

Does life make sense?

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by Frida Nef

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Preface

Her friends were pressing her to publish this account of her life, but Frida Nef still hesitated. Finally she showed me her manuscript, and I too was at once convinced and begged her to have it published. I believe that a story such as hers, so simply and sincerely told, may help others to make sense of life, and of their own lives. And so I am glad to have the opportunity of introducing her book to the reader.

Dr Viktor Frankl, who occupies the professorial chair in Vienna once made famous by Sigmund Freud, says that the disease of our modern western civilization is the loss of any sense of the meaning of life. Most people today, he says, no longer know why they are alive.

He adds that though they no longer find the subject of sex embarrassing, as in Freud's day, many are embarrassed by religion; whereas it is only through man's innate sense of moral values, 'behind which stands God Himself', that he is able to discover the meaning of his life.

True, there are already plenty of books about famous missionaries and eminent evangelists. But they are the life-stories of exceptional people, learned

scholars and talented preachers, and they leave the reader uninvolved, because he himself lacks such gifts.

Then again, they are the stories of people with a vocation, in the theological meaning of the term, and the reader himself feels no call to the religious life. And so it seems to me that an autobiography like this one is a real complement to such books, since it is the story of an ordinary woman, a lay person, who after a difficult childhood worked hard for many years at baking good cakes for love of God and love of her neighbour.

But her book is too personal for me to wander off into generalizations or psychological comments. It moves me too to write in the first person. Frida Nef asked me for this preface because she and I belong to the same spiritual family.

I got to know her well at the time when she founded and ran the hostel called 'The Great Adventure'. I also knew her friend Marie-Liette, and shared their enthusiasm. It was just such simple, concrete witness as theirs that first touched me and changed my own life.

So I too have had my adventure, at once so different and so like that of Frida Nef. It is the great adventure of all those whom God has called, throughout history and all over the world, to abandon to Him the direction of our lives, insofar as that is possible for us proud, selfish, quarrelsome human beings.

Thus, through the very diversity of our differing vocations we can perceive the fundamental unity of our experience in a growing intimacy with God in

meditation, and in its fruits, won through an obedience that is always costly.

I am often asked about the practice of the quiet time, which for forty-six years has led me both to see myself more clearly and also to understand better what it is that God requires of me. I can only answer 'Try it!' The most effective way to learn is to do it.

PAUL TOURNIER

Introduction

I was completely lost. I was waiting for my suitcase, which did not arrive. In an office I was told that I had left the plane an hour too soon, and that I was not at Atlanta, which was my destination. I was coming from South America, and was relying on my watch, not knowing that there was a difference of an hour during the flight. In panic I raced with all my might across the runway, and caught my plane again at the very last minute.

How relieved I felt when I finally arrived in Atlanta to be received with a great smile of welcome by my friend Frances! She took me to her large and beautiful villa. In the neighbourhood, I noticed pretty little houses surrounded by gardens in bloom.

One day Frances suggested driving me to see the mountains, and some pasture land which belonged to her. But as we drove, I could see nothing but an absolutely flat landscape. Mountains? Was she serious? But after many hours of travelling the car began to climb a stony road, and we came to an upland meadow, an alp, strewn with little mountain flowers. Her horses were grazing there under a sunny autumn day. In a mountain hut set in lovely meadows we had our picnic.

During that journey and the days that followed, we came to know each other better. In that warm-hearted atmosphere I felt completely at home. It was then that I realized that we came from entirely differently family backgrounds. Frances's father was the founder of 'Retail Credit', which has become one of the great business houses of America; while I came from a simple Swiss working class family.

I had been speaking of my life to Frances; and one day she said to me, with great conviction, 'Frida, you must write your life story.'

'I would never know how,' I said. But when, about a year later, my friends Gisèle and Oscar happened to say the same thing, it seemed to me that this was a sign from heaven. Although I felt quite incapable of doing it, I set to work - and so this book was born. As I am Swiss-German by birth, I was very happy to have their help and that of others to put my text into good French. I am also grateful to those friends from Britain who have now translated this book into English.

1

Childhood

My family

It was at Gaïs, a little village in the canton of Appenzell, in Switzerland, that I was born one morning in May 1908. I heard later from my mother that that spring had been magnificent, and all the trees were in flower; but the night before I was born, it snowed so hard that the next day many flowering branches broke off under the weight of snow. Today astrologers would probably not have predicted a very happy future for me; but at that time people did not regard such ideas as so important. I was still quite small when we left Gaïs to live near St Gallen; and every time my mother returned with us to Gaïs, her friends were very curious to see the girl who had been born under such unlucky auspices.

There were five of us children: my elder brother and sister, myself who was the third, and my younger brother and sister. We had had another brother who died as a baby.

My father was a weaver. He worked at home, and at the same time was employed at a factory where he had the task of installing and repairing weaving looms. At that time hand weaving was still a good

trade, and very much in fashion. My father had begun this work by accompanying my grandfather, who went to repair looms in the most distant villages; this meant that they had to take their meals at cafés.

Father had an enquiring mind, and was passionately fond of reading; we had in the attic boxes full of magazines, almanacs and books of every kind. When he had read all he had on hand, he would send one of us to the attic to find him a new pile of books which he set about re-reading.

Life is not easy

I think he did love my mother; but unfortunately he became addicted to alcohol, and spent on drink in the cafés the greater part of his modest earnings. Often we had nothing to buy bread with.

Then my mother would send two of us to search the cafés for him. It was the thing I feared most - a real nightmare every time - because we were so ashamed to see our father drunk. From outside, through the windows, we would listen and try to recognize his voice, then we would enter trembling, knowing that the men would laugh and the serving girls would give us mocking looks. (Oh, how we hated those women!) What a relief when we could run out again clutching the few pennies which he had given us to buy a small loaf!

It sometimes happened that my mother, who had the Appenzell sense of humour, would say to us, 'Go and look for your father and tell him that someone is waiting to see him at home.' Sometimes this worked,

and he returned, full of curiosity. Then Mother would say 'The one waiting to see you is your wife.'

Fashionable dresses

Mother's constant concern was to find the money to feed and clothe us. It only happened very occasionally that she could buy us a pair of shoes or a dress, and that was a day of real celebration. She never asked anyone for anything; however, there were people who guessed our needs, and would give us used clothes. Others out of consideration left their gifts anonymously on the doorstep.

Mother renovated these clothes as well as possible; there must not be a single button missing, 'No self-respecting woman would allow it', she would say. On the other hand, she did not mind in the least about being in the fashion. When we wore our dresses, which were far too long, my sister and I were afraid that our school friends would laugh at us, and so we shortened them with safety pins which we pilfered from her. We arranged to leave early for school, and as soon as we were out of sight we would run behind a tree or bush and there we would take up our dresses and secure the hem, as well as we could, with the pins, and in this way we would arrive at school in short dresses. On the return journey there would be the same game of letting down our hems, and we would arrive home in long dresses.

We had to take great care of our things; from the first fine days of spring our shoes were shut up in a cupboard, and there was no question of their

coming out again before the autumn. We went barefoot - and we were almost the only ones who did so. We envied our companions their pretty sandals. At the first frosts we besought Mother to give us our shoes. Oh, how good it felt to have warm feet!

In the midst of all this poverty, Mother never gave up, because she had an unshakeable faith. To feed her five children, she worked very often till dawn, cutting out embroidery, very delicate work done with the help of fine pointed scissors, which required great skill and brought in very little.

One morning (this is one of my earliest recollections - I must have been between three and four years old) we were having breakfast as usual on bread and milk. Mother was silent and seemed tired. I was sitting next to her, and I noticed that she was drinking a cup of milk, but not eating anything. I asked her: 'Why are you not eating any bread?' 'Milk is enough for me - you children need the bread,' she replied.

This answer remained for ever engraved on my memory.

My grandparents

Mother came from a family of fifteen children. Her parents lived for fifty years united by an outstanding love. We had a deep respect for them.

At the age of eighty-five they still went down into their cellar every morning to weave. It was a great joy to us to go and visit them, and to watch them throwing their shuttle from one end of the loom to the other.

They lived very simply. There is one picture which I shall never forget - that of the family meal. Seated opposite one another at the corner of the square table, my grandparents ate off the same plate, which was bigger than other people's. First, Grandfather would serve the meal to everybody; then, while he was eating, with a quick movement of his fork he would push the best pieces to Grandmother's side, and she, immediately, pushed them back to him. This game continued until there were nothing but the best pieces left, and then they were forced to share them.

It was from them that Mother got her simple unfaltering faith. Her brothers and sisters told us that never, never had Mother gone to her parents to complain or to ask for anything. When we asked why she had married Father, she would reply: 'I knew his weakness; but I loved him, and I hoped to do something for him.'

She had promised him to be faithful unto death, and in the worst moments she relied on God alone.

Shoes in holes - and rewards

I remember that one day when there was a great deal of half-melted snow, my feet were soaked as I came home from school because of the holes in my shoes. 'Tomorrow,' Mother said, 'you won't go to school. You must wait till you have other shoes.' I wondered with a certain uneasiness whether you were allowed to miss school because of holes in your shoes.

Imagine our joy and surprise when, the following

morning, three pairs of shoes were lined up on the front doorstep! One of these pairs fitted me perfectly. This made a deep impression on me, and I felt that there must be a marvellous mystery behind it all.

We had many experiences like that. We knew that it was thanks to our Mother who loved God. Often, going into her room, we would find her in prayer. Although she was gentle - a true mother - she was not at all sentimental. She did not spare us, and we learned to work, to help her with the housekeeping and to do other tasks.

On Saturday each had a part in cleaning the house. We rarely had meat on the table during the week, but once the house was clean we received as a reward, at the evening meal, a saveloy or a hot sausage which we were allowed to eat with our fingers! What a treat! For us it was a feast, and we looked forward to it for days beforehand.

Collecting wood

In the holidays we often spent whole days in the forest collecting dead wood. We had to have enough to warm the family room during the whole winter.

We would set out generally between five and six in the morning, with a piece of bread and a little cheese in our pockets, dragging the little carts on which we would pile our dead wood after we had carefully arranged it in bundles. We liked to take a hilly road which led to a pretty hamlet surrounded by forests. There was also a small lake, full of reeds. A little old church with a very pointed steeple, which, like the adjacent convent, was built in 1244,

gave the village a special character that explains its reputation throughout the whole canton.

We would arrive there very early in the morning, dragging our hand-carts. The air was often still very fresh, and the atmosphere so calm. We would go and knock at the door of the convent, and would ask the nun who opened the little window of the grille if she would please give us two ha'pence-worth of 'Kräpfli' (aniseed biscuits) a special confection of the convent. We knew that she would fill our pockets. Slightly embarrassed, but very happy, we would set off again to collect our wood.

We finished this as quickly as possible because we did not want to end the day without having a row on the small lake. Usually there was a charge for the boat, and you were forbidden to go out if there was a wind; but we could not resist the opportunity, and we would creep aboard without being noticed. It was not easy to row on the pond full of reeds, especially when the weather was rough. We would return with beating hearts, feeling a little guilty but relieved to be safe and sound. At other times the water was calm, and from our boats we would watch the sun going down behind the village and the forests. I shall never forget those sunsets. They made me understand that life can be beautiful as well as hard. After that the happy return journey down the hill seemed to me twice as short as usual.

A basket of fruit and a bed of dry leaves

In the autumn our neighbour, a farmer, would ask us to go and help him to gather in his fruit. As a

reward he would give us a full basket for all the family. What a delight to munch apples and juicy pears, and be allowed to eat as many as you wanted! We were often stung by wasps, but, in spite of that, those were our best holidays.

At the first appearance of winter we would go and collect dead leaves to renew the mattresses on our beds, which after a year had become hollow and no longer very comfortable. We would spread the leaves for some days in the sun to become completely dry. Then, one fine morning, we would empty our mattress-cases, Mother would wash them and put them out in the sun, and in the evening we would refill them, taking care to stuff them well. Mother would say to us as she stitched them up again, 'See how well you sleep tonight!' What a joy it was to roll over on the swollen sacks and to go to sleep amid the sweet smell of leaves dried in the sun!

Why?

I must have been nine or ten when my brother and I were sent to work with a gardener. We would pull up weeds, with the sun beating down on us, for a few pence an hour. We had to begin at eight in the morning. At noon we were brought a bowl of soup and a little piece of bread. Seated on the steps at the door of the villa we would eat, but not without thinking sadly of those who could have their meal with their families round a friendly table.

As soon as our meal was over, we had to go back to work until evening. It broke our hearts to hear the other children playing and laughing nearby. And

all this was because we were poor, because our father drank, and we had to earn the money to buy a pair of shoes or other necessities. One day I had really had enough of it, and I refused to return to work so hard for so little.

At night in bed, where we slept in twos, we would ask ourselves a thousand questions. Why is the world made like this? Why are there rich people and others who have nothing? Why does our mother have to work so hard? Why are we worth so much less than others, and why are we treated as inferiors? Why were we born?

School-days

I began school in the spring of 1914. A few months later war was declared. I can still see the town-crier beating his drum and going through all the streets of the village to call the soldiers to the colours. We children were very excited; without understanding the danger that threatened, we sensed that something important was happening. We felt it at home in the meals which were even more scanty. Money was lacking even to buy absolute necessities, and we often went hungry. I remember how my brothers and sisters and I would grab at every little crust of dry bread.

So at mid-day our parents sent us to the school-children's soup kitchen. Mother was happy with this solution; but to me it was a nightmare. I had inherited a weak constitution, and I never felt hungry. Above all I had a horror of the oatmeal soup, which I had been forced to eat so often when I

was ill. So, when a large chipped enamel bowl full of the hateful soup was put in front of me I was seized with a real agony. I knew that I could not leave the table before I had emptied the bowl, and I used to beg my young brother Hans to eat my soup for me. His friends laughed at him; but he would come to my rescue, though sometimes not without getting something more out of it for himself. If he knew that I had been given a little piece of chocolate, or a titbit, he would make me share it with him. If I refused he would say, 'Then I won't eat your soup any more!' Many years later we laughed when we recalled this memory.

Father

Father's behaviour was a great trial to us. One day, coming out of school and returning home happily with my friends, I saw in the distance a drunken man supported by two others. I felt a shock and said to myself, 'Please, please don't let it be Father!' I slackened my pace, and tried to divert my companions' attention in another direction. But it was no use. Suddenly they all cried out, 'There's a drunk down there. Let's go and see!' It was indeed Father. Words cannot express the humiliation I felt. I clenched my fists in my pocket and vowed to do anything so as never again to endure such shame.

From that moment there was born in my heart a fierce desire to succeed in life. As the years passed, our home situation seemed to us to become intolerable, and hatred against our father grew. Often we would say to Mother: 'When we are big, we will

work and earn plenty, so that you will have an easier life; but then Father will have to change his ways or leave us.'

But Mother would say: 'Pray for him that he changes his ways - it is my one wish. Do not do anything that you may regret later. Remember that he is your father.'

The weeks before my confirmation were among the most painful. Father spent all his evenings at the café, and I was in agony at the thought that he might be drunk on that very day. All the presents that I was receiving for the occasion could not take the place of what I would have wished for above all - the presence of a sober and loving father.

On the eve of this great day, he came in late, and slept fully dressed, in the living room. I did not sleep much that night. At five in the morning, I heard him getting up. An inner power forced me to get up immediately and to go and talk to him. I stood in front of him and said, 'Father, promise me not to go to the café today.'

He looked at me in surprise, and said, 'I have to go out for a short time but I will come back.'

