaller feathers, however, than would be expected from *un poulet*. The glistening white peeled *pommes de terre* are *dans une bassine* and *la bassine* is *dans* the sink, and *les vaches* are *dans la grange*, where they should have been an hour ago. Above them the bales of hay are stacked neatly *dans* the loft, and near them is a calf *dans* the calves' pen. The rows of bare lightbulbs in the ceiling shine on the clanking stanchions. *Stanchion* is another word you will probably not have to know in French, though it is a nice one to know in English.

Now that you know the words *la femme*, *dans*, and *la cuisine*, you will have no trouble understanding your first complete sentence in French: *La femme est dans la cuisine*. Say it over until you feel comfortable with it. *La femme est*—spelled *e s t* but don't pronounce the *s* or the *t*—*dans la cuisine*. Here are a few more simple sentences to practice on: *La vache est dans la grange*. *La pomme de terre est dans la bassine*. *La bassine est dans* the sink.

The whereabouts of *le fermier* is more of a problem, but in the next lesson we may be able to follow him into *la ville*. Before going on to *la ville*, however, do study the list of additional vocabulary:

le sac: bag
la grive: thrush
l'alouette: lark
l'aile: wing
la plume: feather
la hachette: hatchet
le manche: handle
l'anxiété: anxiety
le meurtre: murder

Company

I like the students. I like their company. I like them here— if only they would remain in the indefinite future. They must be somewhere in my future or they will not be here for me, for company, where I can talk to them sometimes all day long. But that future must never come. Because it is so hard to meet them in the class itself. The problem is that in order to have the company of them here, in my imagination, I must pay the price of that future arriving, as it does, with all the difficulty of that encounter.

Then there is another sort of company in the letters I have not answered. If I answer the letters, those patient or impatient people waiting for answers are no longer present to me. If I answer the letters, I suppose I may be in some cases present to them, then. But, though not telling myself this is the reason, I don't answer these letters. And yet this is selfish, and of course impolite. I answer some, in fact. But most go unanswered for weeks, months, more than a year, several years, or forever. Several times, I have waited so long to answer a letter that the person has moved away. Once, I waited so long to answer a postcard that my friend died.

But maybe these people are no longer waiting for

answers by now anyway; maybe their attention is no longer on me, and this company is only an illusion: the friendly or neutral words are still there on various sheets of paper in different envelopes, but in the minds of these people who wrote the unanswered letters the words for what they are thinking about me, if they think of me at all, are no longer friendly or neutral but unfriendly, dismissive, even disgusted. I believe I have this company, but I do not have it, unless believing this is enough, and I do in some form have this company, whatever they may be thinking.

When I answer one of these letters, true, sometimes all I receive in return, weeks later, is a brief, tired reply. But more often the reply comes quickly and is full, warm, even delighted; and then, just because it is so generous and such wonderful company, it may sit again on my bedside, or on my desk, or on my pile of correspondence, for weeks or months or longer before I answer it.