Jacques Henry

Child against the Odds

CAUX EDITION

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I thank Charles Piguet, whose precious help enabled me to put my story together. Without his skills I could never have written this narrative on my own. It would have included so many Vaudois words and expressions that even French people would have had difficulty in understanding me.

J.H.

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Translated from the French
by Mary Andrews

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My mother gave birth to me on October 9th, 1925. Her name was Yolande Grossen; her family came originally from the Bernese Oberland, but her grandfather had left the village of Kandersteg, at the very top of that high enclosed valley. This was before the opening of the Lotschberg railway line which today links Berne with Brigue. He had settled with his wife and family at Fleurier, in the Travers valley in the canton of Neuchâtel. My grandfather was a very small boy at the time, and he had seen General Bourbaki's soldiers arriving by thousands at Les Verrières frontier after the 1870-71 catastrophe. They would come down the valley with their skinny horses which they sold off for two francs a piece. My grandfather used to tell me how his father bought two of them and they had been very useful to him.

About 1935, on the way to my uncle and aunt's at Fleurier for an unforgettable holiday, I was shown, in the Place des Fêtes at Langereuse, some old trees whose bark had been chewed away by Bourbaki's horses. My grandfather lived nearby, and I used to go to see him in his saddler's shop. He was one of the last drivers of the coach between Les Verrières and La Brévine, our Swiss Siberia, where temperatures can fall as low as 30 degrees below freezing. Georges Grossen – he was a small man,

full of energy, somewhat authoritarian, and he worked conscientiously, which aroused jealousy at times. One day, when he lost one of his coach wheels, he suspected that someone had loosened a nut.

The tale went round the family that one morning, just as he was taking the coach out of the coach-house, he found two children complaining of the cold and asking when they were going to get to the end of their journey. Grandfather was sure that he had set down all his passengers the previous evening. Who had put those children there? No-one knew, but, be that as it may, he decided to change his job. Since he loved horses, he became a saddler-upholsterer. He went to Paris to complete his training and opened a workshop in Fleurier at 7, Place des Armes. He had the reputation of being more expensive than others, but his stitching work never gave way. He also invented an adjustable wooden mould which allowed him to get the exact measurements of the horse's neck. Apparently, no horse harnessed by him was ever chafed during its working life. The adjustable mould is now on display at Môtier Museum.

When he was over sixty years old and had placed his children, he decided to retire after a fashion. He and his wife, took on a grocery and vegetable shop, with a bread section and a haberdashery, in a district of Lausanne.

Mother was the thirteenth of their sixteen children – quite a tribe. She was an assistant in Fleurier Co-op, a grocer's shop, but, as ever, Georges Grossen decided for everyone. «You, Yolande, will come to Lausanne to help us», he told my mother. So she was «requisitioned», although she was already twentyfive.

On the evening of October 9th, 1925 she had sudden contractions, and, five hours later, I was born. The next morning sister Rose, the midwife at the maternity hospital, asked her: «Aren't you ashamed, miss, giving birth to a child

while you're still unmarried?» Mother retorted: «I prefer shame to remorse. And it's nobody's business but mine.»
She had met my father at the Fête du Bois[1]. «You dancing, missy?»
A simple question, but a lifetime's experience. My father was quite small, but well-built and unusually muscular. He had even been the Swiss-Romande amateur champion for boxing and graeco-roman wrestling. He was born in 1900 at Moulin hollow, where his parents ran the community isolation hospital, where they used to put people with contagious diseases. In 1918, those who caught Spanish 'flu were sent to this place, which became a deathhouse. At the age of 18, my father was helping on the hospital farm, and was also training to become a nurse. I don't know whether he ever got a certificate, but he worked for a while in the canton operating theatre, where he used to hand the instruments to the famous professor Cesar Roux. My parents took to each other straight away, but, after a short time together, my mother realised that she was not up to what he expected of her. She didn't feel strong enough to work on the hospital farm, and decided to break it off with him. But, as a result of their brief relationship, I was conceived. I suspect that when she told him that I was on the way my father muttered, «It serves her right». He couldn't bear a woman standing up to him, and he yelled after her when he left: «You'll see. You'll be forced to think about me all your life».
The doctor confirmed mother's pregnancy and, seeing that she was determined to keep the baby, he suggested prescribing a prolonged absence in France. «You can have the baby in peace and leave it there, and I'll arrange to have it adopted. Obviously, there'll be no question of taking it back again one day».

1 The annual School-Leavers' Party in Sauvabelin Park each June.

The family made it very clear to her.
«You needn't have given yourself. In fact, you've behaved like a whore».
However, her parents accepted her decision to have me and to take responsibility for bringing me up; but they told her: «You can keep him, but not in our house. We don't want to start looking after little ones again. We need you in the shop, so foster him out».
Mother found me a home with a couple in the country, primary school teachers at Monts-de-Grandvaux. She paid out a lump sum for my keep up to the age of sixteen, which amounted to three quarters of her savings; but in this way she made sure that I would have a father and mother throughout my childhood, as well as retaining the opportunity to follow my progress and see in which direction my tastes and abilities were developing.
In the early years of my life I was spoilt, showered with everything, a real spoiled brat. I knew all the children who came to the school, because the teachers's flat was on the first floor and I only had to go downstairs to go straight into a classroom. I would go up to the older girls and ask: «Will you draw me a duck?»
Then I would go off happily with my masterpiece.
On Tuesday afternoons the girls did sewing, and at the same time the boys used to do things which intrigued me. The class teacher would put red wine into a paper cone, and it would come out like water from a fountain. One day, the teacher heated a liquid in a flask – I never knew what it should have produced, because the solution exploded, and a school window was shattered. Fortunately, no-one was hurt. It was all very exciting, and, as you can imagine, even in fine weather I was in school every Tuesday.

The Plan-des-Chênes farm was about eight hundred

metres from the school, and I spent almost as much time there as at school.
Three generations lived there together. The granddad was a wheelwright – I found it very hard to understand how a beautiful round cartwheel could come out of the line of many small holes he cut into a piece of wood with his chisel; this piece would later become the hub of the wheel, round which he would fix a «star» of spokes. For the ironwork, he would take me with him to the farrier. It was an extremely good object lesson.
He once made me a propeller, which he nailed on to a pole at least two metres higher than the apple tree. A strong gust of wind broke off one of the blades, and the other one hung down like a clock hand at six o'clock. So this wonderful fellow, seeing me brokenhearted, put aside his work and made me another propeller, which turned so fast that, despite the noise of the wind, you would have thought it was an engine.
The grandma made vegetable soup which smelled good even out in the yard; I used to rush up to her and say, lisping: «If I fill your bashket with wood, will you give me shome shoup?»
The basket with its handle was too big for a four-year-old, and it would drag along the ground – but I would get my «shoup». By the time I was six, my carrying duties were a lot more useful.
Uncle Robert looked after the farm, and his wife was called Aunt Elise; she was grandma's daughter-in-law, and I bombarded her with all my whys and wherefores.
At potato-planting time the plough opened up the furrow, and only the adults and bigger children were allowed to plant, because their feet were long enough. They would put their heel against the last potato placed in the furrow, then put another at the end of their shoe. Once a row was filled, the plough would come along and cover it all up.

«Jacky», Aunt Elise would say, «You go and look for some seed potatoes with your little basket; it'll make a nice end to the row».
She would answer all my questions: «No, the potatoes won't die or rot underground. They'll produce more potatoes, big ones and little ones».
Some time later, Aunt Elise would take me to the field, where young leaves were coming out of the earth, like little ears – I could see the potatoes well and truly alive.
Towards harvest time, she would take me with her, saying: «I've got a surprise for you».
She would carry the hoe and I had the basket. She would uncover part of a row and clumps of potatoes would appear in their pale jackets. Another vivid memory and object lesson which taught me for the first time how you can provide food, even in winter.
It was the cycle of the seasons, the cycle of life itself. Aunt Elise would show me the withered potato which had produced the plant, and say: «See, that's probably one of the ones you brought me».
Emma was Aunt Elise's daughter. I had free rides with her in the little railed handcart; she was like a sturdy horse, pulling the cart hundreds of times. André, her brother, would take me with him to pick morel mushrooms, watch the fox cubs play outside their earth, or watch the frog-spawn developing at Jordillon pond.
I mustn't conjure up any more memories of this farm, or you will think that I was being brought up by farmers!