I besought him not to shame me by staying in the café while I was being received into the church. I believe that the burning inner conviction with which I spoke to him made an impression, and touched him. In fact, after being out for a short while he did return, and spent the day with us.

Christmas

Sometimes we had to spent Christmas without

Father, and that was really distressing. When he returned, half drunk, Mother would quickly pack us off to bed. We would lie down under our duvets; but all the same, we would strain our ears to assure ourselves that he was not having a row with her. But she knew how to hold her tongue, and remain calm, and, to our relief he generally went fairly quickly to bed.

In spite of everything, we always had a Christmas tree; and if Father happened to be among us, without having drunk anything and truly himself, it was for us an unforgettable evening. Before Christmas we would empty our money box to buy a small present for our parents. Mother could not buy toys, but we would always find a garment or something useful at our place at table. This brought us great joy; but it was nothing compared to the joy we felt when Father was there - when we brought him our small gift, when he had a happy expression and even smiled; then our happiness was complete.

For the meal on the twenty-fourth, each one of us brought a little speciality, some pork or some other special dish, and this was for us the real Christmas meal. What was kept for the next day was stored between the frosted double windows which served us as a refrigerator. Those Christmases when we were a real family remained our loveliest memories.

Mother went on hoping and praying for Father to be cured of his addiction. 'I do not want to ask too much of God,' she would tell us, 'but if only your father could change before he dies, so that we might live two, just two years in peace as a family, that is my dearest wish.'

God granted her prayer. After twenty-seven years of marriage, of struggles and of suffering, Father was sent for nine months to a centre for the treatment of alcoholics. He came out of it a changed man, and asked Mother to forgive him. He had been set free. During two and a half years we had the joy of living happily as a family.

He fell ill and died at the age of forty-nine, on Easter Day, 1930. During the whole of his last day he kept on saying to us, 'Help your mother. Do all you can for her, I beg you.' Some hours before closing his eyes Mother asked him, 'Are you at peace with God and man?'

'Yes', he replied very clearly.

His watch, which was hung on a nail beside him, stopped ticking just when he stopped breathing.

'I want to live'

Those testing years did not only leave scars on our hearts; our health suffered, because we had been under-fed. Until I was fifteen, Mother often wondered whether I would live or die. At the age of nine I was struck down by an illness whose name I do not know; my body was nothing but one great open sore, my legs were swollen with fluid. Besides this, I had scarlet fever, and I hung between life and death. On Whit Sunday morning, after the doctor had been, Mother came to my bedside and said, 'Rather than suffer like this, wouldn't you like to go to heaven?'

This question was a shock to me.

'I want to live,' I replied.

I realized that the doctor had given me up. Although Mother had told me that in heaven I would be with the angels, I was no less insistent in my refusal to die. So, when she had left the room, feeling lonely and abandoned by everyone, even my mother, and not yet having a real faith, I appealed to the God about whom I had been told, and said to Him, 'Since you can make me die, you can also make me live. I would like to know what life is really all about. If you allow me to live, you may do whatever you like with me.'

Later, in my most difficult moments, I remembered that promise, and it often helped me on to the right path again.

2

I Earn My Living

My first wages

At fourteen I left primary school. Some days later one of my schoolmasters asked if I could go and help his wife, who was ill.

I had always loved children, far more than dolls. As there was in that family a little boy of one, I accepted immediately. Soon after the mother had to have an operation. Some people thought that I was too young to take her place; but, to my surprise, I was kept on, and I took charge of the baby and the housekeeping. As I had always felt inferior, this attitude of trust helped me a great deal. For the first time I felt responsible, and I was proud to take care of the baby entirely on my own. The cradle was put in my bedroom, so that I could look after the child; many a time during the night I would get up and tiptoe over to see if he was asleep.

I also tried to cook for the first time. As I was very proud, and my knowledge was still very limited, I used to take an immense amount of trouble. However, I did not always succeed and I felt very humiliated when a dish went wrong. Fortunately my schoolmaster was as understanding at home as

at school; and so I have always had a very happy memory of that first situation, I shall never forget the joy I felt when I received my first wages.

Among the pigs

My next situation was very different. It was in the country, with a family who had a cheese dairy. Besides housekeeping and the big wash, still done by hand, I had to look after sixty to eighty pigs.

I found it very hard to leave my warm bed at about four in the morning to go and collect the cold wet grass which the eldest of the children had mown for the animals. Then I sometimes had to help him to clean out the huge pig-sties. I cannot say that I enjoyed doing this. I considered that I was not a farm servant, but most of all, it was the odour of those pigs that I could not stand.

From time to time the fattest animals were sold. Then we had to get up at half-past two in the morning, and set out in the dark, driving a herd of twenty to thirty pigs to the station in the next village. We had to get there before the day's traffic began, and this took about two hours, depending on the 'good will' of our beasts. When they arrived, we weighed them and loaded them on to a truck, destination unknown - probably the slaughter-house.

When a certain number of pigs had been sold, they were replaced by others, to be fattened up in their turn. Unfortunately the pigs hated foreigners, as much as men do, and the old ones would not accept the new arrivals; they would sniff at them for

a moment, then great battles would break out which would last two or three days in their quite small enclosure.

I can still see myself in the midst of them, a slight young girl of fifteen wielding a big stick and trying to prevent them from biting each other. I was scared stiff by those jostling, squealing creatures.

However hard the circumstances, our mother would not let us leave a job in the middle of a year. She thought it was good for us to learn to stick it out. However, on that particular occasion, fearing that the work might be beyond my strength, she took me away from it after six months.

Pockets full of money

My next job was with Mme M., a seventy-year-old lady who wanted me to help her with the house-keeping and with her shop. I had to share her bedroom. Whenever she had an attack of asthma during the night, I was afraid that she might die, and that I should not know what to do.

She was a very good business woman, but she would forget to put her takings in the till, and would go about with her pockets full of money. At night, on the way to bed, she would drop her money all over the floor; I would gather it up everywhere, even under the bed. I remember that now and again I was terribly tempted to put a coin or two into my empty pocket. Generally I was able to resist the temptation; once or twice I did take a one-franc piece, but then, when I thought of Mother, who had taught us always to be honest, I was so ashamed that

I put the money back where it came from.

While I was living with Mme M. I learnt, among other things, to repair cane chairs. I took up this work with great enthusiasm; I thought to myself, 'Who knows? - when you are old, perhaps you will be glad to earn a few coppers this way.' For each chair repaired, I received a small percentage. At that time wages were very low - at the beginning I was earning fifteen francs a month; little by little I got up to thirty francs.

Buried under brushes

My mind goes back to a well-to-do household where I was in service. The house was on the heights of Zurich, with a magnificent view over the town and the lake. As I remember all I lived through there, it seems to me like a bad dream. At six in the morning precisely I had to be in the kitchen. If I was five minutes late, my employer threatened to reduce my wages. (I was earning thirty francs a month.)

People often make jokes when they speak of the over-meticulous German-Swiss housewives. I do not know whether this has changed. Anyway, in that place every day I had to turn out six bedrooms thoroughly, even if they had not been used. It was like a perpetual spring-cleaning. I can see myself still, grumbling as I brought in all the paraphernalia - brooms, brush and dustpan; feather duster for the curtains, special brushes for the pictures and the radiators, short steps to climb up and brush down the higher parts of the walls, steel wool and floor polish - not to speak of the large and very heavy

block with various rags to make the parquet floor shine. Then the thing I wanted more than anything was for my employer to go out shopping. While she was away I would cheat as much as possible, and do only half the work.

For my meals I was expected to scrape out the saucepans, and nibble at bones with a little meat on them. As I sat at the kitchen table alone, I would say to myself, 'Eat it up, little dog!'

During all those years of service in different families, I had a great deal of work to do. But work never frightened me. However, when I heard people say the word 'maid' in a contemptuous tone, I felt so hurt and humiliated that I could have strangled them. If, later on, I had not met mistresses who loved and respected their employees, and if I myself had not found a hope for the world, it is quite possible that one day I should have joined forces with those who try to achieve justice by hatred and violence.

In a mill

I was about eighteen when I received from my father, who was then still in the centre for alcoholics, the one and only letter which he ever wrote me. He asked me whether on his return I would like to come home, so that we could at last live as one family. This meant that I would have to go into a mill; and although I had a horror of that kind of work, I could not refuse such an appeal.

In a few weeks I learned to weave; eventually I was responsible for six automatic looms. I wove

cloth, flannel sheeting, kitchen towelling and material for men's shirts. Weaving is one of the most interesting trades. When you think of other trades, in which thousands of men and women carry out their monotonous work from morning till night, year after year, you wonder how their spirit can still remain open to anything else. But the weaver sees his roll of cloth growing under his eyes, and when there appears on the material the red cross which shows that the piece is finished, he has the satisfaction of gazing at something useful or interesting which has come from his own hands.

In the room where I worked there were about two hundred looms. You need to have had the chance of going into a workshop like that to understand the hellish din in which the weavers worked. Visitors generally put their hands over their ears. And yet there are workers who spend their whole life, forty or fifty years, in factories like this. That din was probably the cause of the serious deafness from which I suffered later.

It was in this job that I became aware of a wholly new world. For the first time I began to recognize the power struggle in industry, the jealousy of workers among themselves, the unfair power wielded by some foremen, flirting on all sides. All this increased my sense of class feeling, of suffering, rebellion and hate. I suddenly realized that what I was seeing with my own eyes was also happening in the rest of the world.

We were a group of young people, Catholic and Protestant. We loved having discussions before and after work; we wondered whether it was worth

working all our lives just to drink, to eat and to have a little pleasure. No, we thought - that can't be the sole purpose of living.

I tried to find an answer in the Bible but it seemed that nothing in my experience corresponded to what was written there. I compared what I read with the life of Christian people who went to church. Occasionally I even stood in a corner, to watch the people filing out at the end of a service. How I should have liked to know whether they believed what they had just heard, and whether it had made them happy! But nothing in their faces gave me an answer

All or nothing

The discovery of so much injustice and disorder in the world shocked me into revolt, and I longed to do anything whatever to change things. But I felt myself bound in chains which I could not break, and I struggled with a feeling of helplessness. I accused the rich; I thought that as they had the opportunity to get education and to order their lives as they wished, it was up to them to do something. A terrible battle was taking place in my heart. I longed to know where was that God who, nevertheless, had helped our family? Could you believe in Him without having certain proof that He was really there? Why didn't you see anyone living out what was written in the Bible?

For weeks and months I was torn by doubts. Something deep in my heart kept saying, 'All or nothing'. I thought that if God did indeed want to

talk to me and to make Himself known to me, I would give Him my life so that something might change in the world.

A book fell into my hands

One day a book fell into my hands. It was the story of a woman who had found faith and devoted her life to missionary work in China. This story bowled me over. It was a turning point in my life. I took a decision: I too would give myself for something great.

An inner fire forced me to do something at once. For the first time I told Mother what I was really feeling. In spite of all our love for her, we experienced a sort of embarrassment with her, a false modesty which prevented us from telling her what was going on inside us; but this time I knew that I must be entirely honest with her. I needed her help and her consent. Since Father was dead, she needed us and our earnings. However, as I had foreseen, she did not think of herself.

'I don't know,' she said, 'whether with your poor health you could live the life of a missionary; but I would never, never want to prevent any of you from doing what you felt called to do.'

I said, 'If this is the will of God, He will give me all the strength I need, won't He?'

I decided to go away at once to learn French in French-speaking Switzerland, and I gave in my notice at the mill. One of my foremen said to me, 'You'll be back!' I think he had some doubts about my future.

I felt sure that I was going to take part in a great adventure, and that I would find the answer to the problems of this mill and of the world. So in 1930 I left my family to work in Lausanne as a chambermaid in a hostel for high school students.

3

In the Hostel for High School Students

French-speaking Switzerland becomes my second home

I did not understand French, but I quickly felt at ease in this new situation. Monsieur and Madame D., who were then in charge of the hostel, put all their care and energy into looking after the young men entrusted to them. I felt that they counted on my co-operation, and this gave me a sense of responsibility. Every morning for seven years I tidied up about twenty-five bedrooms, made some of the beds and did the bathrooms and thirty wash-basins.

During the last four years, I cooked for thirty or forty people. Those who live with young men from thirteen to twenty-five know how full the saucepans need to be to satisfy healthy young appetites. It often happened that some of the boarders would have competitions to see who could eat the most apple fritters; when I was serving at table, this made me stop them so that each one had his share.

For this family of thirty I had indeed to make from three hundred to three hundred and fifty apple fritters or twenty-eight to thirty cakes for supper. As for vanilla slices, I had to make them twice as large

as those in the shops; they were still too small for those young appetites. When it came to fondue, I had to double the rations if I did not want to hear them say: 'Oh, Frida, that was only an hors d'oeuvre!'

Quite often the boarders would visit the kitchen. What tricks they got up to to find out what they were going to have for supper, or to tell me some of their secrets! I loved those young men; but now, thirty years later, I realize sadly that I did not always know how to help them to solve their problems and worries. However, this work interested me and gave me a great deal of joy.

At that time I belonged to the Y.W.C.A. One day a team of the Oxford Group (which afterwards became Moral Re-Armament) were invited to speak to us. Several people shared their experiences. I listened to them with a certain amount of distrust. It is not in my nature to go into raptures easily; I am one of those good Swiss who want time to consider and never decide anything lightly. What struck me most was not so much what these people said, but the light that shone in their eyes. I longed very much to know the secret of their radiance.

This I discovered at the next meeting. I heard someone say, 'When man listens, God speaks; when man obeys God acts and miracles happen.' I had always been struck by the fact that God spoke to men in the Old Testament, and I could not understand why He did not speak any more to people of my own time; but, hearing this, I discovered that God always speaks to those who listen to Him.

I also heard about those four standards which sum up the Sermon on the Mount: absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Then I felt two voices were arguing inside me. The first voice said: 'Listen! This does not apply to you, because you have suffered enough, and you have lived a better life than many people.' But the other voice kept saying to me: 'You need to change completely in order to become an instrument in God's hands.' I decided to surrender my whole life to the will of God.

Reading the book by the missionary had led me to give my life for people; meeting the Oxford Group made me understand that I must above all live according to the will of God.

Our mother leaves us

At the very time when a new spiritual road was opening up before me, I was called home to look after Mother, who was seriously ill. We knew that she would not live much longer. For the last time, brothers and sisters were again all together at home; this had not happened to us since the death of Father, five years before. It pleased her very much to see us all re-united round her bed; several times she looked round at us, each in turn, with her bright eyes, in which you could read her suffering, and she kept repeating: 'All five are here, all five are here!' She was so happy to have us with her! She thought only of us, and even tried to cheer us up. At certain moments her Appenzell humour came to the surface, and she would tell us such funny stories that she made us laugh in spite of our sorrow.

Mother was continually in great pain but she endured it all without complaint with an amazing serenity and faith. Right to the end, she shared her convictions with us, without any sort of sentimentality. She wanted to help us to remain brave after her death. 'The world is facing great trials,' she told us. 'I am glad to be going; but you must live. There will be stones along your path; I can't remove them, but I want to say one thing to you - God never gives us a burden that is too heavy for our shoulders.'

She knew many people in the village, rich and poor; they came to see her, and she had a word of encouragement for each one. In the next-door house there lived a wood-cutter, a brutal, savage man whose children were afraid of him. One day he asked to see Mother. He came out of her house profoundly moved. 'That woman is a saint,' he declared. After that visit he was quite different.

