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## Living off the land

Photography Rolf Oosterveld Website [www.hirondelle.info](http://www.hirondelle.info)

She used to cook enthusiastically in smart restaurants, but fifteen years ago Heleen Oosterveld and her husband, Rolf, chose the farming life in the Auvergne. In each edition of Seasons she looks at the romance of life in the French countryside with Dutch matter of factness and humour.

### A second chance for Gabin.

Son Quichotte's scrawny horse came to mind when I saw him for the first time – not because he really was so thin, but rather because he looked so forlorn. A horse-raising friend from the Camargue had brought him with him and there he stood, waiting to be transported to the slaughterhouse.

"Hallo, Bernard," I said, slightly surprised, "that's a full-blooded Camargue horse, isn't it? You say he is only fourteen years old; why is he on his way to the slaughterhouse?" "He didn't do his job well. He was supposed to ride round with tourists, but the tempo in his tread was too low, and when he trotted now and then to catch the other horses up, the tourists more or less fell off because he trotted so woodenly. Furthermore, he cannot get on with other horses and he is bad-tempered."

No, not a pretty picture. Something in the horse's sad, lonely attitude made me start to begin to stroke his withers however. Bernard told me his name was Gabin. A nice name, typically French, I thought. He reminded me of the characteristically French actor of some decades ago, Jean Gabin.

Four footed Gabin turned his head in my direction. There was very great disappointment in the human race in his eyes. I felt guilty, even though it had not been my fault. There was still some vulnerability in those eyes however; he had not totally withdrawn from reality. I looked at him a little more objectively: a large, well-built animal, no sagging back; a bit stiff. There was an ugly raw spot under the root of the tail, just where horses in the Camargue wear a tail belt. No wonder he was bad-tempered.

I decided to give it a try: "May he stay with us for a couple of weeks' trial? I am looking for a strong, trustworthy horse for our guests. Maybe he will fit the bill."

Gabin arrived at our house the following day. From their paddock, seven other Camargue horses stood looking at him with curiosity. We have a lot of work for our darlings because we offer nice rides in the area to the tenants of our holiday homes. We have carefully trained our most trustworthy horses to go out with our guests as safely as possible. Would Gabin fit in with the little group?

The first attempt at making acquaintance took place as usual: get away, newcomer! It generally takes about three weeks before one horse is well accepted by another. This period is ideal for a human being to make friends with him, because the animal feels somewhat lonely. I went and hugged him every day, and brought him something tasty. I quickly realized why Gabin was sometimes unable to get on with other horses: he had a subservient, almost submissive character. There is nothing wrong with this in itself - someone has to be at the bottom of the pecking order - provided there is enough living space. That is not a problem on our six hectares (fifteen acres). Gabin would always be able to keep a polite distance.

Three weeks later he looked a little less sad. He had been accepted by the group and had found his own spot. It was time to see what he would be like under saddle. The first attempt to take him out of the paddock came to nothing. Panic! Gabin dragged me back to the other horses - with reins and all. Second and third attempts: a little tour of the farmyard and a little walk. He slowly got used to leaving and returning to the group every day.

To be honest, I was not completely at ease when the saddle was on him. Away we went, Gabin and I, both with our knees knocking. Oh dear, how woodenly that horse walked! He was indeed obedient; our first ride went well. Rides outside followed, with other horses, and things got better and better. After a couple of months I even noticed that Gabin was walking a lot less stiffly; he was starting to relax.

We were pleased to see him become one of our guests' favourites. Gabin is calm and trustworthy. The children, in particular, think he's a sweetie – as do insecure ladies... He brings you home safe. Recently, one of our guests, a good horseman, went out with Gabin for a ride outside. I was actually expecting a bit of criticism, because of his lack of passion, but when the group of horsemen returned I was surprised to see Gabin walking ahead, very satisfied with himself. "How did you like him? He's a bit sluggish and insecure, isn't he?", I asked nevertheless. "Not at all! Gabin rode ahead all the time, at a splendid pace, like a real commanding officer!" So you see once again.