I was five when Papi got a little pimple on his lip – the doctor suggested removing it, but he didn't want him to. It was cancerous, and the disease spread quickly. I remember the thick soups which were fed to him through a tube directly into the oesophagus from his throat.
He died a year later, so, at six, I had my first encounter with death. What struck me most was the lack of movement in this man who had been so bright and full of life. Before being buried in the ground, he was buried in flowers which had been sent from all over – they were in the flat, down the stairs, in the school, and even in the cellar.
This death was to change my way of life totally and, from that moment on, things went badly for that family and for me. We moved to Grandvaux.
Since I was blest enough to have two mothers, I called the teacher's wife Mami. As her husband had died young, she received a pension of only 113 francs per month; when she had a fixed salary as security, most of what she owned had been bought on credit, so everything was repossessed.
There were four of us in the family – Mami and Papi's son, and another child being fostered. We went from three meals a day to two, sometimes one, and there wasn't enough wood to keep us warm. When I was eight I caught tuberculosis, which recurred, but, because there was very little money, they couldn't afford to send me to Leysin, the mountain resort where tuberculosis was treated at that time.

After a while, Mami began to entertain a certain well-known person in the area, a magistrate; I had noticed that every morning at the same time she would sit at the window and look out. It didn't take me very long to see that a distinguished gentleman coming down the village would signal to her with his handkerchief, which he would take discreetly out of his pocket and wave behind his back before blowing his nose. Mami never missed him passing by.

From time to time she would say: «A gentleman is coming to dinner tonight, but it would be better if you weren't there», and add firmly: «Stay in your room».

She would give us some soup early, and I would console myself with the thought that she had prepared a good meal for the gentleman and we would have the leftovers next day. Mami never suspected that, if I climbed on a bedside table in my room, I could spy on what was happening in the bedroom; I'd found a gap between the dividing wall and the stove pipe which went from one room to another. I won't go into detail about what I saw.

Nobody gave me any lessons during my long illness. At school, my friends had learnt the verbs «to have» and «to be»; when I returned to school, I merrily mixed everything up – I was scolded, ridiculed, slapped, and it hurt, since it occurred every day. One of the class teachers rapped me over the knuckles with a ruler. I snatched it from his hand and broke it in two on the edge of the bench, I was so angry with all teachers. However, if by some stroke of luck I only came second to bottom of the class, I would convince myself that I had made a little progress.

We moved again, from Grandvaux to Lutry, which is where Mami met a man of about her own age. He had a few thousand francs, which she desperately needed; he felt lonely and was looking for someone. Fairly soon they decided to live together without getting married. They

invested everything in a cafe-tearoom in the middle of a vineyard, but it was destined to failure. At the beginning each of them tried to show only their good side, but that didn't last. They didn't serve alcohol in the restaurant, only in the office and kitchen. He began to drink more and more, and he became violent when he was drunk. Each accused the other of not doing their utmost and of being the reason why there were no customers.

And what about me in all this? He began to despise me; I was not this woman's son. How many times did I hear: «Son of a whore, bastard, good-for-nothing!»

Then things got worse. At two o'clock one morning he took me out of bed while I was still asleep and threw me downstairs. I'm sure he wanted to kill me. When I reached the ground floor, a whole floor below, I was wide awake, but, luckily, nothing was broken.

From then onwards, whenever he was drunk, I learned to sleep outside, and Mami would feed me secretly. Sometimes she prepared a plate of food for me and put it under a lid in the henhouse, where I would go at night so that he couldn't see me. But sometimes those accursed hens had turned the plate over – and you can imagine what was left for me.

Fortunately, I was good at fishing, and would often catch small perch and fry them on a small fire by the lakeside. I learned to steal – on my own at first, because I was hungry, then in a gang.

During my vagrant life I didn't spend a lot of time studying, but I learned a lesson from it; ever since then, out of respect for what life gives me, I don't think I have ever thrown away even the smallest crumb of bread. I have always eaten it. Even today, even if the bread is a week old, I still soak it, but I don't throw it away.

Mami and her friend sometimes came to blows. I was woken once in the middle of the night by a noise; I heard

them fighting without speaking in the kitchen. I dashed downstairs – they didn't even notice when I suddenly opened the door. He was holding the big carving knife a few inches from Mami's throat, and she was panting and gripping his fist with both hands. Her face was flushed, with the effort and with the emotion, I suppose.

Knowing that he was ticklish, I went up behind him and touched his ribs. He jumped and turned round, trying to attack me with the knife – I can still see the blade gleaming close to me. I darted under the table, to get to the same side as Mami, and I banged into a stool, which I had to push so that I could get out. But, all of a sudden, I had something to throw into his face; this stool must have saved our lives, because my throwing it stopped him in his tracks.

Mami and I had just enough time to get out of the cafe. The darkness of the night was our ally, and we were able to melt into it. We stood with our backs glued to a wall, holding our breath.

The black spots at the bottom of this picture are not a mistake. In this mountain lake where rainwater accumulates, great quantities of tall-growing algea break the surface. When the wind doesn't stir them up, the algae drop and the water is like mirror. Then it reflects all its surroundings – a corner of the sky, the face of a mountain, the grass yellowed by the first frosts. Despite everything which may be lying at the bottom of our pond, God offers us inner peace, so that we can reflect a corner of His heaven.

Mother

My mother was always concerned about me, and I felt her calm presence very strongly well before I could talk. I always felt that she was near me.
The agreement signed between her and my foster-parents envisaged one visit each month, but, at the beginning, the school door was often closed to her. Mami was afraid of the influence which Mother would inevitably have on me; I think that, deep down, she was jealous. As far as she was concerned, I was born by accident, and she continued to address Mother as «Miss», which was a way of making her feel that she alone was responsible for educating me. But Mother persevered in her right to visit, and the teachers eventually yielded to her persistence.
I was eight months old before they allowed her to make her first visit to me. So I was seeing her for the first time. She took me on her lap, and I was happy – I made contented noises, playing with her necklace. Mami was astonished: «How is it that he stays on your lap? When I take him on mine he soon starts crying».
From then on, Mother came to see me regularly, even if no-one answered the door sometimes. The teacher would only return from his walk at five o'clock, and would have «forgotten» that it was the day for Mother's visit.

Fortunately, there was the Plan-des-Chênes farm, where she would be warmly welcomed, and where she could wait. From there she would go over to the school every so often, to see if anyone was there. Aunt Elise once asked bluntly:
«Mother Yolande, will you tell me how it all happened? What was in the agreement between you and the Gs?»
And after the facts were explained, she said:
«That's different from what I was told. I admire you for wanting to be involved with your child. The Gs are friends of ours, but I'd like you to know that, if you need to go to court at any time, I'll be a witness for you».
Mother told me later that Aunt Elise was the first person who had understood her.
I was growing up, and she was always there to listen, comment, complete my observations. She knew a lot of children's songs, and I often asked her to sing «Jean, P'tit Jean et le gros morceau de lard» (John, Johnnie and the big piece of bacon).
Thanks to Mother, I was lucky enough, between the ages of five and eleven, to spend wonderful summer holidays each year at her sister's at Fleurier. When I was older, I used to go by myself to my grandparents at Lausanne, where I was happy to see her, even if only for a few hours.

I was ten when Mami and her friend took on the cafe-tea-room. Apart from an addiction to drink, Albert also had a penchant for homosexuality, and he tried to draw me into it. He decided that he would give me my bath; since I had no father, it was easy for him to tell me that he wanted to take his place, and that there were certain things which could only be talked about man-to-man. At a certain age a boy should know how the male anatomy functions, but he made me promise not to talk about it to

anyone. That was how he gradually began to play with me regularly; he would come into my bed at night and arouse me and himself.
One effect of this on me was that Mother became like a stranger to me during this period of awakening in my life. I dared not tell her what was going on or that, when he was drunk, Albert knocked me about. Previously I had been completely open with her and told her everything, but, at eleven, I began feeling awkward in front of her. There were intimate things I didn't dare speak about to her; I wanted to, but I always put it off till the next day. For her part, Mother was questioning things; she wondered, for example, why, since Albert had been around, was her son so clean and tidy, which he had not been before? Yet she thought: «If I question Jacky, and he innocently mentions it to Albert, this man may take it out on him». She waited months for the right chance to speak.
Once again I had to escape urgently from Lutry, to avoid a drunken scene. About a three-mile walk and I could get to my grandparents' home. That evening, without realising it, I gave Mother the chance to do something. I thought I was alone in the bathroom, and I was reasoning half-aloud to myself: «What would happen if I went to the police constable? He knows I steal, because he's chased me a few times when I've been thieving in the vineyard...»
I hadn't noticed that Mother had reached the doorway; there was such intensity in her look that her lovely brown eyes turned very dark. She simply asked: «Does he pester you at night? Does he touch you there?» indicating below her stomach. I nodded agreement.
«Right. That's all I need».
She reported it that same night and next morning, my twelfth birthday, the policeman came for me, to go and