Mother talked very simply of her approaching death; she even prepared her funeral with us, and asked us not to hide anything from her. She had specially in her mind the future of our Hansli, a boy of eight whom she had welcomed into our home when he was two years old.

Hans came from a very poor family. His mother, who suffered from a very contagious form of tuberculosis, had been given up by her doctor. It had therefore become necessary to find a home at once for this little boy. But in spite of urgent appeals, launched especially by the church, no one had offered to take him because of the fear of infection. When Mother heard about this, she declared: 'This is all wrong in the sight of the Lord who loves little

children. No one wants to take him? Then I will!' In spite of her weariness, and the trials which life had laid upon her, she had given herself to that child as only a mother can do.

Hans had become deeply attached to her, and had been loved by everyone. His state of health was very weak, but, because of the care and affection which the family gave him, he had come through the critical years of early childhood. In spite of his youth, Mother talked to him quite naturally about her approaching death, and encouraged him to obey and to work, so that he might be useful when he grew up. He told me later that these words had remained with him all his life.

In the course of one of the last nights when I watched beside Mother's bed, the thought came to me to ask forgiveness for having often been lacking in love, for having thought so much about myself and so little about her. She at once expressed her forgiveness by pressing my hand. All my life I shall be grateful that I did not miss that moment.

She died at Easter 1935, five years after Father, at the age of fifty-six. She left us nothing except her furniture and the hundred francs which she had put into the hand of each of us some days before her death. She told us, 'This is all that I have been able to save.' For my part, I thought, 'Where do you find mothers who leave their children a spiritual heritage such as we have received?' A neighbour called to say, 'We did not often see your mother; she did not talk much; but when we left her house, we always took with us something which helped us in our daily living.'

Hans found a new home. He was put to the trade of a chimney-sweep and became an employer. One day he came to see me in French-speaking Switzerland. He told me about his troubles and worries, and ended with these words: 'Your mother was a real mother to me, she loved me as probably no one will ever again.' A year later he lost his life in a tragic motor accident. He was only twenty-eight.

Three days after Mother's funeral, each of us returned to our work. I took all that had been left to me from the house and loaded it on a hand-cart. With the help of a friend who came with me to the station I took the train back to Lausanne. As my feelings prevented me from saying a single word, my friend said, 'You have a heavy heart.'

'Yes', I replied.

I felt that one door was shutting for ever behind me. I was going forward to an unknown future.

At Lausanne, my employers welcomed me gladly with understanding but I was overwhelmed by feelings of sorrow. In spite of my decision to follow a new path, I went through a time of great discouragement after Mother's death and the breaking up of the family home. During nights of struggle and despair, an inner voice kept saying to me, 'Stop wallowing in sadness, lift up your head, look up! I have a plan for you. Your past life will help you. Stop feeling self-pity; it's now or never. Follow me!'

One night I cried to God, 'Take my hands, make what You want of me, use me so that I may know what to live for!'

Clara

The following day my employer called me into her office, where she was talking to a lady. This lady asked me if I would agree to help a servant whom she had had for many years, but whose character she could not put up with any longer.

'We have tried everything for Clara,' she told me, 'but neither the priest nor the minister has succeeded in meeting her need.' Although Clara was twice my age, I felt that I must try to see her.

I found a woman with an expressionless face, and hard as nails. She was cynical, and her whole attitude breathed hatred. After an hour's conversation, during which she talked non-stop and passed bitter judgements on everyone, I came home completely discouraged. It was clear to me that I could do nothing for the woman.

The following morning, during the time of quiet which I had begun to practise regularly, I said to God, 'I'm not getting anywhere with Clara. I could never change that woman.'

Then an inner voice said to me, 'Do you think it's you who can change people?'

'No', I replied impatiently.

'But, do you believe that I could change Clara through you, if you agree to be my instrument? Don't give up! Go on seeing her!'

Suddenly I realized what God was trying to say to me. 'I can do what you cannot do on your own.'

I was filled with a great hope. From that moment onwards, before each visit I prayed to God on my knees, asking Him to speak through me and to

inspire me. Clara's heart was stirred as far as I obeyed the inner voice but no further.

One evening she told me that she was a Catholic, but that for the last thirty years she had not practised her faith, nor prayed any more. Some days later, in my morning quiet time the thought came to me to suggest that we prayed together.

'I am a timid person, and I have never prayed out loud,' I thought in self-defence. I was frightened. Twice I came home without having had the courage to do it. Clara did not take another step forward; I knew that it was because of my disobedience.

The third time I met her, I decided not to leave without having prayed with her. At a given moment, mustering all my courage, I said, 'Would you like us to pray together?'

'If you want to,' she said without any enthusiasm.

In my inmost self I was trembling; but I prayed with all my heart. Scarcely had I finished when Clara collapsed in her chair and started to sob. 'No one has ever prayed with me like that,' she said. 'I felt the spirit of God was there.'

Some months later, Clara had to go into hospital to undergo a serious operation; the nurses asked her what was the source of the light that radiated from her and shone through the whole ward.

She lived on for many years, and was full of faith right to the end.

I need to change further

The change in Clara which had taken place before my very eyes when we had prayed together showed

me that you don't have to be a saint in order to help other people. At the same time it was a challenge to me; if in future I really wanted to be an instrument in God's hands I needed a deeper personal change.

I shut myself up in my room. In the silence all my life passed before my eyes. For the first time I saw myself as I really was. Before my family and friends I had worn a mask which had always shown me to be better than in fact I was.

I remembered again the hatred which I had felt towards Father, and which I had thought was justified. Hadn't he spoilt our childhood and our family life? I understood how much he must have suffered because of my lack of love, for even after his change of attitude, I had still felt bitter towards him.

I had blamed rich people for being materialistic - but I was the same whenever I clung to my little bit of money as much as they did to their millions! I was full of class feelings, and certain that I had rights: the right to a home, a husband and children, the right to have holidays and leisure, the right to enjoy material security, the right to rebel, since I was, after all, the victim of social injustice. I was obsessed by demands, and I was far from knowing how to love people.

I had the sense that there was no longer any good in me. 'What can I still hope for?' I cried. Then a thought came to me, 'This Jesus, who died on the Cross for the sins of the world - is it not possible that He also died for you?' I went down on my knees and asked His forgiveness. An inexpressible peace and joy flowed into me, and a heavy burden was lifted from me. I understood that you cannot buy or deserve grace - you can only accept it humbly.

Vreni

My new decisions were soon put to the test. In the students' hostel, in summer, the breakfast had to be ready at ten past six. I got up between four and five to pray and listen to God. Although the previous day had often ended late in the evening this time of quiet gave me fresh strength and a joy and new passion for living.

There were three of us working in the kitchen; one of my companions was called Vreni. She often laughed at me, because she had seen the light in my room, and knew that I listened to God every morning. She was highly strung, and very quick-tempered. If something did not go her way, she was capable of throwing the cake mixture into a corner of the kitchen, or into the pig bucket, all the time swearing like a trooper. I was horrified, and showed my disapproval quite clearly.

I felt very superior to her but in spite of this I decided to care for her. I tried to be helpful, and not to react to her violent outbursts. But in the evening, when I thought over the day, I had to admit that I hated her as much as ever. This went on for some time. But one day I realized that my efforts were useless, and that wanting to please her could only produce the opposite effect. I decided to stop being a hypocrite, to be simply myself, and to stand up to her bad temper instead of giving in to it in the hope of pleasing her. At once I felt free, and the feelings of hatred disappeared.

Some days later, early one morning, Vreni knocked at my door. 'May I have a quiet time with you?' she

asked. After a time of silence she apologised for her attitude and began to tell me some of the deepest things in her life. She changed so radically that everyone noticed it, and I was almost jealous! From that time on, because of our new relationship of warm friendship, we both felt responsible for the house and the young men. We continued to meet very early in the morning to have our quiet time together. Soon our other friend joined us too.

Some weeks later, the director stated that the atmosphere of the house had changed completely. We no longer fought one another; we had found a friendship which enabled us to work together for the same end.

To my great surprise, more and more girls came to see me. They were in domestic service in Lausanne, and began to meet in my home on Sundays and on their days off; when there were too many of us, we would go to someone else's home.

After a while, I had practically no time to myself any more in the afternoons or evenings, so great was their need for sharing and fellowship. We would listen to God together, and examine our lives in the light of the standards of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love; this led a good number of these girls to find a new life. You could see their change in their work, some of their employers were interested and came to ask me what had happened, and they themselves altered their way of life.

Against common sense

Life continued like this for some years. I always had

more and more people to see. But little by little I got the feeling that a new stage was coming, and that I must keep the promise I made to God long before to put myself wholly at His disposal to change the world. This was not easy. I had worked for twelve years with the couple in charge of the hostel, and they hoped that I would never leave them. On the other hand I knew that I could not count on financial support from my near relatives, and that if I left this employment, I should lose all material security. From a human point of view this was against common sense, and many people told me so. But I knew that I must give in my notice and I obeyed.

My employers found it very difficult to accept this; they could not understand me. But just as God had won the battle in my heart, I knew that He would triumph in theirs. In spring 1942 I left the situation where I had lived through so much that was new. Some years later my former employers came to see me at the Moral Re-Armament centre at Caux. With tears in her eyes, Mme. D. apologized for having been so hard and so lacking in understanding at the time when I left. From that moment a wholly new friendship was born between us. Much to my regret, they fell ill afterwards and died almost at the same time. A page was turning; I felt sad, but I was full of gratitude for what we had been able to live out together.

4

'The Great Adventure'

When I left my work in 1942, the world was at war. I did not know then that from that day I would never again earn a salary. I was just thirty-four.

When I asked myself honestly whether I was ready for absolutely anything, I had to admit that deep down I cherished a great desire to get married. I had said that I was ready for anything, but since I had been unhappy in my childhood, I longed one day to create a happy home. This was the point at issue in my refusal to say 'yes' unconditionally. Eventually I gave in to God on this last point.

A new stage in my life began. In the course of one sleepless night, I thought about my childhood, my youth, my fellow-workers in the mill. I recalled our discussions, the questions we asked ourselves about life. The needs of young people filled my mind. I felt a great love for them, and thought: 'Give them the secret that you have found, the secret of a changed life; young people are searching for it, they are ready to pay the price for something great!' Suddenly a conviction forced itself upon me - to create a home for girls, be they workers or students. Before dawn, I

had made a pact with God – I had promised to obey Him.

Without money or qualifications

When I awoke and recalled my decision, I was afraid; but the battle had begun. Yet, how could I realize my dream, since I had neither capital nor diploma nor furniture?

Many friends encouraged me. With them in silent prayer I searched step by step to see what to do. I began by consulting certain important people who had had experience with young girls. Since I had nothing, and we were in the middle of a war, these people did not share my enthusiasm. ‘Why not wait till the war is over? You haven’t the money or the training,’ they said. ‘First take a course in social studies, earn some money, and then you can take the risk. Will you find a large enough number of boarders to keep it going? Won’t the young women take advantage of you in view of your increasing deafness?’

I knew that all these things had been said to me by well-intentioned people; but I thought, ‘Where is faith, then, if you cannot do anything without having all the material goods first?’ This all made me think further but it did not discourage me. More than ever I felt impelled to go on.

One fine morning I set out to look for a flat. Those I saw seemed so gloomy and old that I turned them down, one after the other. Without demanding a great deal of comfort, I felt sure that we must live in a place where there was light, sun and a bathroom,

and where everyone felt at home. One day I went to see a flat in rather an expensive district. As soon as I entered the wide corridor opening on to seven sunny rooms, I knew that this was exactly what was needed. I went down to the caretaker to ask if the flat was still unlet.

‘How did you manage to get the key?’ he asked with great surprise. ‘As caretaker here, I have not the right to show anyone a flat before the end of the lease. I don’t understand at all.’

‘But I understand,’ I replied. ‘I got the key, and I think that this flat is reserved for us.’

I told him what I wanted to do. He looked at me with growing interest, and said warmly, ‘Then I shall tell people that it is let.’

‘Not yet,’ I replied, ‘but perhaps soon.’

From that moment onwards that man became a friend, and afterwards he did many things to help me.

Two days before going to see the agent for the flat, I once more turned to God and asked Him for a sign of His will. It was a Sunday evening. The day had been rather difficult; several people had told me of their fears about the adventure. Never had I felt myself so much alone or so wretched. On my knees at my bedside, I gave the whole thing to God. Two days later I found in my letter box a hundred-franc note with these simple type-written words - ‘In obedience to God’. I knew that this was the answer. I was filled with joy such as I had never known before.

I went with a friend to see the agent. He seemed rather mistrustful, and asked me certain questions.

‘You have, of course, some capital, madam?’

‘No, sir, I own nothing.’

‘But the furniture?’

‘No, apart from one or two things, and a chest of drawers, which I inherited from my mother.’

‘What about the girls you mentioned?’

‘Yes, there are one or two ready to come, I think.’

Again he asked, with a frown, ‘Are you sure you will have all you need?’

‘Yes, I am quite sure all our needs will be met,’ I replied.

In view of the puzzled attitude of the agent, my friend offered to add her signature to mine. After a few moments of thought, the manager replied simply, ‘It is not necessary. Since you have such confidence, I will trust you.’ He never had cause for regret – our rent was paid regularly.

We are given everything

When the lease was signed, the next thing was to find the furniture. Many friends telephoned to offer me the most necessary things. ‘Do you need a cupboard, a dining table and six chairs?’, or ‘I have a sideboard and a bed – would they be of any use to you?’ People invited me to their homes, and I came back with a suitcase full of surprises: linen, pretty coffee cups, precious provisions of food – for this was during the time of ration cards. Everywhere people lent or gave me their treasures. For several weeks I spent my evenings calling on friends in different parts of Lausanne to collect, in my hand-cart, all the gifts they had offered. Neighbours who watched

from behind their window curtains and saw us always with our hand-cart said to one of my acquaintances, 'Some funny people have just come to live under our roof.'

'They are not funny people - they are people who live by faith,' my friend replied.

'Oh,' they exclaimed, 'they live by faith? But we have seen them eating pastries on their balcony!'

Little by little the rooms were attractively arranged. I had only just come to live in the flat when someone rang the door bell. It was the caretaker with a great pile of crockery in his arms. 'Here you are!' he said. 'We had a large family, but now our children have left home, so my wife and I thought these dishes might be useful to you.' With a broad smile, he deposited them on the table. Another day, while I was stirring the jam, I was wondering into what sort of containers to pour it, when the caretaker, who did not know what I was working on, again rang the bell. He brought me in some large empty jam jars!

The purchase of a cooker for such a large family caused me some concern. A shop was offering an electric cooker, to be paid for by instalments. This involved a first payment of 182 francs; but I did not possess that amount. A quick decision had to be made, and I besought God to help me. The previous day I had received with an anonymous note a money order for 83 francs. The next morning, which was the day for the payment, I called on a friend; on the landing she slipped an envelope into my hand. It held a hundred-franc note! Feeling most grateful, I

went to buy the cooker. When I came out of the shop I had one franc left.

A home comes into being

If I wanted to have more than five girls in the house, I had to obtain a special licence. Being rather inexperienced, I thought that this would readily be granted, and that everyone would understand my honest intentions. I first applied to the Federal Authorities, but this application failed, because of the interference of hotel owners, who were afraid of competition. Also, those responsible for enquiring into my case could not understand anyone wanting to create a home for this kind of wholly unselfish reasons.

When I was refused the licence, this was a real shock for many of my friends. For my part, although I was disappointed, it seemed only a misunderstanding, and I thought that the State would never prevent anyone from helping young people. I felt confident, and was glad I was so far committed that I could not draw back.