speak at the police station. He was very kind, very paternal – like I imagined a father to be. I was all set to tell him everything, but he quickly broke off his questions and said:
«That's fine. We'll help you».
Barely an hour later, he came back to the cafe to take Albert away to prison.
In the middle of the week the policeman came for me at school, to take me to the courtroom. Mother was also there, but I was not allowed to go up to her. The judge seemed so full of himself, so cold, that I said hardly anything. Albert was given eight days at Bois-Mermet prison – I think he would have got much longer if I had told the whole truth.
When he came back from prison there was a coldness between Albert and me – naturally, on the physical side there was no more touching, but I was always on my guard, and kept away more and more.
In the meantime my foster-parents, having lost their reputation, decided to give up the tearoom at Lutry and take a large flat in Lausanne; they could cook well, so began to take in boarders for meals. But Albert continued drinking. My problem was that there was a police curfew forbidding minors to be out alone after 9 pm: I had to be very careful and creep about surreptitiously, to get to one of my hiding places and spend the night there.
Le Flon was a place where thousands of CCF (Swiss Railways) wagons came to unload their goods at numerous depots – you can still admire the imposing Customs House today. There were the lorries carrying wholesale early fruit and vegetables all over French-speaking Switzerland. The Securitas agent would do his rounds to supervise these buildings; he would go in by the main entrance, opposite the unloading quays, below the hiding places where I slept. There was only the miaowing of the

tomcats and the cooing of the pigeons to disturb me. For food, I had the market sweepings and the dustbins, where I could find plenty of food to eat from the big hotels. Luckily, there were also the school kitchens – you paid 20 centimes for a large bowl of vegetable soup, sometimes with barley or oatmeal added. I well remember that you also had the right to a second helping and a fruit as a dessert. I was a good customer at this type of restaurant – it was lovely to sit down and be warm...

Every Wednesday children of my age, volunteers, used to pull around the large cart with a sign «School kitchens» on. We went round the streets in the market area and, as we passed, market stallholders would throw leeks, potatoes and fruit into the cart. I often helped out, and would yell enthusiastically – hang it all, it was a question of getting food to feed ourselves!

It wasn't my idea of life, it wasn't at all funny. How was I going to get out of it?

Mami had a sister who went to the markets, though they rarely saw each other. I used to look out for her and finally spotted her, thanks to her name written on a little card amongst her vegetables. I watched her for several Saturdays; she came by the 7.43 am train-tram[1] from le Jorat to the Gare du Tunnel, with a large hamper on her back, and a box perched precariously on it attached by a knotted rope, and a heavy basket on each arm. She would then walk for about ten minutes to get to her place on the Louve market. At about 12.15 she would gather up what was not sold, and stop on the way to buy her groceries and get her train back to Moudon.

One day I ventured to say to her: «Can I help you carry things?»

1 Train-tram: This looked like an electric train, but replaced a tram as it went to the outskirts.

She looked at my frame, lean but nevertheless showing a few muscles.
«You look a bit skinny, but let's try».
As she got into the tram, she said, «You're a lot stronger than I thought. Could you come and meet me at the train next Saturday?»
«Of course».
But I had to have permission to arrive at school five or six minutes later than the others; in view of my academic performance, they were hesitant to give it, so I said: «If you don't give me permission, I'll do it anyway».
And that's how it all began. Old Betty gave me 50 centimes each Saturday; at that time, you paid 35 centimes for a kilo of bread, and for 20 centimes I could go to the school kitchen.
She was my first boss. One day she gave me six eggs for her sister, my Mami; I was proud to be the supplier of such precious merchandise, and also to take greetings from that same Aunt Betty to whom she hadn't spoken for years.
A year later, when I was thirteen and a half, I asked Aunt Betty another important question: «Do you need a farm boy?»
On Easter Sunday 1939 I arrived at the farm and met Paul Porchet, her son-in-law. Apparently I wanted to do the milking, and I got two and a half litres, which impressed Paul. «I'd like to try you. You can start tomorrow». It was like a breath of fresh air – I suddenly felt really free. I was proud of having found a way out of my situation like a gate opening onto a vast expanse of open countryside. I had to warn Mami and Albert that I was leaving them. I knew that Albert was going through another bad patch, and when I arrived at the boarding house I rang the bell, so that I could be sure of having him facing me, and not behind. The light went on in the corridor. I went in.

There was a strong smell of Rio Grande cigars – he was there. There were six more metres to reach the bedrooms and kitchen. When he saw me, he pointed an accusing finger at me and yelled: «You bastard, get out of here, or I'll kill you».

As he was still coming towards me threateningly, I said, «Stop. I've got something to tell you». He kept coming forward, so I picked up an egg and threw it right into his face. He stopped dead in his tracks.

It was quite funny to see the egg yolk trickling slowly down his face and chin. «I've got a job. I start tomorrow. I've come to get my things».

Very annoyed, he retorted: «You're a minor. We're responsible for you. You've no right to decide for yourself».

«You say you're responsible for me, but at the same time you tried to hurt me, and even kill me. I'd rather work and be safe».

He let me in. My things were very soon packed – everything I owned could be wrapped in one large handkerchief. What I stood up in was full of holes.

Mami arrived very shortly after this scene; she was crying to see me leave, but she was relieved by the solution I had found. I was given money to go up to Epalinges by tram. My mother was very pleased that I was leaving a place where I was not happy any more. She thought I was rather young to be helping on a farm, but she had seen me as a child at Plan-des-Chênes, and this reassured her that I would fit into a country setting.

I start work

Epalinges. I arrived as a boy, but I very quickly passed through teens to become a man. First, there was the acceptance into a farming family, in which I felt very much at ease. Nobody spoke during working hours. It was considered time-wasting. But around the kitchen table I could exchange my ideas and take part in the conversation. I well remember my first night. What a luxury it was to be able to sleep safely! There was no need to worry about what each sound meant. The food was copious and very good. From then onwards I could eat my fill every single day. Life became totally different. The warm milk straight from the cow was so good. I thought that it must be good for me and would give me strength, since that is how the calves were fattened up at that time.

My boss was strong; one day, when he had hoisted a 50 kg sack of cement on to his shoulder and put another one under his arm, he called out to me:

«Give me a sack to put under my other arm».

And off he went, carrying 150 kg. He taught me to work quickly and well, without losing time between different jobs, which is very important in the country, where tasks and movements are so different from each other.

I went to the «big school», which was about 600 yards away. In summer, it was from 7 to 9. I had thirty minutes

between work at the stables and school, in which to clean my clogs (my only shoes), get washed, changed, have breakfast and get to school (running more often than not).
We were at the stable at 4.20 am, and in the evening we would have soup at 11 pm. We stopped for 70 to 80 minutes at midday for lunch and rest – which meant that we worked a 105 hour week, including Sunday to look after the livestock.
I earned my first wages after an apprenticeship of two and a half years – 40 francs per month, including food, lodging and laundery. That was the rate for a farm hand at that time.
In July 1939 Paul bought the next-door farm, which doubled our surface area, and in September came the call-up. Because Paul was a cavalry sergeant, he left with his horse only two and a half hours after the churchbells and the radio had announced the general mobilisation. That left the grandma, the boss's wife and me as the only able-bodied people. There was also good old Louis, handicapped by cerebral palsy. He could do little jobs; he couldn't read or write, but on his mouth organ he could pick out tunes he had heard on the radio, and he played on Sunday evenings as he sat on a bench in front of the house. He was a good-natured, big-hearted man.
We had to manage somehow to keep the farm going. At that time, we used to cut grass for the cattle, instead of enclosing them inside electric fences as they do now. I remember one large field of beaten-down corn. We had to scythe it, spread it out, and turn it over with a pitchfork before finally stooking it. The harness team consisted of Flocki, a 22-year-old horse, and Mesange, a good-natured cow. They didn't always obey at the same time and in the same direction, hence there were certain problems... The funniest thing was to see them ploughing

together; when Flocki (the intelligent one) took a half-step forwards, so that he was only pulling 40% of the weight, Mesange would touch the horse's neck with her splendid horns, so that Sir should get back into his place – it was a question of equality of labour!

With all that work, I missed a number of classes. One morning, after I had been in the dairy to pour off the milk, I was scything grass for the cows in the orchard. When I got to the end of the first row of stooks I turned round, and standing there, firmly rooted, was the Chairman of the School Board:

«Can't you hear the bell? The law requires that you attend school – it's compulsory».