Finally there was a meeting with the authorities concerned, and I was able to state all my convictions about the young women. The battle was won! Some weeks later the licence was granted to me, at the minimum charge. But there had to be a name for the project. A competition was held among the girls with whom I was in contact to find the best name for this enterprise, and 'The Great Adventure' was adopted almost unanimously.

On the first of June 1942, at the end of the afternoon, all of us were in festive mood. All day I

had cleaned and arranged the rooms, to make the home look as attractive as possible. When I had hidden away my last brush, I had the feeling that everything was ready, and that something important was about to begin. Then the bell rang; the first boarder was arriving. That evening a student, a secretary and a journalist shared in our first meal. Each of them had decided to try out for herself this experiment in community living.

When I had used up all the modest savings of my last years of work to fit up the flat, I was left with exactly twenty Swiss francs in the housekeeping purse to begin this great adventure. But I had decided never to close the door to a girl because of lack of money. The amount paid by each girl depended on her earnings, or on her family, and so the price paid for board varied from nothing at all to 180 francs a month. Humanly it would never have been possible to live with so little money; yet we never lacked for anything.

At the beginning, the girls found it difficult to share a room with one, two or three companions. Almost every one of them wanted a room to herself; but as there was only one single room, this was naturally kept for the student who was taking examinations. Then I explained to them that the purpose of the house was to live as a community and together to try to find answers to the problems which might arise. Each one, therefore, had the choice of remaining or of going elsewhere. In most cases they preferred to stay; and, without any advertisement, the house was very quickly full.

The girls came from all parts of Switzerland,

bringing with them their personal and family troubles. A few were entrusted to us by the Cantonal Office for Minors – if these sometimes caused us additional worries, they also prevented us from resting on our laurels! There were some mornings when we had no bed left for someone due to arrive that very afternoon; in the last resort I could always give up my bed and sleep on a mattress on the floor. And yet, always at the last moment, perhaps even an hour before the arrival of a new boarder, a bed would be offered to us by telephone. There followed a quick journey to collect it with the hand-cart. After some months, we were fourteen staying in the house, and still more for meals. We had to rent rooms in neighbouring houses.

One evening, making the round of the rooms, I paused by each bedside. There they were, as I had seen them in my vision – factory workers, apprentices, a telephonist, a typist, a journalist, sales-girls, a social worker, dressmakers, secretaries, students and schoolgirls. There they all were, French-speaking and German-speaking Swiss, and girls from different countries. They had come without my seeking them out, united in the same quest – to find what life is all about. I felt full of gratitude, and I wondered, ‘What can I give them? How can I satisfy their search for truth?’

Once a week we had what we called a family evening, which gave us the chance to make suggestions and together to look for the answer to the problems which inevitably arise in community life. But the most important meetings were in a group of two or three when someone spoke of her deepest

experiences, things she had not dared to share with anyone. Many of these girls decided to be completely honest about their past life with their mother, father or fiancé. They apologized where they had done wrong; they learned to listen to God and to let themselves be guided by Him; and they began to take responsibility, in the home or outside.

Naturally, not all the girls accepted our ideal; in one or two cases we felt it would be better if we separated. It was mostly at the point where I lost patience, where I ceased to love, to understand, to know how to listen, to forgive or to ask forgiveness, that things began to go wrong. Fortunately, through my morning quiet time I was able to take my bearings and start out anew.

A colleague

The work was steadily increasing; up till then, I had carried single-handed the responsibility of the house-keeping, the cooking and everything else. But now I felt that I needed a colleague as well as help with the housekeeping. A friend, Marie-Liette, gladly agreed to help me out. From then on we carried together the material and spiritual responsibility, and we were united by a complete honesty and mutual trust. Her artistic gifts, combined with my practical sense, resulted in a very fruitful partnership. But let her tell the story herself.

“There were Laurel and Hardy, Pat and Patachou, and there were Frida and me. To all appearances, we had nothing in common - our childhood, our education, our sphere of life, all were different, but

in our hearts we had the same over-riding concern, the same eager longing to bring answers to the problems of young people. Our gifts were completely complementary, but in the essential matter of truly understanding many of these girls, I had absolutely everything to learn. As a matter of course, I wanted to influence them, to steer them towards the careers, or even quite simply towards the attitudes of life which were familiar to me, but which often had nothing to do with their aptitudes, their tastes, the reality of their existence as individuals. Frida, for her part, saw them as they were; she accepted them fully, while struggling day after day that they might find their true destiny as children of God, loved by Him, like real daughters.'

I still remember the arrival of our first helper in the household. She had been offered to us by the Cantonal Office for Minors; she was sixteen, and was carrying her little daughter in her arms. She decided, though not without great sorrow, to put her child in a nursery, where she very often went to see her. When she arrived at our house, she had only one idea - to marry as soon as possible in order to hide her mistake. Her parents, too, encouraged her in this line of action. But her boy-friend was a violent, abnormal man, incapable of undertaking the responsibilities of a home. She learned to listen to God, and slowly she saw her position more clearly. She took some painful decisions, broke with the father of her child, and tried to become a mother capable of bringing up her little girl all alone. She made real efforts to change her character; today she is married, and the mother of two other children.

The miracles grow

The more the family grew, the more needs we had. Often we would not know the evening before whether we would have sufficient to meet the needs of the following day; but God took care of us in the smallest details, both materially and spiritually.

One Saturday evening for instance, I received an unexpected invoice for a hundred and sixty francs. This was a shock; but I said nothing, and prayed earnestly to the Lord. 'God,' I said, 'as You are the Head of this family do not abandon us.' That night I dreamed that I received a hundred francs in an envelope. When I woke, I felt happy and relieved; it was only a dream, and yet I felt sure that it was a promise. At breakfast on Sunday I related this to all the others, who made great fun of my prophetic dreams. At the end of the afternoon, two friends came to see us; as they were leaving, one of them placed an envelope on the table. In it was a note for a hundred francs exactly as in my dream. Two days later another note for a hundred francs arrived, and the bill was paid.

On another occasion, I had two francs left in the housekeeping purse, and it was the end of the month. We had to pay the rent and buy in our stores. I went to the market to buy some fruit for dessert, and kept the rest of the money for a loaf. As I walked through the streets, I noticed the fine vegetables. 'God knows that we need some,' I thought. I had only just got home when the telephone rang. 'Hullo, Frida!' said a voice. 'We have so much fruit and vegetables in the garden that

we shall never get to the end of them. Will you please come and help yourself twice a week as long as they last?' This went on throughout the whole summer; in the days that followed presents of money enabled us to pay all our bills.

One morning a delivery man from a big shop deposited on our kitchen table a dozen tea-cups and saucers. That very day we were expecting thirty people for tea, and we had not enough cups. We never knew who gave them. We were deeply moved that so many miracles took place.

From fourteen, the number of girls rose to twenty, then to twenty-six, and thirty for meals. I had the insistent thought that we should move to a house; and in our search for it we were again marvellously guided. We found a house which had been a boarding school before the war; we went to see the proprietors, two sisters, and we talked to them of our vision for the girls - a vision which their house could help us to realize.

'Well, we must pray to know who is meant to have this house,' said one of the sisters, 'since there are several people who would like to have it.'

'Why not pray now?' suggested one of the two friends who had come with me. All five of us went down on our knees to pray. When I got up, I knew that we need have no further anxiety.

Ten days later, just before Christmas, the proprietors came to tell us that the house was ours, and that they were prepared to accept our offer of rent, although it was less than they had asked for.

Three months later, 'The Great Adventure' was established in this beautiful villa, with twenty-six

rooms, a tennis court, a terrace and an uninterrupted view over the lake. The reality far surpassed my wildest dreams.

A new beginning

When night fell, and we saw the removal van disappear for the fifth and last time, our feelings of delight far outweighed our sense of weariness. We recalled the hand-cart which we had dragged from one road in Lausanne to another just three years before. I think this was the best day of my life, it felt like my wedding day. That evening we had a grand celebration with our proprietors, to express our joy and gratitude.

The girls, with their very different gifts, helped to get the house ready. They did it with great taste, and in a short while our new home was the envy of all who came. A fortnight after our arrival, there were forty of us. Our life together was exacting, very exhilarating, not always easy but full of rich experiences. A housekeeping team of four girls worked in close co-operation with us. They spent several evenings, for instance, in the great kitchen, helping to make anything up to a hundred kilos of jam, singing happily as they worked. They even made a most impressive fondue, which ended in their dancing a farandole round the kitchen range.

On the first of June we had our house-warming. This was a great festivity, the brilliant sunshine matched our own happiness. A hundred and fifty friends came from all over Switzerland to take part in this great day. It was an occasion for 'The Great

Adventure' to show its artistic talent. There was a play, 'The Prodigal Son', written by some of the girls, but everyone helped to put it on, and had a part in it.

But the greatest adventure was to bring to human hearts the deep change that totally transforms someone's life. Right at the top of the house a little quiet room with a dormer window was set apart for those who wanted to join a small group for prayer and listening to God. It was there that we had the idea to undertake various activities - invitations to the tradesmen, to the postmen, to neighbours, to the employers of some of the girls, or else to plan anniversary evenings with their songs and sketches. We even planned the wedding reception of one of our household. What a memorable day that was!

It was in that little room too that many personal problems were shared, and the answers found together.

What counts is not success but obedience

Having a beautiful house with forty girls in it, a pretty garden and a magnificent view over the lake and the mountains - all this seemed to me like a dream come true. But outside, the war was raging. The world was living in anguish for the future. I kept wondering who would rebuild the nations, torn apart by hatred and fear. I knew that Moral Re-Armament was at work in this field and it was the one hope I had.

Some years after we had gone to live in this great house, some friends asked me: 'Would you be

willing to let go of the house, to give all your time to Moral Re-Armament?' The challenge hit me like a bomb. 'No!' I thought. 'I have given everything - my energy, my money. This is *my* house, *my* girls, *my* life. What would people say if I gave it all up? No, I cannot and I will not do so.'

The more I thought, the more I rebelled and felt in despair. I felt a grudge against those who had asked this question, but I knew I must reply. Even if people had never seen me weep before, this time I wept with a vengeance. Why must I give up what I had created with so much hard work and also so much joy?

A voice in the depths of my heart kept asking me: 'Was it your work, or God's?' A great battle took place inside me, on my knees I besought God to give me the desire and the power to obey His will and not my own.

In our visitor's book, someone had written: 'What counts is not success but obedience.' I had never understood that; my goal had been success. Little by little, I saw clearly my ambition and pride, which had made me blind in many situations - so much so that others had suffered in consequence.

Little by little, I realized that I had given myself to a few dozen young women, but that there were hundreds and thousands who were searching for a goal in life; thousands of workers who had no hope. I must be free to give myself to this great task. And at last I was able to say yes. However incomprehensible this seemed, to myself and to many others, in the end I understood it fully; God wanted to lift me out of this sphere of work to

entrust me with a greater one - the whole world.

One of my colleagues took on the care of the young women in a smaller setting, and right to the time of her death, it was a happy home. A good number of those who spent some time in 'The Great Adventure' found a totally new inspiration for their family life, and their profession, and some of them, like me, gave their whole time to taking this idea to the world.

Two friends have told us what 'The Great Adventure' meant to them.

Suzanne

After my mother's death, Frida invited me to come and live in her home to have my first experience of living in a community; I went, anxious to live this life with other girls. I found many friends there. I learnt to have a time of quiet each morning; I was able to be honest and to find the answer to my problems. This has enabled me to be freer, happier and more responsible in my work. And when Frida left us to go to Caux, I continued for twelve years living in the community, which was smaller by then, happy in these surroundings where I found a true family.

Vreny

I should like to thank you for what you have done for all of us, of such different characters and nationalities. Today, I can appreciate how much you had

to give up your personal plans and rely on God to direct this 'Great Adventure'. I benefited from being with this family, with all its advantages, at a time when I myself was so selfish. I must confess that your understanding in my most difficult moments enabled me to find a guideline for my life.

Another girl who changed greatly while she was with us was Lina. Here is her story. One morning the telephone rang. A woman police officer asked me to take on one of her charges, as soon as possible. At that moment I had not a single bed available and did not see how I could take her. 'Please take her, even if she has to sleep in a passage for the time being,' the police officer said. I promised to think it over.

Two days later Lina appeared at the door. She held her head down and would not look me in the face. She hesitated awhile before she would enter and shake hands. For weeks she said practically nothing and rejected every gesture of friendship. My friend Marie-Liette and I took turns to sleep in her room. We had to be ready to stand by her at any difficult moment when she wanted to become violent again. We often prayed on our knees for Lina to tell us the deepest things about herself. After about two months Lina asked to speak with me. We were alone and sat facing each other. I waited for almost an hour. At last she told me what tormented her. She came from a large family and her father drank. When she was fifteen her mother lay dying and wanted Lina to kiss her, but that was so unusual that she refused. The memory of this scene and many others weighed on her. After this conversation

Lina could look us in the eye, and her attitude to us and to her work changed.

Then she got engaged. We decided to have the wedding reception at 'The Great Adventure'. Some of Lina's relatives wanted to stay away from the celebrations, but Marie-Liette and I went to see them the day before the wedding and invited them personally. In the afternoon they were all there and it was a wonderful party. Later Lina had two children and girls from 'The Great Adventure' were godmothers. Looking back Lina said, 'In our family God had no place, at eighteen I landed up at "The Great Adventure" full of rebellion and not trusting anyone. As a result of my experiences there I found my balance again. Now as a wife, mother and grandmother, sister and sister-in-law I can overcome the problems of life, thanks to this spiritual power.'

5

Caux

As the years went by, the Oxford Group, which has been mentioned many times in these pages, had taken on a world significance, and had become Moral Re-Armament. During the war years an international team had been preparing itself to meet the immense needs of a devastated Europe.

‘Since Switzerland has been spared by the war, she is destined to become the place where men and women from all the nations of Europe and of the world can meet again as they search together for the secret of unity.’ This was the thought which had come to certain friends. The Caux Palace Hotel was for sale. It had a unique position overlooking the lake of Geneva from a height of three thousand feet. It was the ideal place we had been seeking for the centre.

But the conditions of sale stipulated a first cash payment of four hundred and fifty thousand francs, for the signature of the contract of sale. There were very few of us, and we did not have this sum. Certain people sold their insurance policies, others their country houses, still others emptied their savings

accounts. One person gave up her trousseau; and in this way, through great sacrifices, the necessary money was found in time. The total to be paid by the end of the year was one million fifty thousand francs; this sum was given entirely by Swiss people in the course of the following months.

Beyond the possible

On the first of June, 1946, I was one of a group of Swiss in the little blue train labelled 'Montreux - Caux - Rochers de Naye'. A young German-Swiss girl sitting opposite me told me that she was a librarian, and that she had left her work to help to prepare the buildings at Caux, in view of the conference which was soon to take place. This made a great impression on me.

As the train climbed on, the sun seemed to shine more brightly on the Dents du Midi and the Rochers de Naye; at each turn we saw a new expanse of the blue lake. A unique panorama opened out below us.

In the course of that first climb to Caux, no one knew what the future held for us; but we all felt that it was something great, something never seen before, which far surpassed all our limited ideas and all our small personal points of view.