I replied, «The country needs milk and butter more than it needs people who can write without making mistakes». Then I carried on working. He wasn't there when I finished the next row, and I didn't see him again all summer. That must have been in June 1940 – we were behind with the hay, which was already overdue. The boss's wife had written to our general, «My mother is doubled up with rheumatism and our farm boy is only 14. Could you give my husband some leave, to help us?»

Twenty-four hours later Paul arrived, saying: «Orders to go home – from Staff Headquarters. Was it you who wrote to him?». We did the harvesting in three days, unloading the carts at night.

General Henri Guisan was a firm man, but he had heart. As Commander-in-Chief of our army he was very popular because he understood everyone.

Between Autumn and Spring there was wood to be transported from the forests of the Lausanne Commune, which was a very tough job, as winters then were very severe. We would make a way through by loading about half a cubic metre of wood onto a sleigh and the snow came up to the horses' belly.

The next loads would be heavier. On the Route des Paysans, which had been cleared by the highways department, we would transfer the logs (cut into metre lengths) to waggons. The load of 18 – 20 cubic metres was then taken down to Lausanne to transfer it again into railway waggons. I calculated that about 15 metric tonnes of wood went through my hands in a day. The round trip was 25 – 35 km and we made it in all weathers. Paul would set out at about 7 am with the equipment and the harnessed animals and get back to Lausanne at about 7 pm. From Lausanne, I would go back up to Epalinges by bike to take charge at the farm, which comprised milking the cows, delivering the milk, and looking after the calves which were being fattened up over the winter.

There are so many things to learn on a farm, for example, how to behave with animals, especially horses, which can be man's faithful friend for almost a lifetime. We had an excellent brood mare from the Franche-Montagnes; at the Comptoir-Suisse[1] her foals regularly won first prize in their category. Stella was very docile, obeying only the human voice. She could open door latches and had even worked out how to untie herself in the stable, and she had to have a snap-hook fitted, just like a bull.

One very cold day in the forest we had to harness up six horses to get a large 3.3 cubic metre fir tree out of a small trackless valley. On reaching level ground again, we unharnessed Stella, Paul's horse; he said: «She'll follow us, same as usual». We think a hare leapt out somewhere near her, because she bolted. When she reached the edge of the down slope she reared up on her hind legs to stop herself, but she slid and fell on her haunches. She had broken her back and had to be destroyed. She was eight, the prime of life for a horse.

Working in the country is a risky job. In the forest it was 15 degrees below zero, and this tragedy caused a great coldness in our hearts as well; so our return journey was sad. The sky was low, and for several days we scarcely

1 The Comptoir Suisse is an annual event in Lausanne. It includes cattle, horses, exhibitions of household and electrical goods. Other «comptoirs» exist, but they are smaller events.

spoke to each other, except for what was necessary. Usually, after drinking at the fountain, Stella would come up to the kitchen window, which she would push open with her nose. Grandma would give her an apple or a carrot, but now her neighing was silenced.

There is also a poetic side to farm life, so many things to observe. In winter there is an abundance of light snow, which the wind transforms into clouds scurrying across the ground, filling all the holes and levelling out the roads and the banks. Everything is smooth and curving – a sign of God's pardon wiping out all old traces; a vast expanse ready for new footprints.

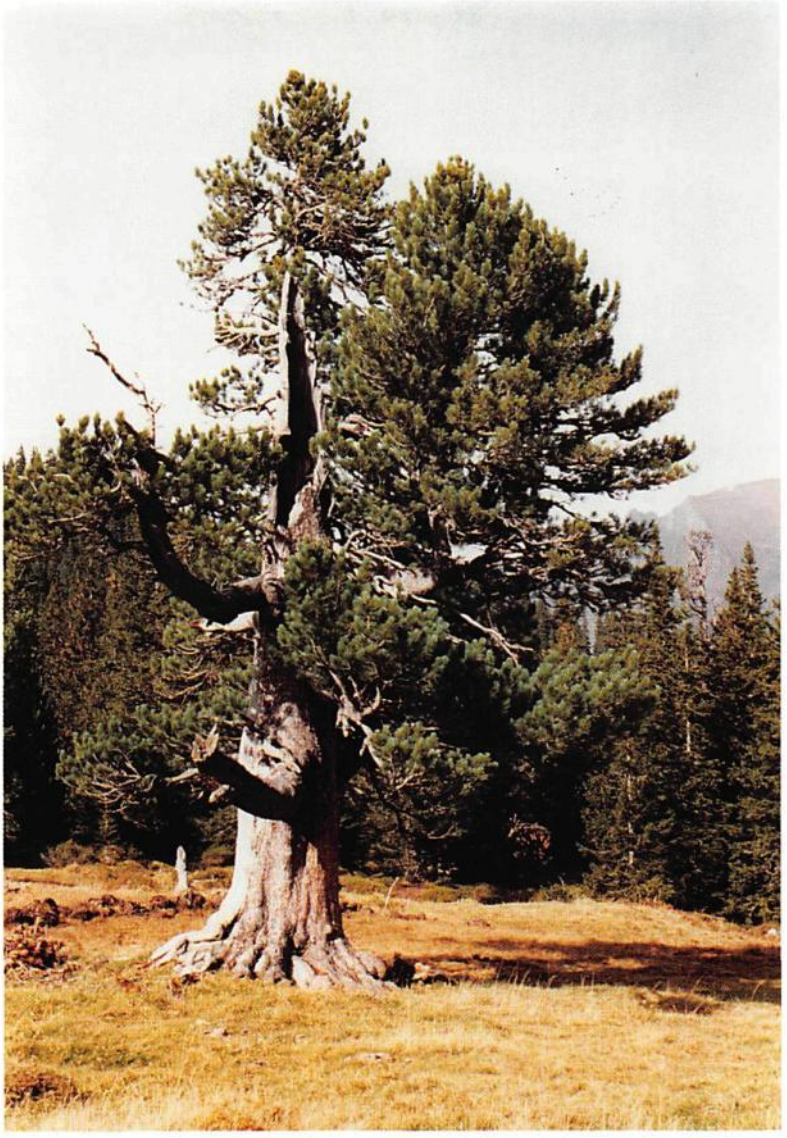
The snow thus blown about penetrates under the tiles and covers everything in the barn; the lightly-sprinkled spiders'webs look like perfectly geometric white stars. In front of the house, more than five centuries old, the forty-metre-high lime tree is covered in hoar frost. When the thick fog suddenly disperses, the tree appears in supernatural majesty against the blue sky – but its reign will not last, and it will soon lose its sparkling robe. The birth of a calf. It must be dried with straw, its mother milked and the calf given its first bottle, and then it is ready to start life on its own.

The smell of land freshly-turned by the plough blade – the birds follow us to make the most of the meal of worms thus made available to them: the tidy furrows piled one against the other, promise of new sowing, new reaping to assure our future.

In the low rafters of the stable a couple of swallows have found their nest again fixed firmly against a beam; while we milk, we can watch the constant to-ing and fro-ing of the parents feeding their young – ten days later you see their beaks, a week later their heads, then there they are on the edge of the nest. *Spread your wings to the wind...* One fine day they are no longer there, because they have

taken off to live in freedom, full of an enviable joy of living.
The newborn foal looks like a giraffe perched on its spindly legs, but a few days later, when you see it galloping round the field with its mother, what strength and suppleness are in those legs!
The tortoiseshell cat, who shows us her kittens for the first time – they are already quite big, because she went into hiding to give birth.
The scorching sun, which makes us stream with perspiration and makes us thirsty for cold water. When the hay is as dry as tealeaves, crackling and smelling good, it will keep well.
The fountain fed by a deep spring is generous even in periods of drought, its water appreciated by both man and beast; the birds also take advantage of it, and round its edges bees, wasps and butterflies sip the liquid they so much need.
The wind in the ever-yellowing ears of corn, ready for harvesting – our bread of tomorrow.
The rain showers pattering down on the corrugated iron sheets, moistening the earth, useful and essential for growing everything.
In the evening, when I went to fetch the cattle from the field, the moon's rays made the dew sparkle on the grass, like rays of aluminium.
As well as observing all these lovely things, I still thought, compared things, and wondered about my future. Should I go on working all my life as hard as I did now for so little money? Were there others in society like my boss, who made money because of a *white slave* like me? I found it hard to accept the job of thoroughly combing and grooming the horses every Sunday morning, washing their tails and manes, cleaning out the stables, washing and greasing their wooden hooves, while my boss, a