The Caux Palace Hotel, at the time of its glory, had seen many of the great people of the world pass through it; then, in the course of the war, hundreds of refugees. As we stepped inside, we knew that an immense task awaited us; we felt in a way like pioneers. But the amount of havoc and the ac-

cumulated dirt everywhere was enough to discourage anyone; so before continuing the tour round the house, all those who had arrived formed a great circle and danced a joyful Swiss country dance. The laughter and warmth generated by this happy beginning enabled us to face the task of exploring the premises. Everywhere we found broken chairs, burst mattresses, parquet floors warped through rough scouring and excessive water; the kitchen walls were black with soot because the refugees had cooked their meals on army field-kitchen stoves.

We had to get to work at once, since we had only a few weeks before the opening of the conference. A cleaning contractor from Geneva came voluntarily with his machines, and showed us how to work systematically. Each of us began by cleaning out our own room, and making the bed with the sheets we had brought. Then we went on preparing as many rooms as possible. When night fell, we gathered around a fire burning in the open hearth, and people described, one after another, their experiences and the miracles of the past week. Those were memorable evenings.

A real hive of industry

Every week more people, both known and unknown, arrived from every corner of Switzerland to help us. They came singly or in groups, for a day, for a week, or for life. Sometimes the house was like a veritable bee-hive. Everywhere people were working; on the balconies, they were beating the mattresses in chorus; in the garden in front of the house pupils

from one German-Swiss class were scrubbing the dining-room tables with great enthusiasm; while in the kitchen a decorator and all his family were whitewashing the walls - it took seven coats of paint to get them right. A Dutch architect, who had just come from a concentration camp, went round armed with a hammer and nails doing the most urgent repairs wherever they were needed. It was he who made the plans for turning the old ballroom into a theatre.

Every Saturday, as soon as their week's work was over, a number of girls from 'The Great Adventure' cycled as far as Montreux. From there they climbed on foot to Caux, to cook, clean or serve at table right up to Sunday evening.

Housewives from all over Switzerland sent linen. An eighty-year-old locksmith gave many weeks to repairing and servicing some eight hundred locks. And how much we appreciated his services, for it was no uncommon thing to be suddenly shut in a room whose latch no longer functioned, and it was he who came to our rescue when we shouted for help from our balconies or windows!

The guests arrive

Eventually there came the official opening of the kitchen. What a transformation with its seven coats of paint! And what a pleasure to work in that beautifully white kitchen! I was proud to be preparing the very first meal, with six girls of different nationalities.

From that day onwards, foreign delegations

began to arrive - British miners, French Members of Parliament, resistance fighters, and many others. From all the countries of Europe devastated by the war, there poured in men and women who wanted to take part in working out an answer for the world. It was the beginning of that vast enterprise which was to make the name of Caux known throughout the five continents and to show what contribution our country could and must make towards a better world.

On the opening day of the first conference, Frank Buchman, founder of Moral Re-Armament, arrived from America with an international team. Up to the very last moment we were hanging curtains in the rooms which were to be occupied, and putting flowers everywhere. Then everyone gathered in the great entrance hall to receive Frank Buchman and his team.

As Swiss, we were proud to show off this house, where we had worked so hard and for which we had made many sacrifices; but what interested Frank Buchman above all was the people who were there. He knew how to create an atmosphere which melted the frozen hearts of yesterday's enemies, where hatred gave place to forgiveness and freedom. Day after day new reconciliations took place before our eyes. Former enemies shook hands and decided to strive together for a new world.

Everyone took responsibility for the running of the house. For my part, along with a friend, I took charge of the stores and provisioning. I had already fed forty people for many years; at Caux I had to learn to feed up to eight hundred! The most difficult

part was to anticipate the quantities needed for so many people, almost all of whom had been through the war and had been under-nourished, quite apart from the fact that there were still ration cards.

The young cooks were also undergoing new experiences. They worked enthusiastically putting their whole hearts into cooking really well. Frank Buchman used often to say to us: 'Give these hungry people plenty to eat!' But sometimes the contents of the sugar sack suddenly went right down, and the stock of dripping melted away under our eyes; then panic seized us, and we wanted to cry, 'Stop!' Fortunately we had our times of quiet in which to sort out our thoughts and feelings. We emerged from these with a new confidence, and we realized that fear is a bad counsellor; it paralysed us, and created a spirit of anxiety, the effects of which could be felt throughout the whole house. But when we were at peace, then we had faith. Each of us was happy and ready to give of her best.'

Who is Frank Buchman?

Sometimes I used to wonder, 'Who, in fact, is this man Frank Buchman?' I very much wanted to know him better, to find out his secret of changing people; also I wanted to know whether he was indeed someone out of the ordinary.

The first time I had the chance to meet him personally, I did not notice anything special about him. I was relieved to find that he was entirely simple; he had nothing of the supernatural about him, and did not talk in great intellectual phrases

which would have frightened me. I only felt a great peace about him. His eyes, full of kindness, shone intensely, and saw right through you to the bottom of your heart. I knew that it was useless to try to put on an act with him, all I had to do was to be myself. That gave me confidence.

Something puzzled me, nonetheless. I could not understand why someone who had so many people to see, and who had to give so much from a spiritual point of view, always wanted to be kept informed about everything connected with the running of the house. No material detail seemed unimportant to him; he wanted to know what menus were being prepared; he walked through the rooms to make sure that everything was in order, even the vase of flowers planned for his guests. If a meal was a failure, why did he come and ask the cooks if there might possibly be jealousy or rivalry between them? Why did he not let the women look after all that, since it was their province?

One incident, which proved salutary, cleared my mind on all these points. One day we were told that a statesman from a far country was coming. People had thought out carefully how he should be received; the cooks had decided on a splendid meal; everything necessary had been ordered. The very same morning Frank Buchman asked to see the menu. After a moment of thought, he said, 'No! This is not what our guest should have. I thought this morning that we must give him a dish from his own country.'

When the cook came to tell me that we must immediately, and without delay, order something different, I was furious. There was little chance that

the specialities required would reach us in time, and I could not understand why such a fuss should be made for one man. I was full of resentment, but did nevertheless carry out this request.

The following day at the morning meeting, I heard our guest speak. He said, 'I was three years old when my mother died, and I missed her terribly. I have travelled across the world, I have stayed in the best hotels, but never anywhere have I been received like this. The way you entertained me moved me deeply; I appreciated the magnificent room you gave me; but when I sat down at table, and was served with a dish from my own country, prepared even better than any I had ever eaten, I said to myself, "This must be what it is like when a mother receives her son." You have won me. All that I have heard and learned here will remain graven on my heart. Thank you! Thank you!'

This shook me to the core. Rarely have I felt so ashamed; I just felt like disappearing down a mouse-hole. It was then that I understood that for Frank Buchman the spiritual and the material were one and the same. For him, all that he did, said or lived had only one single aim - to change the heart of a man so that he might find God again and become an instrument to remake the world. This was something we women badly needed to learn.

Frank Buchman took care of everyone

I had the chance to work more closely with Frank Buchman when he came to my town of St Gallen. In fact in 1960, a group from St Gallen invited him to

come to our town. He specially loved this part of our country because it was from here that his ancestors had emigrated to the United States two hundred years before.

Before leaving Caux, he invited all those from St Gallen to his room, 'How many people would you like me to bring?' he asked us. 'Which of our plays should be shown to your fellow citizens?'

'Thirty to fifty people, and one play, and perhaps a film,' we replied.

With his eyes full of mischief and a big smile he replied, 'If you want to do something for your region, it must be done well! I shall come with a hundred people, three plays and three films.'

Feeling rather scared, we left the room, realizing that Frank wanted to give us a vision and a faith which went far beyond our limited and timorous expectations.

A manufacturer of embroidery and his wife offered hospitality to Frank and his closest colleagues. People from every background, from far and near, poured in to meet him. Often he called all of us to his side, including the helpers in the house, to talk with us of his plans, and asked us to consider with him how best to receive his guests.

In the course of this campaign a film or a play was shown every evening in the St Gallen theatre. The audience was quite overwhelmed by one of the films, *The Crowning Experience*. It is the story of a black woman in the United States who herself suffered a great deal from discrimination. She opened her first school in the open air, for black children, with a capital of one and a half dollars! At

the end of ten years she had created a university of six hundred students, and finally she became an adviser to President Roosevelt. She conveys to the audience a great experience which they long to share, and which could become the crowning experience of their lives.

At the end of three weeks spent at St Gallen, when thousands of people had been moved by the plays and the films, a farewell evening took place for friends and their guests. The previous day Frank Buchman asked me, 'Are you sure your family will be there for the evening meal?'

'It's not possible, Frank,' I replied, 'because my brother-in-law has to milk the cows at that time.'

'Oh! We must send a car for them,' he said emphatically.

That was what happened. Frank was anxious to greet all my family, and they had a wonderful evening.

The following year, 1961, Frank Buchman was again at Caux. Although he was in pain, he was preparing for the summer conference. On Easter morning he asked his guests from St Gallen, including myself, to come up to his room.

He had in his hands a coloured china cock, and he held it out to me, saying, 'This is for you, Frida, and these toffees are for your nephew. I heard that he had had an accident. And look! These magazines are for your family.' This proof that he was still thinking in this way about my family moved me deeply - it overwhelmed me. It was for me a real challenge to give myself for others as much as he did.

I shall never forget the radiance and the kindness

that flowed from Frank that Easter Sunday. Indeed, we had no idea that that was the last time we would see him. A short while later he left to rest at Freudenstadt in the Black Forest - the same place where in 1938 he had had the inspiration to launch Moral Re-Armament. His state of health rapidly deteriorated. On the seventh of August that year this great man, who was at the same time a father to thousands of people, left us for the world beyond.

His last words were: 'Why should not the world be governed by men governed by God?'

6

In France

In the autumn of 1947 I left with a team for Le Touquet, in the north of France, near Calais. Coming to this town, a great part of which had been destroyed, was a great shock for those of us who had not been through the war; most of the houses and hotels were unusable, because they had neither water nor heating. We were there in November. Between two and four hundred people were expected for the two week-ends, but as many as two thousand turned up.

A play was put on - 'The Forgotten Factor', by Alan Thornhill. It was extraordinarily relevant, focussing on the key issues of the day - the divisions between employers and workers, and also the divisions within families. Those who took part in these week-ends came from far and near, and returned with a new hope for themselves and their countries.

The following year, a team of between ten and fifteen was invited to Roubaix and to Lille, to help workers and employers to create a new spirit in their families and their companies. There was not much

money, little to eat and a shortage of accommodation; but everyone was willing to make sacrifices and to share what they had. My friend and I were invited to stay in a worker's home; they offered us a room with two beds in it. The following day we realized that they had slept on two old sofas and had given us their own room. When we tried to persuade them to go back to their room, they just refused. Wherever we went we were warmly welcomed; people were willing to give everything to build a new world. Many divisions within families were healed.

Class conflict was very obvious in the North. The workers were full of demands. But then, things happened which no one would have thought possible; some of these self-same workers invited their bosses home for a cup of coffee, told them what they really felt, and so together they found a new understanding.

One day the newspaper 'France-soir' under the heading: 'Roubaix employer and his workers together beat the building crisis', printed the following article:

Eleven men met with the head of a building firm one evening, ten workers and the foreman. The employer was chewing away at the stem of his pipe gloomily, and suddenly decided to talk.

'You all know,' he said, 'that we are going through a crisis which is bound to last for some months. We cannot borrow money. What are we going to do? Other contractors have paid off on an average a third of their work force, and yesterday evening I had finally resigned myself to

doing the same. But this morning I thought, "Jacques, if you dismiss a single one of your men, you no longer deserve to be the head of the firm." Then I found another solution. I will tender for contracts at a loss in other parts of the region.'

Several moments of silence went by; then one man raised his voice, 'Sir, if you go short to save some of us, it would be wrong if we too did not make a special effort. We are prepared to go and work in other parts of the region and to give up all claims to travelling expenses. And if necessary, we will even leave our wives during the week to go and work in other yards. And finally, if you agree, we will do one hour's work for nothing every day - fifty-four hours for a forty-eight hour wage, for three months. It's worth trying.'

This article then told how, the same day, the employer, encouraged by the support of his team, had won three contracts, and it added that the new spirit which existed between them had given the firm a fresh vitality. The anti-waste bonus was soon put up to three per cent, and at the end of the year, in spite of the crisis, a profit four times as large as before was distributed to members of the firm.

I came to know this employer and his workmen very well, and, as a worker myself, I was deeply moved by what had happened in this situation; it was an example of what can be achieved by the peaceful revolution sparked off by certain employers and employees in the spirit of Moral Re-Armament.

Delegation to Caux

The following summer, several delegations from the North came to Caux. For many it was their first journey beyond their own frontiers. In order to pay for their travel and their stay they had to sacrifice a great deal, and use money saved with much difficulty.

Their first days at Caux were not easy. Indeed, this great house, so well run, aroused in them a certain suspicion. 'Isn't this a place for capitalists?' they wondered. 'Haven't we been caught like flies on a fly paper?' But when they were told the facts, they discovered that it was the gifts and sacrifices of hundreds of people from all walks of life which had enabled Caux to become such a welcoming home. They began to feel reassured, and to change their attitudes. We also said to them, 'Why did you give us your best room? And now you are angry because we too want to give our best to you and to everyone!' Then they laughed, and the battle was won. Finally, when they saw all those who were working voluntarily to make the house run smoothly, they said, 'Is this, then, the classless society?' By the end of their stay, they were determined to win their country to this idea.

The following winter some of us were invited to the Pas-de-Calais. It was the first time I had been in a coalfield, and the great coal furnaces, with their black smoke and tongues of fire, impressed me very much. I shall never forget, either, the workers of all nationalities whom we met by day and also by night. They looked so sad. I felt a deep sympathy for them, and decided to do everything I could to help

them to find a goal that was worth living for.

Several families had seen the play 'The Forgotten Factor' at Le Touquet and had decided to change their way of life. All day long we were on the move, invited now by one family, now by another. For the first time in my life, I was able to fight with conviction for both employers and workers. 'What impresses us most,' the employers said, 'is to see the workers really change. This fact alone is so heartening that we cannot but follow their example.' For their part, the workers told us exactly the same about the employers.

It was good to realize that a profound change of heart was taking place in this part of France, and that it had repercussions everywhere. The workers took much more interest in what they were doing, production increased, and this benefited everyone. From that time on, every year industrial delegations came to Caux from different parts of France.

7

In Holland

In the autumn of 1962 I was invited to join a Moral Re-Armament team working in the Dutch ports. In Rotterdam I stayed with a young engineer and his wife, who, like me, were living without any salary. It was a great experience to see how God meets the needs of a household in exactly the same way as He meets our personal needs.

I loved that country, which has much in common with Switzerland. I would go and visit the dockers in the port - it did not matter at what hour of the day you went, even just before a meal-time, you were always welcomed, and they never failed to warm you with a good cup of coffee.

I can always picture the port of Rotterdam. Many of the boats served as permanent homes, and at nightfall you would see thousands of little lamps burning from the top to the bottom of all these masts. It looked as if hundreds of Christmas trees with their multitude of candles were lighting up the night.

That winter Peter Howard's play 'The Ladder', translated into Dutch, was put on in the port of

Rotterdam and the surrounding districts. The actors were dockers and employers, who, after their work, willingly gave of their energy, their time and their money to spread the message. They did it because they had found the answer to fear and hate in their own lives.

After staying for four months in a country which I loved, I was beginning to understand a little of the language. But an unexpected piece of news brought my stay to a sudden end. It came from South America, where my brother Hans had worked for twenty-five years in the Swiss Embassy at Buenos Aires. He was due home for a holiday the following summer with his wife Marie, and he was looking forward to seeing his family and friends again. But the letter informed me that he had had an operation for cancer of the lungs and that his condition was very grave. His wife, who suffered from a serious eye complaint, and was almost blind, depended upon him a great deal and her husband's illness filled her with despair.