Parish councillor, went to church. I willingly accepted that it was important to care for the horses, but why not do it on a weekday?
As far as working with the wood was concerned, Paul often worked out the daily total in front of me. It would be between 135 and 140 francs, without the overall expenses, of course. But, if I think of my first pay packet, it meant that, with a single day's takings for wood, he could pay me three-and-a-half months' salary. I didn't dare tell him. As I thought he would dismiss me for not being satisfied, so I thought up all kinds of revenge. I became spiteful and sharp, especially with the cows, and I began breaking the handles of the stable forks, about 15 in all, each of which cost 5 francs 10. On my bad-tempered days, I added a bit of sand to the oilers for the winding machine, and had the same idea for the cartwheel axles. I thought: «He makes too much money from my work, so this will cost him something in equipment».
I began to detest and hate him more and more, and even wondered how I could set fire to the farm without getting caught. I even tried burning the wick used for detonating delayed-action explosives; but the wick left a trace when it burned, so that was not a good idea.
At sixteen, my life was like a bottle of ink. What would be my future, my way out? How would it happen?
It was just at that time that I met René. I had promised our pastor that I would go to the Y.P.s (Young Parishioners). Because of the constant badgering, I told myself that, if I just went once, he would leave me in peace. I thought that the girls in this group seemed really nice, and it was a good reason for going a second time. René was the president of the Y.P.s. He would become my first and best friend, which he still is to this day.



I love the Arolla pine because it is a symbol of the power of life. In Europe, this is the tree which grows at a higher level than the others. Even when it is split right down the middle, its inner vigour allows it to start growing a second crown from a side branch. Survival becomes its reason for living.

René

René didn't like Porchet, even though he was on the Parish Council; and I thought they were hand-in-glove. One day, when he was walking along with me after a meeting, he asked:
«How are you getting on with your boss?»
After several meetings, I told him everything, describing my boss as entirely responsible for my lack of joy, my bitterness and my profound disillusion. I had good reasons to complain, and I gave him one in detail:
Paul had demonstrated to me how to hold a halter rope when leading an animal, and I had said: «Yes, yes; I understand». But the cow I was leading to the fountain that day was in heat and was particularly nervous. We had to go through a doorway where the rough-cast walls were very sharp-edged; I thought I should go first, but the cow was very thirsty and had other ideas, so we got jammed in the door frame. As I had wrapped the rope round my hand, I couldn't get free; my body was naked, so I was scratched from my fingers to my shoulder, right across my shoulderblade. That same day, Paul made me spread manure on a ploughed field; my wounds were smarting and became infected, but Paul's only comment was:
«Maybe next time you'll listen to what I tell you».
I asked René, «Do you think that's Christian ?» If he had answered by quoting the Bible, I was ready to produce

other reasons for my resentment, but he didn't argue on the subject. He told me about himself. His father was a woodcutter, but René had managed (thanks to his Primary school teacher) to get to a commercial school. When he was in his second year there, his father said one night at supper:

«I haven't got enough money any more to feed everybody. What you learn at school is rubbish, so tonight you can pack your bags, and tomorrow you can go out and fix yourself up with a job».

So René found himself working for a fishmonger in Basel. «I resented my father», he said. «But later on I said I was sorry, and we made it up between us. We started talking to each other again».

That made a deep impression on me – it was the first time I had heard a man witnessing to his faith by referring to things he had actually lived, which was something I could understand. That made me open my heart to him, and he asked me this straight question:

«Do you believe in God ?»

«No».

«Do you believe in your conscience ?»

«Perhaps».

Then he went on:

«I will tell you frankly what I think. You see. I sense so much impurity in you, so much attraction to women, that you could well produce several babies by different women».

This was true – he was exactly right, because I would have been prepared to pass on to others the very thing that had hurt me most, namely illegitimacy. This was the first time anyone had dared say so to me.

René also spoke to me about my hatred, saying:

«The more you take revenge, the more dissatisfied you are, and the more you look for revenge. It's a vicious

circle, and, if you continue like this, you will destroy yourself. You'll be done for. But if you take the trouble to listen to your conscience, you will find a way to get out of your mess».
He added simply that I knew where he lived, and that he would always be ready to welcome me if I needed him, even in the middle of the night:
«But if you go on as before, I'm not going to stop you, and I wish you luck. Goodbye».
René was not sentimental: I needed a good shaking, a thorough «ploughing» so that new seeds could be planted in a fresh-turned soil. The object had been achieved, even though it was not at all easy to face myself for the first time. At that point in my life I had little to lose by trying René's method, especially since, by my reckoning, there was very little chance of success.
One Sunday afternoon, I went to sit on a tree trunk at the edge of a clearing, from where I could see everything and be able to move if someone came in my direction. What would I have looked like, sitting there doing nothing ?
After five minutes, I felt astonishingly calm, which was not a normal feeling for me – it was even rather odd. *I need your help.* I heard these four words as if they had actually been spoken. They had been pronounced in a benevolent, kindly way, so I turned round, but there was no-one there. I searched in vain through my memory, but nobody had ever said such words to me. Mother and I loved each other, but she had never said anything like that to me.
I have a plan for the world. You are in the world. I have a plan for you.
It was like opening the shutters of a room where I had been shut in, looking out onto a scene I had never dreamed of. I told myself it was too good to be true – but what if it was true ?

Then, just like the images of a slow-motion film, all the rotten things I had done paraded before me. It was not at all a pretty sight. I was ashamed, and felt that I had to ask forgiveness for my hatred and my spiteful behaviour. It was what I had to do in order to step into that new view seen through the open shutters.
God, it was hard!
It took me three weeks to find the courage to approach Paul. We were standing by a pile of 25 tonnes of potatoes which we were sorting by hand. I asked his forgiveness for my hatred, spoke about the broken tools and all the other things, about thirty altogether; I admitted that, when I had caught his legs with a pitchfork while loading hay, I had done it deliberately - he had limped for a fortnight. Paul was silent for two or three minutes, then said what I knew to be right:
«I'm not responsible for all your negative feelings, because of what you went through before».
Then he added:
«But on my side I ask your forgiveness for that part I am responsible for. I'd like you to stay with us, so that we can learn to live together in a new way».
It was like a sack of ballast falling from my shoulders. I was surprised to find that I liked this man – were we really so different from each other ? It had taken ten minutes, and I had undergone a change – my dross had fallen away, and a deep joy began to envelop me. At the same time, I had seen my boss turn into someone else, expressing his feelings frankly – he too had changed.
I was quite sure that I could not have brought about such a change by myself - it was the start of a simple, practical, effective faith; I had come to God through experience. Henceforward, my reason for living was not only to produce good work, but to create new relationships

between people. It was a seam to prospect for still further – a gold mine, perhaps ?
René didn't ask me to become a member of a church, much less a sect, nor to join a new society. He didn't demand a curriculum vitae or references to join an organisation, nor even ask me to pay a sum of money, either straight away or at a later date. Being basically a man – I could even say a man of the people – this total freedom pleased me very much.
But, as is always the case, it was a decision I must take deep in my inmost self, in the very depths of my being. It was a solemn moment – an oath made before God, like that of a soldier ready to give his life for his country in the hour of danger. Remember that at the time, Switzerland was surrounded by countries at war with each other.
I could just as easily have encountered Marxism – I would have believed its theory sincerely, its atheistic approach to solving problems. In their eyes, I would have had nothing to lose. Instead of that, René had suggested something else and, what is more, I had already seen its effectiveness. Everything had become different with Paul, my boss. We worked just as hard, but I could tell him what I was thinking as we went along. He bought bottles of mineral water and orangeade to quench our thirst; but what quenched it best was the lovely, cold water from the fountain. He gave me my pay rises without my asking him, and I also discovered the reason why we had to work so hard and earn as much as possible. Paul confided to me that, before his marriage, he had been guarantor for a friend who had gone bankrupt, and that there was still a large amount to repay. We grew close to each other, to the point of mutual transparency and understanding.

René introduced me to other people who were motivated by the same outlook on life as he had. They liked to meet in homes, and there were always extra chairs, in case anyone cared to join them. Larger meetings, known as «house parties», would be held in hotels; the first one I attended, on the 3rd and 4th of April, 1944, took place at the Hotel de la Forêt du Chalet-à-Gobet, about a mile from the place where I worked. Anyone who wanted was able to speak freely – I was immediately struck by the easy way in which they shared personal experiences, often humorously, and no-one interrupted them. I found I was not the only one seeking God's will in my life. It was very encouraging. There must have been about thirty people, including René Thonney. I remember also Jules and Jacqueline Fiaux, Jules and Marguerite Rochat; there was also a very nice young lady, Lucie Perrenoud, who was the daughter of a big businessman from Bienne. She just sat on the edge of a table and sang a song which she had written to a well-known tune; it was practically my own story:

I am a shepherd of the mountain,
I've always lived up there.
Life is hard and the little you gain
Does not make life better to bear.
I've often thought in the alpine field,
Discouraged and full of chagrin,
That all must change,

At the desk, in the grange,
But where do we begin ?

The boss of the herd tells me
To milk the cows before my food.
The Boss up there in Heaven asks me,
«When will you change for the good?»

Religion was not my concern in life,
Though I really respected it.
I thought it was for any old wife,
Not those who suspected it.
But my neighbour in the pasture
Became so different
That I said that I too
Would like to be new.
It was worth the effort to try.

The boss of the herd tells me
To milk the cows before my food.
I asked my Boss in Heaven where to begin,
And He told me where I should.

Five months later, there was another meeting at the Hotel Monney at Montreux where there were people from all over Switzerland and from various backgrounds. I felt God's presence strongly from the very start, in the same way as when I had been seated on the tree trunk, but on a much broader scale. This gathering of people represented a force on the move: and I, with my one small experience, was part of it. So I was not travelling along the right road alone. This point was illustrated by four young ladies perched on a painter's ladder, who were acting out the Maurice Chevalier song: *From mason to mason, from house to house, from*

workshop to workshop.... to this day, I can still hear them singing.
It was the first time I had set foot inside such a hotel. I was afraid of tripping up over the carpets, yet the atmosphere was not at all formal, and everyone was open and sincere. Jules Fiaux, the businessman I had met at the Chalet-à-Gobet, remarked that, though my hands were clean, my nails certainly weren't; it was the first time I was aware that nails had any importance.
During the meal I thought «It's mad, our waitress is asked to do a whole lot of things while we just sit here. Why not help her ?» I got up and went to the washrooms to fill up the water jug, as if I were going to the fountain. When I came back, I thought I detected smiles all round the table – which just showed how uncouth I still was.
The hostilities of 1939-45 finally ended, and bridges, roads and whole towns needed to be rebuilt on the silent ruins. But the most important thing was to rebuild trust between men who, only yesterday, had been enemies. On what grounds would they be able to come together ? Those who, over the years, had met at Chalet-à-Gobet, Montreux, and in other Swiss-German areas, decided to meet at Interlaken at Easter 1946. There were to be 250 of us. Did we want to offer a centre for reconciliation to the peoples of Europe? Were we prepared to make our contribution to the reconstruction of Europe and of the world by dedicating the best of ourselves, our time and our money ?
Faced with this immense task, I felt like a small boy, but, at the same time, what I had experienced in my own life made me certain that I had a part to play. I said yes wholeheartedly, as did all the others.

My father

My mother was very thrifty: when I was eight years old, she took me with her once to town, and we were standing in front of an enormous building:
«What's that?» I asked.
«That's a bank, where you put money in or take it out».
There were people waiting at the counter; we stood in the queue, and others joined on after us. Mother turned round and saw that my father was just behind us.
«Does he know who I am?» he asked.
«No, but you can tell him, if you want.»
My father was a champion boxer, but he didn't have the courage to say to me, «I'm your father.»
Two years later, Mother and I were crossing the Place Saint-François, where the public transport systems converge, and she suddenly said:
«Take a good look at that man on the pedestrian crossing?»
«Yes. Who is it?»
«We'll talk about it quietly later, and I'll tell you then».
Once we got back to the house, she said that for some time she had been looking for an opportunity to talk to me.
«The man we saw is your real father».
I said to myself, «So that's the coward, the swine. I feel like smashing a bottle over his head from behind. If I'd

had a normal family I wouldn't have had to suffer. It's his fault».

But to Mother I simply said that it didn't affect me one way or the other – it was like getting to know a stranger.

When I was twelve, my father contacted Mother again – after an unhappy marriage, he had divorced, and Mother agreed to see him from time to time because, deep down, she felt that, if things worked out, it would give me my father back again.

It was just at the time when the situation in my adoptive family had deteriorated, and I had taken refuge at Mother's after Albert's disgusting behaviour. Mother must have telephoned my father, because next morning, when we got off the train together at Lausanne to take the train to Lutry, my father was on the platform.

It was the first time I had really met him: he greeted me perfunctorily, as if we had seen each other just a few hours previously, then launched into a great speech on queers, insisting it be reported. There was a lot of «*I*» in what he said. Mother reminded him that she was the one with parental responsibility, and that she would take me to Lutry before she took such a step that same day.

My first impression was that my father was all mouth and no heart.

The three of us met more and more frequently, but it was three years before he decided to regularise things, and my parents were married a few months before I left school. My father had always recognised verbally that I was his son, but now he did so officially: he hadn't done so earlier because he would have had to accept responsibility for me and pay my mother a regular sum of money.

I was rather clumsy in the way I announced my change of name to my class teacher at school. As we were soon going to be thrown into adult life, our teacher took great

pains to explain to us by example our right to vote. He had prepared electoral cards, on which our names were written in rounded letters – the candidates' list consisted of all the boys in the class. When he gave the cards out I was embarrassed, and said:
«There's a mistake. I'm not called that any more».
I had to explain that, up till then, I had used my mother's name, and that she was not married; but, she and my real father were married last Saturday over there (pointing to l'église des Croisettes which we could see through the window):
«My father has accepted me, and now I have his name, Henry».
The class teacher was very tactful he said, «Now there's a good example. It's like when a women marries a man. Her civil status changes.»
He went to his desk to make out a new card in his best handwriting, and the lesson went on. At break, there were all sorts of questions:
«Who is your father?»
«Why did he disown you for so long?»
«Is he rich?»
«Do you like him?»
«Was your mother a whore?»
«Are you going to live with them?»

I was living at Paul Porchet's farm and in February 1944 I left it to join the recruiting school; four months later, at the age of nineteen and a half, at their invitation, I went to live with my parents for the first time.
Without my knowledge, my father had been setting up a job for me. He was in charge of the disinfection[1] services

1 «Le service de désinfection» – these men remove smells, dead animals, wasps'nests, rats, etc, using chemical products – not only in the streets.

of the city of Lausanne, which were under the authority of the police. With his boss's collusion, he worked things so that the post of assistant-driver to the disinfector was to be restored; he asked me to apply, and told me what tender to offer so that it was below the others. I was taken on, but I needed my own van, and I had a thousand francs in savings. Mother lent me the rest out of hers, and in a year I had paid it all back.

From that moment I was my own boss, but at the same time I became my father's workman. I earned five times what I had been earning in the country, for a lot fewer hours'work per week. I had some free time, so I took up evening classes, to get a district cleansing certificate – it's the only paper qualification I have to my name.

My father also saw advantages for himself in the situation – he could leave me alone to get on with the cleansing jobs while he went off to talk with his friends over a few glasses of *white wine*[2]; but when he came back he would tell me off for not finishing the work.

He was becoming alcoholic, and getting more and more irritable. His negligence worried me.

My contract stipulated that I had to provide a replacement whenever I was away doing military service: instead of that, my father agreed to do my work at these times, for less pay than I would have had to give a replacement – but this was added to his district employee's salary. Since he didn't have a van, he used mine, which he used both for work and his own trips, and the expenses were not very well shared out. The one sure thing was that he was never out of pocket.

It wasn't easy to get on with my father – he wanted to control me, even in my personal life, and make me feel

2. «Trois décis de vin blanc» – A Vaudois usually drinks the local white wine. He may order «Un petit blanc», «Un déci», «Deux décis», etc.

that he was my father. I sometimes reacted quite sharply, because up to that point I had always managed on my own to run my life and earn a living. At twenty years of age, I didn't need any gratuitous advice. I could have done with his help during my adolescence, but I hadn't received even a postcard or a single franc in pocket money. He gave me no money at all during his whole life, and that's the way I preferred it to be.

Bit by bit, I realized that my bitterness was poisoning our relationship. I spoke to René about it. He helped me to realise that I was becoming an obstacle to any kind of understanding. I had discovered with my old boss what the word «sorry» can accomplish – why was it so difficult with my father? He would say to me:

«You say that you worked hard when you were little. Other people have done the same – I did, too».

Or:

«You were a farm-hand; so what? You had to do something». And I would answer:

«I would much rather have worked with you and for you, together as a family, and not for other people».

To which he wouldn't say anything.