This was a shock to me. I kept thinking, 'If only I could go and help Hans and Marie! If only they lived nearer to us! But to go so far is impossible; I have not got the money.' I felt deeply the needs of my family, but it seemed impossible for me to meet them. Deep inside me a voice seemed to be saying, 'Supposing you are meant to go to them, all the same?'

One morning the telephone rang. A friend said, 'My husband and I have been thinking about you. Have you asked God whether you ought not to go and stay with your brother in Argentina?'

‘I dare not even think about it,’ I replied. ‘How could I ever find or even accept enough money to take me to see my family?’

She said, ‘If it is right for you to go, you will go, because it is in God’s plan, and it is He who will send you.’

I had scarcely hung up the receiver before I knew that this call had forced me to a decision; I now felt compelled to face the situation squarely. So I promised God that I was ready for anything, whatever it might cost and that I would go to the ends of the earth if He asked it of me. So that I might know His will, I prayed that God Himself would meet my material needs.

I told my decision in a letter to a friend in Switzerland, so that she might know, in case I should suddenly have to go. Two days later, she rang me up.

‘Frida, some of your friends have been meeting to think about your family, and we want to take complete responsibility for the cost of your flight. If you think it is right to go, go as quickly as possible.’

This news, so unexpected, bowled me over. My throat was dry and I could not speak.

‘Thank you,’ I said, and put down the telephone.

From that moment all those who were with me, by common consent, helped me to prepare for my departure. The following day a sum of money arrived by express from England; it was from a friend who had been through a great ordeal, but had regained peace of heart. With their great generosity, my Dutch friends bought me the necessary clothes. One day my next-door neighbour arrived with a

lovely nightdress. 'I thought that you would certainly need some underwear,' she said. Another neighbour brought me a piece of jewellery to brighten up one of my dresses. A distinguished Dutch lady sent me a book of travellers' cheques. 'So that you have enough in your pocket when you are in America,' she said.

I was deeply touched by everyone's help, and I realized once more that God takes us at our word when we take Him at His word.

8

In Latin America

My first flight

Three days later, my friends drove me to Amsterdam airport. The time for my final great departure had come. I seemed to be dreaming; my legs shook – so much had happened in so short a time. Now I was standing there, waiting for the plane which would take me far away into another continent. As I was saying goodbye, my feelings overcame me for a moment. I looked up to the sky, and noticed a magnificent sunset. I seemed to hear an inner voice saying: 'Go! Have no fear! You will never be alone. I shall be with you wherever you go.' With my spirits renewed, I boarded the plane.

This was my first flight. The engines began to turn with a loud roar, and slowly the plane gained height. The little lights by the passengers who were reading were put out, one by one. Only the purring of the engines reminded me that we were flying towards a distant land. I did not feel at all like sleeping; my thoughts winged towards those whom I had just left and those whom I should meet the following day.

At one in the morning the light in the ceiling went

on. It said, 'Fasten your seat belts.' Feeling a little anxious, I asked an air-hostess what was happening. 'There is a great storm down below us,' she replied. And suddenly I thought of the immense responsibility of those who fly aircraft across the ocean, and how much the lives of thousands of people depend on their complete discipline. If such discipline could be applied in all areas of our practical life, would not the world be a different place?

At four-thirty in the morning the plane landed for the first time. We were at Dakar, in Africa. A heavy, suffocating air suddenly enveloped us as we left the plane. The next port of call for refuelling was Rio de Janeiro. Then came the last stage in my journey to Argentina. The nearer we came to our goal, the faster my heart beat. The sky was clear and beautiful. On that Sunday afternoon, at three o'clock, the pilot announced over the loudspeaker, 'We are now flying over the River Plate.' The river looks like a sea - it is so big. Then came the capital - the huge city of Buenos Aires. After twenty minutes' flying over houses and beautiful parks, the plane began to come down quite gently, and landed.

The engines stopped; the doors opened. Before leaving Holland I had sent a telegram giving my time of arrival; but I did not in the least know whether I would meet any of my family at the airport, or whether I would have to face alone the difficulties of finding my brother's house. As I came down the gangway, I felt great gratitude for this wonderful flight; a pleasant, temperate breeze blew round me, as if to welcome me to this country, and this was the beginning of a new adventure.

In Argentina

To my surprise, my sister-in-law Marie, her son and her three little girls welcomed me at the exit. Marie's emotion made me understand at once how unhappy she had been because of her husband's illness.

It took a good hour by car to reach the city. The Swiss Embassy, where Hans lived, is in the centre of the city, which comprises about five million people. We had scarcely reached the house before Marie began to tell me all she felt. She was in despair, full of revolt against God and man, and she could not accept the fact that her husband might be called to the next world. 'Now I know,' I thought, 'why I am here.'

In spite of having had no sleep for the past twenty-four hours, I went at once to see Hans at the hospital. How can I express what went through his heart and mine when we clasped one another's hand? Great tears ran slowly down his hollow cheeks, showing inexpressible suffering mingled with gratitude. 'One of my family! One of my family!' were the only words he uttered.

The following day, when Marie left the room for a moment, Hans turned to me and said, 'I am so glad that you are here. Marie could never have undergone this ordeal alone.'

'God! I know now why You wanted me here,' I thought again.

Those were not easy days. I knew I was there to help my family, but I shared their suffering. I often felt alone and miserable; sometimes I was paralysed

by fear because I seemed incapable of meeting all their needs. As time went on, we realized that there was little hope for Hans. Marie's distress increased daily; she was at war with God and with everyone.

Hans was only fifty-three. He was much loved, and was a real father to the whole Swiss colony, to whom he had given himself without grudging his time or his energy for almost twenty-five years, and no one had imagined that he would leave them so soon. At a certain point, he himself underwent a profound inner crisis. The doctors, who did not want to tell him the truth about his state of health, were always reassuring him, promising him that he would soon be well and able to work again. But in spite of the momentary hope that this gave him, he realized at the same time that his illness was growing worse; he was in a very confused state, and struggling against death with all his powers. This situation was most painful for every one of us; we felt as if were in a tunnel.

Then one evening, when I myself was feeling desperate, I asked God: 'Why have You sent me here, when I can do nothing? Am I not useless? Was it worth while spending so much money to come here, since I am unable to change anything?' But an inner voice replied, 'Who are you to want to change anything in this situation? Am I not present here, your Almighty God close beside you? Haven't I got control of everything? It is I who have decided on the hour and the moment when I shall change the way things are going. If you will just trust me, if you are willing to be simply My instrument, and nothing else, I will use you in My service.'

I realized once more that all my personal efforts were useless. My pride had pushed me into wanting to justify my stay in Argentina. I had hoped to be able to change my family's attitude to life, and clearly I had not done so. I was ashamed; I accepted to be nothing, and no longer to want to do anything by my own will. This experience led me to the foot of the Cross, where I decided once more to live with and for Jesus. A heavy weight fell from my shoulders.

A few days later, Marie came to me and said: 'I am so miserable and desperate. If I come back to God, do you think He will forgive me?' A miracle had happened in her heart. From the moment when she accepted her misfortune, she became completely different. To the many friends who telephoned her, and who were in the habit of commiserating with her over her sad lot, she would say: 'We have not the right to go against God's plan. I have decided to accept His will, whatever it costs, and now I have found peace of heart again.'

The new spirit, which filled the home from that time on, enabled Hans too to be deeply honest with his wife. He asked her forgiveness for things he had done wrong. And he could tell her his last wishes without provoking outbursts of despair.

One morning the prior of a convent which had been founded near Buenos Aires by the monks of Einsiedeln, in Switzerland, came to visit him. Hans, feeling at peace in his heart, said, 'Prior, I am ready to go now. God can take me when He wants.' The prior, as he blessed him, said, 'We know that you are a Protestant, but in our eyes you are a great

Christian, and I am sure that when you go, God will receive you with open arms.'

Although Hans' sufferings became more and more severe, a spirit of peace and light shone through the house. During the last ten days, Marie and I were often on our knees at his bedside, praying together. This was for me, perhaps, the greatest gift that God gave us during this testing time. So it happened that, the last evening before his final departure, one of those marvellous moments together enabled us to put all that was troubling our minds into the hands of the Almighty. That evening, when I came down to my room, the house was strangely calm and silent; I had the feeling that the sunshine had come back after the storm.

The next morning, the postman brought a box of narcissi which friends in Switzerland had picked the Monday before, at a height of 1100 metres. They arrived at our house in the Embassy on Thursday morning. When Hans saw the bunch of flowers, he repeated again and again: 'Flowers from my country! Flowers from my country!' This was the last message of farewell from his homeland, which he had so much longed to see again.

During the afternoon, his breathing became more and more painful. He did not complain, and remained completely lucid. In the evening, when I was preparing a small meal, Marie called me, begging me to come up at once. A few minutes before, Hans had said goodbye to her, thanking her once more for all she had done for him. As I entered the room, his spirit left him for its flight into Eternity. In the silence, inexpressible and absolute,

which gave you the feeling of the presence of God in person, we knelt down to thank Him for having delivered Hans from his sufferings, and asked Him to help us to endure our own.

In spite of her great sorrow, Marie remained calm and confident. The funeral, as in all hot countries, took place the following day. Very many friends hastened from far and near to take part in the farewell ceremony. Messages arriving from Switzerland and from the Argentine authorities were also a great comfort. When you live in another continent, fellow-countrymen often feel closer to one another, and if one is missing, the gap seems that much greater.

That night I could not sleep. As in a film, the days of the last two weeks passed slowly before my eyes. I no longer wondered 'Why have you come here?' I had seen miracles take place, for, where there had been fear, revolt and despair, now in spite of the sorrow of separation, there was peace and a deep thankfulness.

Some days after my brother's death, two masses were celebrated at two different places; members of the family and from the Embassy knelt together with friends, Catholics and Protestants side by side, before the altar. This union between the two branches of the church was a real gift.

The First of August

It so happened that the First of August celebrations were due to take place some days before my date of departure. To celebrate Swiss National Day in another continent was a very special experience.

Receptions at the Embassy took place from eleven in the morning till one o'clock as a rule; but this festival went on for three days! Magnificent flower arrangements in the Swiss national colours decorated the entrance, usually carefully closed, but now wide open, and the reception rooms. This gave everyone a feeling of festivity, though it also made people homesick for their country.

The Ambassador and his family personally welcomed and shook hands with each new arrival; and little by little the drawing rooms filled up. Groups formed of very different people. French, Swiss German, Spanish and German intermingled in that crowd of close on a thousand people.

Along the walls were tables magnificently decorated and set with the country's special dishes. Everyone was in their Sunday best. However, I saw one old woman, wrinkled and care-worn, with an old scarf on her head. Her dress and the socks which were falling around her feet showed how very poor she was. But nothing worried her, and she gulped down at great speed one thing after another; whatever did not go into her mouth disappeared into a torn handbag! No one seemed to notice her or to want to pay any attention to her. It was a true picture of the world!

As I watched a little of this multi-coloured scene, I realized that this day was indeed the great festival of the year, when some Swiss travelled long distances to meet their fellow-countrymen. They seemed to me to be much more 'Swiss' than all of us in our own country. The first person who spoke to me was from St Gallen, my own region; in the course of our

conversation, I learned that he had started a little embroidery factory - something very close to my heart. In the corner of one drawing room I saw a group of white-haired men discussing together the events of the year; as if they had stepped out of an old picture, they drew thick clouds of smoke from their pipes, which had the long stems and small bowls with decorated covers so characteristic of our cantons in the old days.

Through many conversations, I could sense that among the older people, and also among some younger ones, there was a great nostalgia for their own country. Several people told me: 'I have only one wish - to see my country again before I die.'

I had spent two months in Buenos Aires, and the time had come for me to leave. When I first came, I knew no one, but now it took me two weeks to say goodbye to all my new friends!

In Brazil

I went first to Sao Paolo, in Brazil; two Swiss friends met me at the airport and took me to a house which an industrialist had given for the work of Moral Re-Armament.

I was never so much aware of the beauty of nature as in this country with its temperate, pleasant climate. The winter was only just over, and already the gardens were full of roses, orchids and trees covered with brilliant-coloured flowers. All this made one believe that it was a prosperous and very productive country, but behind this apparent wealth there was a great deal of poverty.

Sao Paolo is an industrial centre where people work very hard. In a few years, this city has grown so much that the inhabitants themselves say the tower blocks of flats have sprung up like mushrooms. This city, that looks so new, clean and well built, stands in stark contrast to the nearby shanty towns; real villages where thousands of people live on top of one another in hovels without drinking water or the most elementary forms of hygiene. All this extreme poverty made me realize that unless work is undertaken by a team of people who have decided to change this state of affairs, cost what it may, hatred is bound to grow worse.

After Sao Paolo, I went on to Rio de Janeiro, a city where the sun always shines, so magical with its flower-decked quays and its beaches washed by an intensely blue sea which you can bathe in all the year round.

There I had the chance to meet dockers in the port, and my visits to their homes impressed me deeply. In spite of the scantiness of the accommodation – sometimes as many as seven children would be sleeping in one room – almost everywhere I found a spirit of joy and gratitude. I wondered what could have happened, and what was the secret of this joy. It had not always been like this.

Some years before, the wives and mothers of these dockers had decided to devote themselves wholeheartedly to making a better world. They had put their own lives in order, and above all had been honest with their husbands; some of them had apologized to their neighbours with whom they had had long-standing quarrels. Many of them met

every morning at eight o'clock to share the thoughts they had had on waking, in a time of quiet. Together they sought what to do so that the homes of the whole country might find true happiness.

Forty of these couples, who had not been married in church, had asked for the blessing of the church, and were putting their faith into practice.

The husbands, for their part, had been honest with their wives, and at work, and they were responsible for revolutionary changes in the port. Since they really cared about the destiny of their country and of the world, they decided to write their story and to film it. At great sacrifice they succeeded in making the film, *Men of Brazil*, which has been translated into many languages and shown in almost every country in the world.

Hundreds of little houses

A leading industrialist in Rio had been concerned for a long time at the terrible conditions in which the *favela* people (the slum dwellers) lived. One morning in his quiet time, the names of two men who were responsible for the favelas came to his mind, and he invited them to a showing of the dockers' film, *Men of Brazil*. These two men decided that the film must be shown in the thirty-three favelas of Rio de Janeiro. They asked the dockers to come and help them to show it, each week in a different district.

There was one favela into which no woman from the town could go, it was so dangerous. But on the evening when the film was to be shown there, I was asked to go with a friend. As street names do not

exist in the favelas, the organizers of the evening came to fetch us. It began to grow dark, and we were taken for shelter to a house which looked out on the square where the film was being shown in the open air. To be honest I did certainly feel safer there than out of doors. In this room there was just a table, with three or four chairs, a chest of drawers and a crucifix; but there was a friendly feeling about the place.

In the square outside, the projectors had been set up. The crowd of spectators stood motionless during the two hours that the film lasted. There were young and old, and mothers with their babies in their arms. At the end of the evening many people came into the house to talk to me; women pulled at my dress to make me understand that they were inviting me to come and drink a cup of coffee with them. As my interpreter was having to answer questions from every side, she could not come to my aid, and I contented myself with smiling and shaking their hands, and we understood each other through our feelings.

Through these showings, a new spirit was born. Leaders of the favelas got in touch with the authorities; and the result was that some years later hundreds of these wretched dwellings were demolished and instead villages of little houses with proper sanitation were built. These became an example, and there were repercussions which no one would have dared to imagine possible at that time.

I wanted to return to Europe by way of North America in order to get to know that country, which

was bound to be so different from my own. Once more God provided marvellously for all my needs. I took a plane from Sao Paulo, crossed Brazil and flew over the Andes, where I saw the famous Lake Titicaca, surrounded by glaciers, at a height of about four thousand metres. In the blue sky, and with the gleaming sun, it was a unique panorama, and all the tourists were crowding from one port-hole to another to admire the sight.

At Lima I was met by the daughter of my sister-in-law. I was to stay twenty-four hours, before boarding the plane again at midnight the next day. When I arrived, my niece invited me to have a cup of coffee. We were in one of the main streets where the shops offer tourists local handicrafts. Suddenly an underground rumbling shook the bench on which we were sitting. I was wondering whether a heavy lorry, or even an underground railway, could cause such shakings, but before I had time to ask the question, I saw people's faces change and become panic-stricken. With one accord everyone stood up, men and women crossed themselves, and, without stopping to pay the restaurant owner, they fled towards the largest public square in the town.

My niece cried out to me something in Spanish which I could not understand and ran off with the others. Then I realized that it was an earthquake. But before rushing out into those narrow streets, which seemed to me very dangerous, I thought for a moment. As I knew neither the language of the country, nor the way back, one thought, like lightning, impelled me not to lose sight of my niece,

and I began to run after her. At that moment the earth stopped rumbling.

There is probably no insecurity more absolute than the feeling that at any moment the earth may open and swallow you up. I had just been made aware of the perpetual anguish of those who live in these regions, where from one moment to the next a whole population may be annihilated.

But in spite of that moment of panic, when I felt that I was no braver than the others, as I prayed in my heart I had been given a strange calm, and a voice in the depths of me said; 'Don't be afraid, you will not die here.' All the same when the plane took off for New York that night I was relieved to be getting away!

Home again

After thirteen hours of bumpy flying, as we flew over Panama and Cuba, we reached our destination. The wealth and materialism of the United States made me feel very ill at ease. As a matter of fact, I had the same feeling later, when I got back to Switzerland. It seemed to me that everyone was living and working for wealth and pleasure, and that this blindness prevented them from seeing that in reality the world was in great danger. By the time they did realize this it would be too late to save humanity. More than ever, I decided to give myself without excuse or rest so that people would wake up and begin to think and to live for others.

In the course of my stay in the United States, I learned that my sister-in-law Marie, who had left

Buenos Aires for a stay in Switzerland, had had a heart attack during the flight. She was in hospital, and very much wanted to see me again. So I came home sooner than I had intended and said goodbye to that country of vast horizons, which gives us Swiss, with our narrow views, a larger vision.

When I saw Marie again, I found her terribly changed. This attack had affected certain cells of her brain; it prevented her from expressing herself in Spanish, but she could still make herself understood in German, her mother tongue. Contrary to what I feared, this new trial did not make her bitter; she remained serene as never before.

One evening, just as she was going to bed, she took from her bag a piece of paper, all crumpled up, and asked me to read what was on it. To my surprise, it was a prayer which I had copied out for her, when I was in Argentina, so that she could read it again when she felt lonely and desperate. I had to read it to her every evening during her stay in Switzerland.

On another occasion she said to her doctor, 'I have lost everything, my beloved husband is dead, I cannot see any more, I can no longer speak correctly, but I have found God. Is there a greater gift than this?'

I had gone out to help my family, and today I ask myself, 'Which of us gained most from this experience?', and I have to admit that I did.

A New Baking Kitchen

On my return from this great journey, which had made me feel even more deeply the needs of the world, I was glad to be able to take part once more in the conferences at Caux.

Everyone in this centre has a part in the running of the house. For several years I was working in the baking kitchen. The place where we did this was a windowless room where in former times they had made bread. Here we had made temporary arrangements for baking cakes, but these made the work very tiring. Each day we prepared a simple but tasty tea for hundreds of people. In the course of this work, in these difficult conditions, we rediscovered our true vocation as women; to have a heart and a home always open, ready to serve everyone, in order to help spread a spirit of brotherhood and hospitality in the world.

One morning I woke with the thought that the time had come to reorganize the baking kitchen completely. All my friends agreed with me, but the necessary funds had to be found, since Moral Re-Armament does not have any reserves at its disposal.

We thought we should tell our friends and acquaintances of the need by letter. Gifts varying from five to a hundred francs began to come in; in this way a hundred and fifty people contributed to raising the amount needed. One young woman from 'The Great Adventure' whom I had not seen for years actually sent me a thousand francs! Two apprentice gardeners sent us the pocket money which they had saved 'in gratitude for what they had received while working in the kitchen at Caux'. Two Dutch ladies gave us a very substantial sum.

It took nine months of effort to collect the money and to transform the place where we had spent so many hours working meticulously. The new baking kitchen was ready in time for the opening of the summer conference. The great kneading machines, the new ovens and all the new equipment enabled us to work more quickly and efficiently. The opening was celebrated by a delicious buffet meal with friends and workmen.

At the end of the evening, I went up to my room, feeling very tired, but full of gratitude. I kept on saying, 'Thank You, thank You, God, for all the miracles that have happened in these last months.' And I promised to take a rest in the following days.

I had scarcely put this thought into words when I slipped and was thrown violently against the corner of the wall. My head and my hip hurt very much, and I dragged myself painfully as far as my bed, where I lay hoping that all would be better the next day.

But the next day I was taken to hospital with a fractured femur. Unfortunately, there was no question of going to work in my beautiful kitchen, and I

knew that this enforced rest was going to last for a good deal longer than the one I had anticipated.

In the stillness of the nights that followed, I had time for reflection, and the inner voice which I knew so well said to me, 'For a long time I have been wanting you to realize that you were going beyond your strength; but you were driven by a sense of duty, and the ambition to do well, and these have prevented you from listening to Me.' Once again, I had to ask God to forgive me.

In hospital I realized that God does not do things to punish us, but only to make us understand new truths. On one occasion He said to me, 'The fact that you have decided to serve Me, does not mean that I shall spare you trials and sufferings. The world needs to see whether I, God, have victory in your heart at a time of trial.' At once I understood that I was not intended to go on wondering why this accident had happened to me, and I decided to forget myself and think about those around me.

My room-mate in hospital was a young woman suffering from cancer. Very quickly we became friends; we were able to read the New Testament together, to pray and to share our thoughts. She was troubled about her husband and her two children, who were only teenagers. Little by little she found peace of heart; and in the evenings, when they came to visit her, they behaved like a family, and made jokes together. We remained close friends right up to her death, and I think that for her this was a great encouragement during the last days of her life.

In this way I came to understand that my calling was not so much to work hard to justify my

existence, but, above all, to take care of my neighbour. It is not what I do that matters most, but what I am. Even when we have less physical strength, God often entrusts us with new tasks which require more time and prayer to find His direction. I had proof of this in the course of the following months.

But my time of testing was not yet over. Some months after my discharge from hospital I had inflammation of the lungs. As it persisted I felt so weak and listless that I had only one wish, to go away somewhere alone, anywhere, to recover. Friends offered me a little holiday home on the Thunersee. On arrival I noticed a beautiful armchair and I said to God, 'That will be Your place during my stay here. With You I shall never be alone.'

I felt a great longing for a new relationship to God. To be honest I must admit that I not only got weaker in body but was full of a great bitterness; for some months earlier a friend had wounded me badly. Although we had apologised to each other for our feelings, still the wound in me was not healed. I spent several hours in prayer on my knees and asked God to free me from myself, and give me a strength and purpose for living. Once again I had to learn that goodwill alone is not enough to set you free from bitterness. Only if I was humble and faced my own motives honestly could God heal me and give me victory.

Many people suffer from depressions. May not these sometimes, as in my case, have their roots in bitterness which one refuses to face? I am very grateful for this testing time. It taught me, more than ever, to depend on God.

10

India

Out of the blue

I needed a great deal of patience to recover from that fracture. I was weakened and felt wretched. However, I knew that God had already worked so many miracles in my health. Some years before, I had had to have three operations on my ear, and through these I had regained my hearing. It was during this latter period of illness, one of the most difficult in my life, that God was preparing one of His greatest surprises.

A friend, Mme. N., the wife of an industrialist in St. Gallen, had been invited to go to India, to a centre like Caux, but smaller, which had been set up by Rajmohan Gandhi, the grandson of the Mahatma, and his friends. Mme. N. was over seventy-five, and this invitation to India came as a shock to her. She had exclaimed, 'Me, to go India? What about my house? And my garden? Who will carry my luggage? And I should need injections too! No, not now. I could always think about it again next year.'

A few days later, she invited me with two friends to have breakfast with her. She told us that God had spoken to her very clearly, and she felt she must

accept the invitation and not by any means put it off till the following year.

‘So, what are you going to do?’ I asked her.

‘If God speaks so clearly, how can I say no?’ she replied. ‘I wrote straight away to India, so that I could not put it off any more.’

It seemed to me that all her fears and objections had been swept away. And then she turned to me and added, ‘In my quiet time this morning, I had the thought to invite you to go with me to India.’

This time it was I who had the shock! I had always been very much interested in what was happening in that country, and I wanted to go there some time; but I kept saying to myself, ‘Only not just yet!’

I still felt too weak to undertake such a journey, and I was very much afraid. I knew that I must find a very clear inner sign; without that, I could not risk this new adventure. It was impossible to sleep the next night. I thought and prayed, when suddenly it seemed that God was there, close to me, and He said: ‘Remember all that I have done for you. And even when I have allowed you to undergo trials, it was always out of love, to draw you to Me and to make you depend on Me. Now I am opening up a new path for you; and this is also out of love.’

‘If this is truly Your plan, I will go,’ I replied.

All fear vanished, and during the whole journey, which was marvellous though not always easy, my inner peace never left me.

That journey made me think back over my years at school. I had detested geography. Coming from a poor family, I had got it into my head that I would never be able to travel so I wanted to study only

what seemed to me useful for my future. I refused to learn the names of towns, of seas and of distant rivers which I thought I would never see and which I would forget anyway. Whenever the schoolmaster called one or other of us in front of the map of the world, I tried to hide behind the others. Unluckily for me, he knew my weakness, and, with a malicious smile, he purposely made me come out. It was terribly humiliating, but it did not make me change my ways! How many times since have I regretted this stubbornness, and felt ashamed of not having even an elementary knowledge of the countries of the world.

Knowing little, having little physical energy, and with my limited experience, I had to rely doubly on the One who never lets us down.

Without even a handbag

Our departure came at a time when several aeroplanes had been hijacked. Some days before, a Swissair plane had been burnt out in the Jordanian desert, and we had to fly over that region to reach India. Many people were saying that they would never risk flying again. I telephoned Madame N. and asked her whether she was not afraid to start out at this particular time. 'No,' she replied, almost astonished that I should ask such a question. 'And what about you? Are you afraid?' During the final days before the flight, as everyone seemed to calm down, we decided to leave as planned.

At the Zurich airport, passenger and luggage control was very strict. Then came take-off, and, at

sunset, the flight was over Mont Blanc. What an amazing sight it was! At Geneva, among those who boarded our plane was the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka. We were feverishly awaiting our departure. The little light in front of us went on, to tell us to fasten our seat belts. But still the engine did not start.

Suddenly, over the intercom, the pilot announced that, for reasons of security, all passengers were asked to leave the plane. Silently, with beating hearts, we filed into a lounge of the airport, with plate glass windows, and there, one after another, we were subjected to a further search from head to foot. When they had probed into everything, they took our handbags, giving us a receipt in exchange. I asked when we would get them back, and was told: 'At Bombay.' This was a further shock. I had not been able to keep anything except my passport; as for my friend, she held on to her cheque book! Eventually the departure took place, three hours late.

Once on the way, we realized that without our handbags we were stripped of everything. We looked at one another, and almost burst out laughing. God had taken us at our word; we had indeed put our trust in Him; but we had not been aware how much we depended upon things in those handbags – flight tickets, purse, spectacles. I could not read anything, we had no comb to tidy our hair, no sweets to suck, no air-sickness remedy which we had thought we might need. All had disappeared.

We had to fly like this till noon the following day. We were told that our delay was due to a sudden

announcement that something dangerous would take place in the plane. Everything had been carefully checked, but the atmosphere remained very tense; you could see the anxiety in people's faces. We prayed that everyone would be at peace and people would stop feeling frightened. Perhaps that was what enabled us to become one family more quickly.

At Athens, the plane was immediately surrounded by soldiers with sub-machine guns at the ready - you might have thought we were in a war. From there we took off for Karachi, flying over the Persian desert. The sun rose towards three in the morning, and suddenly it lit up mountains and mountains of sand. Finally, at mid-day, we reached our destination.

Bombay

We were very glad to leave the plane. For the first time we breathed the warm air of Bombay. In the hall of the airport, great ventilator fans in the ceiling made a loud noise, and people were milling about. Our handbags had been piled up on the floor in the middle of the hall and an air hostess simply said, 'Take what belongs to you.' All of us almost threw ourselves upon our bags; each one found her own, and checked with relief that everything in it was safe and sound.

An English friend had come to meet us. She drove us through Bombay. We passed sometimes through streets where well-dressed Indians were walking about and there were fine shops, sometimes in the

slums where the people were dressed in rags full of holes. In the little streets, the shops are open and narrow; the shopkeepers, seated cross-legged on a table, wait for their customers. Children wander about in the streets, because they have no homes. When you have seen this kind of poverty, it remains like an agony in your heart.

The same evening, a small plane took us to Pune, a town with a population of a million, before our climb to Panchgani. Early in the morning I was awakened by the shouts of the shopkeepers; it reminded me of my childhood. Once more we went through streets full of people, of children and of animals of every sort - dogs, pigs, cows, goats, oxen, all jumbled together, with a concert of motor horns. We could not help laughing and crying out and comparing it with Switzerland.

Panchgani, six hundred kilometres from Bombay

The higher we climbed, the greener became the meadows. It was almost the end of the rainy season, and it was a joy to see small alpine-like flowers.

The district of Panchgani is very picturesque; it is surrounded by hills of an intense green, and the ground is reddish-brown and rocky. Old trees, bent almost double with age, made sudden dark patches on the landscape. All this, at sunset, formed a striking view.

At last we were there! A line of flags, from several countries, including Switzerland, was fluttering at the entrance to the garden. The great house itself was decorated with pots of dazzling red geraniums.

We were coming into a veritable builder's yard. In fact, through the gifts of thousands of people from Asia, Europe and other continents, two fine buildings had been put up, and work was in full swing to construct a third, which would contain a dining room, a conference room, and a theatre. Architects and engineers from several countries were giving their services free; a trade unionist from Australia, who had come with his wife for two years, was supervising the carpentry, and Indian tradesmen had agreed to considerable reductions in their prices.

A hundred labourers, both men and women, were working on this construction. Some, who came up from the valley, walked up to two and a half hours every day, climbing up in the morning and returning in the evening. They did not have a single machine to help in their work, because it was necessary to employ as many men as possible, to give them the opportunity of earning their daily bread.

Those in charge did not merely direct the work. They were also concerned that each worker was happy, and found a purpose for his life. Some of the workers said, 'Even if we were offered a better wage elsewhere, we would never want to leave this place.'

The farm

In centres such as this, where hundreds of people come, many of them foreigners, the question of food remains a problem. Everything is arid in the neighbourhood; the peasants had given up hope of making anything grow.