Oh, yes, I really resented him for having let me down, and for not giving a decent allowance to my mother.

René made the following observation:

«Since you think that he is 90% wrong, why don't you say sorry for your little 10%?»

Sorry – it was practically a magic word, but it seemed so hard to pronounce. What if he burst out laughing? Yet it could be that I was witholding the key to our understanding.

Finally, and humbly, I decided to risk it:

«I will try, father, not to reproach you all the time for the past. Help me».

He reacted very badly:

«Shut up, or I'll clout you with my fist».
But, during the next few weeks we began to tolerate each other better, to respect each other, and even to laugh together. The ice was thawing very slowly, but it was thawing.
I discovered that, in certain aspects of my character, and in my physical strength, I was like my father. But I had accepted honesty and respect for women. That was the difference between us. I began to judge and criticise him when he didn't act very properly or when he took advantage of others. I realised with horror that I had become selfrighteous. I, who hated the gossipy church women, I had turned into one myself. I waited for a suitable day to admit this to my father:
«I'm an idiot to have gone that far», I told him. This time, there was almost no reaction – not on the surface, anyway.
At that particular time, as the war was over, people from all over Switzerland were trying to set up a reconciliation centre for all the peoples of Europe. They had decided, by combining all their resources, to acquire the former Caux Palace, which no longer functioned as a hotel. René and I often discussed this, because we too wanted to take part in any way we could in this enterprise. As early as 1946, René had let his sister replace him at the post office in Chalet-à-Gobet, so that he could participate in setting up the first conference during the summer months. But what could I do?
While I was earning my corporal's stripes in September 1947 I had the very clear thought that it was the right time for me to take up full-time work at Caux. As I had already been thinking about it for a year, I wrote to the Lausanne city authorities that very same day giving three months notice to end my contract with them.
My father's reaction was extremely violent. He had found me a good job, with the chance of becoming a municipal

employee. But he too would be losing a lot of his perks. He called me all the names under the sun, then calmed down and tried to be pleasant.

Faced with my quiet determination, he set up a meeting with the head of the sanitation services, Dr Messerli, who had done some psychology and had occasionally looked after patients at the Cery psychiatric hospital. At the outset of our meeting he was very gentle. In answer to his questions, I said that I was happy with the work and with the money he paid me. I took the opportunity to thank him for his letter offering me a 25% rise as from the beginning of the following year. However, one by one, all his arguments to make me change my mind fell on deaf ears. So he became edgy; he stood up, and walked around his office as he talked to me. Finally he burst out: «You're a very stubborn, narrow-minded young man. Your idealism will be like a flash in the pan. You won't listen to mature people like your father and myself. In any case, what good will your faith be? Will it feed you?»

«Doctor», I replied, «the faith which I have at this moment won't stop me making mistakes, but, if I do make any, it will give me the strength to pick myself up again». «The meeting is over», he shouted angrily. «Get out». I offered him my hand, but he kept one hand on the door knob and the other behind his back. I wondered whether perhaps psychology was a science which was used to impose one's point of view more effectively on others, or whether, on the other hand, it could help you to put yourself in another's place to help them to develop.

My job ended on the 31st of December. I was still living with my parents. As soon as January came, my father, who was still very annoyed, threw me out daily. I had to seek refuge with friends so that I could dispose of my cleansing equipment before going up to Caux.

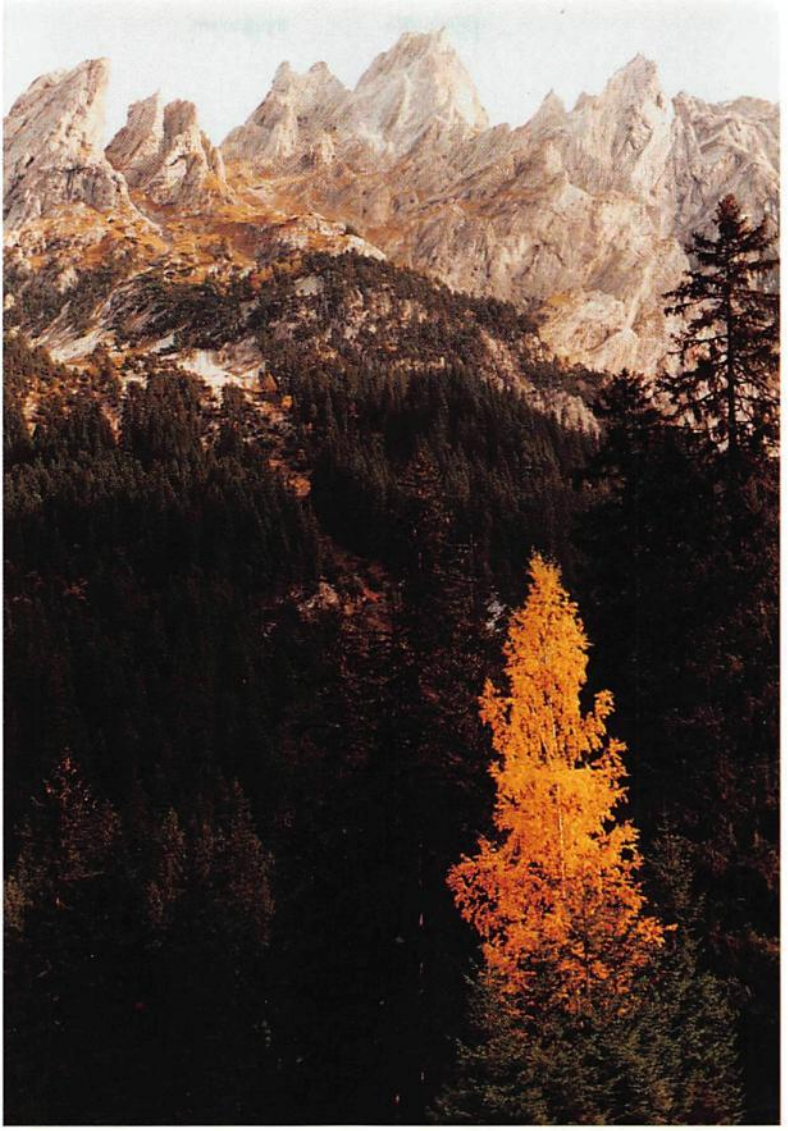
My father had been poisoned by the disinfectant products he worked with – he should never have touched alcohol. Three times he asked me to sign the pledge with him at the Blue Cross. It was always after the end of a binge when he had given in to the drink so much that he made himself ill. On the the third occasion he wanted to sign for a year, but I gently suggested that he sign for a shorter, renewable period. «What do you take me for? You want to discourage me now?»

We signed up one morning at about 9.30, and, as we came out, he said in a half-hearted way:

«I'm leaving you now. I don't need a shabby thing like you with me in the bistros where I'm going to settle a few little debts».

He hadn't returned for lunch by midday. At about two o'clock I went back into town in my van. Suddenly I caught sight of my father. He was swaying so much that he needed the whole width of the pavement, and part of the roadway, to make his way homewards. I helped him into my van. At home, I took his arm to get him upstairs and put him into bed. He didn't say a word all day long, but next morning he sneered mockingly at me:

«I caught you out. Now I'll see if you can last out for a



In the immense expanses of the Schwartzwaldalp forest, a solitary birch, touched by sunlight, lights up the darkness. The Child of Bethlehem seemed a fragile light to light up all men. Yet it is He who teaches us to forgive, to stretch out a hand rather than shake our fist.