Panchgani is like an oasis springing up in the desert. Cisterns have been built to collect the water during the rainy season to irrigate the ground. As we walked through the gardens we were astonished to see all that was growing there; the tomatoes were beginning to turn red, there were great square beds of beans and other vegetables, quantities of strawberries, almost ripe, which made your mouth water, and a great field of potatoes, a rare sight, was ready for harvesting. Near the house there was a pond where red and yellow fish darted about. The grass sown for the cows was already lovely and green. Beds of flowers of all colours had been planted to decorate the houses. After the rains, the vegetation sprouts so quickly that you can see it grow from one day to the next.

A family of farmers from New Zealand had left their lands and had come to help to set up a farm. One fine day the first cows arrived, sent by Australian friends as a gift. Today the cattle shed is full; and these cows, instead of giving the three litres of milk a day that is usual in India, give seven or eight every day. The surplus is sold in the schools of the village of Panchgani, where it is very welcome. The lack of milk is a great problem in India; generally only children and old people are able to have it. Friends from Luxembourg sent the first hens; now there are hundreds. What a joy it would be to collect all the eggs!

Local people

In the region of Panchgani, as in the rest of India,

there are thousands of poor peasants and people without work who beg. Many came to Panchgani to see what was happening there, or to take part in a conference. I met several of them, among many others, who had given up drinking and smoking and decided to use their earnings to feed their children.

Many had left their plot of land, thinking that it was not profitable. When they saw all that was growing in our centre, they wanted to take responsibility themselves and began to cultivate their land again. Those who were working only two or three hours a day began to work as much as seven or eight hours. Some, who had been at loggerheads, began to work together, and the results were far better than before. They were able to harvest enough for their own needs, and also to share with others and to bring a contribution to the conferences. Facts like these have made their mark in the district; even members of the regional government were interested in them.

Delegates from the whole world

A conference was about to begin. Some Indians, squatting very low, were feverishly cleaning the house, the garden and even the roads with small native brooms. When we said good morning to them in their Indian language - 'Namaste' - their big eyes shone and they joined their hands together in response.

The delegates arrived from Australia, New Zealand, and different countries of Asia, Africa and Europe. They represented different religions. How

could one forge all these different races, religions and mentalities into a single force, capable of changing the world? Only the power of God could make this happen. Frank Buchman had taught us that when man listens, God speaks; when man obeys, God acts and miracles happen.

In the course of one meeting we were told that five hundred rupees was still needed to pay the workers that very evening. After a quiet time, everyone gave what they could. When I thought of these workers, I felt uneasy; but what a pleasure and what a relief it was in the evening to see the men and women who came out of the office with their pay! Their joy was visible on their faces; several had their money in their hands and they counted it and smiled as they walked along. They knew beforehand what they were going to do with it. As for me, I remembered my wages at the factory; I could understand them, and I fully shared in their happiness.

Madame N. and I had the chance to tell of our personal experiences of change. It amazed people to see the wife of an industrialist and a former woman worker speaking together. We often joked between ourselves, saying that my friend represented the capitalists and I the proletariat!

One day an industrial delegation arrived, an employer, members of his staff, and workers. Some days before, there had been serious riots and a death in this factory. They were very suspicious of each other. At the centre at Panchgani they learnt to listen to their inner voice, and each day there were new reconciliations between them. Together they decided to bring a new spirit to their

factory, and to the industry of the whole country.

Everyone taking part in the conference helped in the work of the house. Men in India are not used to doing this kind of work. At Panchgani many did it for the first time, and often you would hear bursts of laughter. One trade unionist declared with glee, 'Today I did something which I have never done in my life; I was in the kitchen, preparing vegetables; but since my wife will not believe it, I had myself photographed to prove it to her.'

But those at the conference who made the deepest impression on me were two men from the caste formerly known as the untouchables, whom Mahatma Ghandi called Harijans - Children of God. In former times, they could not go to school, nor learn a profession.

Over a cup of tea, one of them told us how, through listening to the inner voice, his life had been changed. Then he decided to set up an evening school for the children of his caste, and now about two hundred and fifty pupils attended. He had found masters to teach them the alphabet; but he told us, 'I do not want them simply to learn to read and write - I would like them also to learn to be honest and to live like that in our world, which is so full of corruption.'

He lives in a little two-roomed hut. One room serves as a kitchen. In the other ten people sleep, his own family and his brother's. He himself gets up very early in the morning and goes out to the little balcony to have his quiet time.

Just as I am

I was very much impressed to see that these people who were materially so poor had simple, open minds, not cluttered up by the ideas of European intellectuals, and this enabled them spontaneously to hear the voice of God.

In my youth I had not been able to learn a trade, owing to lack of money; I had very often envied others, thinking to myself that with more instruction I could have been more useful in the world. It was at Panchgani that I really understood that it is not necessary to be so educated in order to serve God. My contact with the Indians helped me once and for all to accept myself just as I am. Perhaps for the first time, I was able to say to God, 'Thank You for having made me a very simple woman.' And yet when I look back at the road I have travelled, I do seem to have passed through a university - the university of life!

New Year

In November we had the opportunity to take part in the great festival of Diwali, which is for Indians what Christmas and New Year are for us. Many of them close their account books at this time, a new year begins. This festival is the symbol of light - all the houses are cleaned from top to bottom, and decorated with candles; even the streets are swept. All those who can do so buy new clothes.

At the great ceremony, everyone was seated on the ground in a circle, cross-legged, to eat curry by

candle-light. We foreigners, who were rather older, were seated round a table. Custom requires that brothers give a gift to their sisters, who have cooked a good meal for them; often they also play tricks on them. It is a light-hearted and happy occasion.

After the meal, everyone goes out into the night, under a splendid sky, strewn with stars; fireworks are let off - this is not only for the pleasure of watching a spectacular sight, it is also a pious act to chase away evil spirits. Their religion requires everyone, before this festival, to put right anything wrong in his life, so as to set out again, pure and free, into the New Year.

Leaving Panchgani

At the end of November, feeling rather sad, we had to leave this place where we had made so many new friends.

It was a magnificent day, bathed in sunshine. As we went down by car, from time to time we passed a little temple; the Indians seated in front of it were waiting for visitors, hoping to receive a few small coins. At the edge of a pool some women in very colourful saris were doing their washing; some vigorously beating the clothes against the stones, others spreading them out on the grass to dry in the sun.

A little further down, we met a whole band of gypsies. What an attractive picture they presented, with their many colours; it was like a picture out of one of my childhood books. In the middle of the band walked several pairs of donkeys, each pair

yoked together with a bar. The donkeys carried the gipsy mothers, with their babies in their arms. Between the donkeys, hanging from the bars, baskets containing all sorts of things were tossing about. Sometimes, even, the head of a child poked out, looking thoroughly contented. All along the procession ran dogs watching to see that all was well. The gipsies were completely covered with jewels; they had them in their noses, round their heads, on their belts, fingers and feet. And all this glittered in the bright sunlight, and almost dazzled us. I could not imagine all these people transported into the midst of our western civilization; but there they fitted in perfectly.

A small plane took us to Bombay for a few days; there we felt again even more keenly the vast poverty of India, as we saw those families who have not even a hovel to shelter them, and who live on the pavements. This sight moved us to the depths, and made us wonder how it is possible that so many people can pass close by this suffering without being moved by it. We understood that it was because the poverty is so overwhelming; faced with this problem, which is so far beyond your power to believe, you put on armour plating, you become hard, as the only means of protecting yourself. If I had not been convinced that everything in the world can change, I should probably have had the same attitude. I long with all my heart that the light of hope which shines at Panchgani may reach out, little by little, to this huge country.

Delhi

If Bombay is an old city where you feel you are at the heart of Indian life, it is with a certain relief that you arrive in Delhi, where the poverty is less apparent. Although there are also slums, here there is more comfort, and you are aware that you are at the seat of government. Apart from the official buildings, which are so impressive, there are also ancient forts and an immense zoo, where we were able to see tigers.

Delhi is further north, and we were not so hot there. In November and December it is mid-winter. But Madame N. and I enjoyed the sunny days, and we had no need of our umbrellas, except to protect us from the sun. However, in the morning and evening, we would meet Indians with woollen scarves round their heads, and muffled up in great warm blankets. At first we thought that they were ill; it was only afterwards that we realized that this was their winter wear. As heating and fireplaces do not exist in their houses, you see them in the evenings eating their curry round a fire lit out of doors, to keep themselves warm. These views of family life, seen through the smoke-filled air, were very touching.

One day we were invited to a curry dinner. The father of our host had been a national hero, and his monument stands at the centre of the city. He himself was one of the leaders of the opposition party. He and his wife had been, many years before, to a conference at Caux. As he was convinced that his country needed absolute moral standards, he wanted

us to meet some of his friends in politics. A dozen of them came with their wives, these latter dressed in magnificent saris.

Not knowing anything about Indian politics, I had thought, 'What shall we do in such company?', and I had hesitated very much before accepting the invitation. But in a quiet time I had had the thought that I must simply be myself, and that I should take some flowers to my hostess, although this was not the usual thing to do.

When I arrived, I was introduced to my hostess; and then, when I wanted to give her the flowers, she exclaimed in a low voice, 'Not for me, but for my husband, whose birthday it is.'

'Many happy returns!' I said to my host, offering him my bouquet. He was so pleased that I no longer felt afraid!

When you go to Delhi, you must be sure to go to the city of Agra, where there is the Taj Mahal. This is a monument, with a tomb made entirely of marble, built by an emperor in memory of his favourite wife; it is one of the seven wonders of the world.

There, for the first time in my life, I stayed for two days in a magnificent international hotel. What impressed me most was the servants in their splendid costumes, their pink or green turbans, their dignified and noble attitudes, as they served you without pestering you or calling attention to themselves. One of them told me that he had been seven years in this place and that he was perfectly happy. Knowing myself what it is like to be in someone's service, from morning to night, I had to admit that I had by no

means always had that quality of self-giving in doing my work. I thought, 'This spirit of service - isn't it what we need most in our businesses and in our families? If only we could learn afresh how to take care of each other!'

In the home of a minister's wife

To visit the wife of a Minister of State was certainly the last thing I would have thought of doing. But in God's plan everything becomes possible. Just before we left, we were invited to the home of the wife of the Minister of a great Indian state with a population of about fifteen million.

We arrived with beating hearts, praying inwardly; but she received us with such kindness and dignity that all my fears vanished. We had scarcely sat down in a gracious drawing room, with beautiful old furniture, when she began bombarding us with questions: 'Why have you come to India? What do you think of this country? What have you found here?' Feeling encouraged, we told her what the Indians had taught us with their simplicity and their humility, and also spoke of our convictions for her country and for the world.

When she learned that Madame N. was more than seventy-five, that she listened every day to the inner voice in order to obey God, and that in this way we had felt that we should come to India, she exclaimed, 'Oh! Please stay in India. We need women like you to help us.' She came with us to the car, repeating, 'Please come back!'

Departure

Two days later we left India. Seated in the plane next to a port-hole I saw in the distance a succession of glaciers. Feeling very excited, I asked the air hostess if those were the Himalayas. The pilot confirmed this over the loud-speaker. For twenty minutes these majestic glaciers passed in turn under our eyes, bathed in sparkling light. It was a dream come true!

This journey to India represented for Madame N. and for me the crowning experience of our lives.

But it was good to return to our own country. There I was struck by the number of people in Switzerland who believe that the greatest problem in India is poverty. Rajmohan Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, had told us, however, 'We do need material aid; but if you Europeans gave us all your money to the point of becoming poor yourselves, you still would not have helped us enough, because what we need most are men and women who have the answer to corruption and violence, and who will teach us to work and to unite.'

Turkey

'We must carry the whole world on our heart.' Frank Buchman often said this. I wondered how such a thing was possible.

Some years after my journey to India, a Turkish girl who wished to learn French came to live for two months in our home. It was through her that I came to understand the character and customs of Turkey.

A little later, her parents and friends, who were interested in Moral Re-Armament, invited a group of ordinary women from Europe to come to their country.

A programme for each day had been carefully prepared by our Turkish friends. During meals with different families, and in a restaurant, and also by visiting the city of Istanbul, with its marvellous mosques and museums, links of friendship were formed which were to last a lifetime. We learned to listen together to our inner voice, and to share what we felt most deeply. We were discovering that neither our different traditions nor our different religions could prevent us from fighting together for a common goal, for a world free from hate and divisions. '

There are great problems of survival in Turkey; the negative forces work mercilessly among the youth. But these warm-hearted people, who offer hospitality such as you find nowhere else, are certainly called to give something special to the world.

A year later, my inner voice told me during a quiet time to go back to Turkey. As I had anticipated going to a conference in London, I was not at all ready to obey. So for three weeks I hid this thought. When I began to be more and more tormented and lost my inner peace I agreed to let my own will be broken, and to be ready for anything. I talked to some friends about it; they had no doubt that the idea of returning to Turkey was an inspired suggestion.

So it was that I returned with one friend, a

clergyman's widow. During the five weeks that we were there, we were invited to thirty-eight meetings, with many families. We felt completely out of our depth, but every evening we knelt down and God gave us afresh the power and the inspiration to be ourselves and to give to others what He gave us. In this way I understood that gradually the whole world may come to have a place in our hearts.

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Conclusion

I have come to the end of my story. I am seventy, and with my delicate health I never thought I would live so long. I have reasons to be very thankful. Although I have fractured my thigh twice I can still walk; and after three operations on my ears I can still hear. And here I am 'a senior citizen'! But what does that really mean? In my childhood, no one talked about such things. I think of my grandparents, who had brought up twelve children, and who, until they were eighty, would go down every morning to the basement to weave. There was no old age pension then. However, we never heard them complain about anyone or lay claim to anything. They were poor, but they were united, and they feared God.

For my part, since I have lived by faith without any salary for more than thirty years, the arrival each month of my old age pension represents an immense gift. I always want to express my gratitude to the state and to those who began this marvellous work of social service. This enables me to share a small flat with one of my friends,

and for the first time in my life I can say, 'I am at home.'

But I know that this is not enough to make you happy when you are old. I know many people who, whether they are well or sick, live in old age with joy and courage, and encourage others. But it hurts me deeply to see that many among us have lost a direction of life, and no longer know whom to live for.

One day, when I was ill and had no energy, a friend, who was a professor of theology, said to me, 'If in every house there was one sick person who prayed for her own circle and for the world, the world would become very different.'

Whether we are young or not so young, does not the world urgently need us all? Age cannot prevent us from listening to God and obeying him. General MacArthur said, 'You do not become old by having lived a certain number of years; you become old because you have given up your ideals. Years wrinkle the skin; renouncing your ideal wrinkles the soul.' Saint Paul (2 Corinthians 4.16) says, 'Though my outward man decays, my inner man is renewed day after day.'

When I was asked to write the story of my life, I agreed to do so out of obedience to an inner conviction. Opening the New Testament, I came upon this text (2 Corinthians 4.7): 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.' In my spirit I saw a spring gushing up and overflowing from an earthenware vessel; an inner voice said to me, 'Look! That is your life, it is human and

ordinary, but full of miracles which I have done for you. Now write it down!’

I am not an intellectual, but a very simple woman. I wrote in fear and trembling, feeling that I was quite incapable of doing so, but this account has seen the light of day, thanks to God and thanks to my friends to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude. If I have been able to live through such experiences, I do not deserve credit for it. It is to Him who has given me everything, and marvellously guided me, that I give thanks and honour.

I believe that thousands of people can, like me, have this experience, that God exists, that He loves us, that He speaks to us and works miracles. I am convinced that He has a satisfying plan for each one of us who is searching for a meaning to life.