year.» Whenever I (who knew when to stop) was drinking a glass with him, he would carry on, and, naturally, I was the one who made him drunk... He would shout at his wife: «What a rotten kid you've got there».
My attitude couldn't have helped much. On our national festival day, August the 1st 1948, I had the really annoying idea of giving up alcohol completely – I kept to it, but I didn't tell him anything about it.
I wanted to pay my parents a surprise visit on Christmas Eve 1949; they had no telephone, and Mother was delighted to see me. She said:
«He's gone out. He's drinking heavily again, and he's very snappy. Be careful when you open the door to him.»
At quarter past midnight the door to the block of flats closed violently – kicked or slammed shut, probably. Because I knew his methods as a former champion boxer, I took the precaution of holding my left arm over my stomach. His punch was a good one, but he only broke the glass of my wristwatch. In a burst of anger, he called me all the worst kind of names he could think of, the mildest being thief, liar, homosexual. He suddenly stopped after a quarter of an hour:
«Haven't you anything to answer? Say something».
«I think you could be the happiest man in the world if you...»
I didn't have time to finish my sentence. This time he was off again, against the Church, kids, Moral Rearmament. All the tittle-tattle he had picked up in the cafes was served up boiling hot, with fierce threats punctuated by thumping of his fist on the table, Suddenly he stopped:
«Well, for God's sake, say something».
I repeated my opinion:
«You could be the happiest man...»
He fell silent, and I saw tears rolling down his cheeks. It was the very first time I had seen my father moved. It was very obvious, and touching. Was he shedding crocodile

tears, or was he sincere? What if his heart were at last starting to function again?
He took me by the forearm, gripping it hard, looked me straight in the face and asked:
«How did you manage to give up drinking?»
Now I was the one who was speechless. How did he know? I had never told him, and he couldn't have found out from Mother. Fortunately, he added:
«I made enquiries in the bistros where we used to go together. Even up at the Col de Jaman they told me, «Your son doesn't drink any more».»
His explanation gave me time to prepare my answer. If I told him it was because of God, that would set him off again... He soon broke the silence:
«Are you going to explain?»
«Father, we all have temptations; with me it's women – when I see one who attracts me I want to go further than just looking at her. So I pray, then the tension and the temptation pass. Everything then falls back into place.»
Quite humbly, he asked:
«Could it work for me too if I prayed?»
«Do you want us to pray together? Let's go to the foot of my bed».
When we got there, he went down flat on his stomach.
«If you want us to pray, it should be on our knees. It's a struggle between doing your will or God's. Your body should be broken like your will».
With a struggle, he makes it to his knees, then says:
«You're in the Big Boss's good books, you pray and I'll listen».
To which I reply:
«I pray for myself, you must pray for yourself». I had no sooner said «Amen» than it was as if I had released a spring – he was on his feet in next to no time. «I thought you wanted to pray...»

He hesitated, then got back on his knees and turned his head towards me.
«I don't know how to pray, What should I say?» Now it was my turn to be moved – he had probably never been taught, or at least too long ago.
«Well, you're not going to tell Him the fable of the crow and the fox. What do you feel?»
In his disgust with himself, he slammed his fist down on the bedspread, which raised a cloud of dust.
«I'm fed up with it all».
«Well, you must say so».
Turning his head to the wall, he said:
«I hate bigots who say *my God, Lord.* Since You're listening, I tell You that I'm really, really fed up».
He turned his head towards me again:
«How do I go on?»
«What do you want?»
«For things to change».
That was his way of praying, sentence by sentence, right up to the end. He also asked:
«Make me happy and less grumpy».
Then, finally:
«I'm not going to say amen, because You've heard me and understood».
Then he went calmly off to bed.
But I couldn't sleep at all. I had just been the cause of and witness to an awakening of conscience and a change in my father. I had so often wondered if he could be saved from himself. The church bells had stopped ringing their Christmas chimes for some time, but in my heart they rang out again, especially the repeated clang of the great bell. On that evening *Peace on earth* was not an abstract idea – it was men opening themselves to change.
My father kept it up for five months, then, after a really good drunken bout, he kept up again for several months,

sometimes a few weeks. Eventually, he had no more strength to resist. Two years later, I arrived home unexpectedly – he wasn't angry, even though he was on one of his binges. I asked:
«Shall we go to the foot of the bed?»
His reply was instantaneous and very clear:
«No. You taught me the telephone trick with the Big Boss. I don't need you.»
Later on, he had serious hallucinations. One day, for example, he came to Epalinges by taxi to tell me that Mother had committed suicide. He was sobbing, and I believed him. Fortunately, it was all in his mind. That same day he had to be detained in a psychiatric hospital, then he underwent eight months of detoxification in a special institution.
Mother and I did what we could for him when he came back home. We tried everything. Since he was an excellent mycologist, able to identify some five hundred varieties of mushroom, I took him to the Val d'Hérens, in Valais, where I knew there was a place for him to pick great quantities of «tricholoma nudum», the so-called bluefoot mushroom. It was the day of the Jeûne Fédéral[3], and I had specially hired a little car, but I didn't know that in Valais on that day the bars didn't open until 4 pm. He thought that we had deliberately chosen that day, to stop him having a drink, so he refused to pick a single mushroom. I realised that his great passion for mushrooms had been superseded by this other passion which had such a fiendish hold over him, which took control of him more and more often.
Some time later, he drank even more than usual and as he was coming out of a bistro, he fell in a very busy

3. «Le Jeûne Fédéral» – Originally a day of abstinence and prayer. Now this is only maintained by Church groups, etc. – for the rest it is a holiday.

street. A car driver just missed him, and went to the police station to complain. That same evening my father was back in the psychiatric hospital for three weeks. But it was our fault, of course, because we had upset him at home. Like all alcoholics, he always blamed others for his problems. At the age of 73 he died of an acute attack of rheumatism; his whole body was stiff, except his eyelids, his eyes and his lips. I was placing a face flannel on his forehead to wipe away the sweat from round his eyes. His speech was just a grunting sound – nobody could understand him any more. He had become so sensitive that the vibration from the telephone bell made him groan. After three days of suffering, there was an expression of love in his eyes and he smiled, a smile such as we had not seen for fifteen years, because he hated us for having kept him shut up. Had he used the telephone link between man and God? What power can give peace in such suffering? He died very peacefully. It had only taken the small sacrifice on my part to give up drinking, to be able finally, on a single memorable occasion, to talk to him about our Creator. No long speech, no facile advice, just a practical way of opening his heart to a wider dimension.

**Reflection on the death of my father,
to all those who expressed their sympathy**

Why have such anger, what the gain?
Why by such feeling make such pain?
Why have so vengeful a desire,
Consumed by suffering, like a fire?

Why wait until the hour of death,
When life may no more abound,
To accept completely, with each breath,
The true light you have found?

Why shake your fist in angry mood,
Instead of helping, doing good?
Why let your heart be dry and bare,
When its longed-for greatness was always there?

Have you seen how the morning dew
Can bathe the leaves in its light?
When, suddenly, they are pierced through
By the sun's rays – what a sight!

Just so the tiniest water pool
Sparkles bright with diamond's shine,
The ordinary, for the briefest time,
Transformed to beautiful.

I had never seen such smiles before,
With which Dad's face was beaming.
What a different posture for my memory's store
I assure you, I was not dreaming.

One drop of water needed only one ray.
But something was needed of greater power
To relax Dad's mouth in his final hour.
To what, to whom, did he say yea?

Was it to God, so many times denied?
What source can so abundantly provide,
In deepest suffering, peace and calm,
A hopefulness, a quiet balm?

I live, not for tomorrow, but today.
My destiny is closely linked with others.
It is the Father's will I must obey,
And show concern for all, who are my brothers.

Why try to shun our being used as token,
Even though the heart with hurt is broken?
Good Lord! It is well worth the effort today,
If only our Lord we will obey.

Towards a new world

So in February 1948 I was taken on permanently at Caux. A friend came to meet me at the station, and we went into the main hall of the Caux-Palace, where I met one of the founders of the new centre, the engineer Robert Hahnloser from Zurich. I regarded him as a VIP, so I said very respectfully:
«Good morning, sir».
He smiled, took me by the shoulder, and said:
«I shall need you as much as you will need me. Call me Robert».
I discovered again the atmosphere I had already encountered two years previously when I had asked my employer for leave to take part in the first conference at Caux. At that time I had been responsible for the luggage team. One of the people working with me was Ismail Hassan, a cousin of King Farouk of Egypt, who had voluntarily offered to help me. He had been brought up in Switzerland and spoke fluently our four national languages, amongst others. When he began making jokes in Swiss-German, those who understood fell about laughing, and so did he. He worked very hard, in spite of his asthma which slowed him down when he loaded the luggage on to the departing trains. For a prince, he had an astonishing spirit of service.
Frank Buchman had arrived with an international team of

four hundred people. The Swiss who were there, and the people who had already arrived from neighbouring countries, welcomed the newcomers at the main entrance. It was fine weather; the flags were flapping gently in the wind, and the spontaneous yodellers, dressed in regional costume, were a great success.
It was lunchtime, and soon the crowd moved towards the dining room.
Frank Buchman was still strolling in front of the house, with a friend, and I was busy unloading several hundred suitcases. From the trolley, I was keeping my eye on this man I had heard so much about; when he drew level with me, he stopped and said jovially:
«Hello there. What's your name? You've got a tough job there».
I was amazed that a man of his standing should be interested in a luggage-porter. A year later, I was doing exactly the same thing when Frank passed by the trolley which I was unloading.
He said: «Hello, Jacques. I'm pleased to see you again.»
I was bowled over. How could he possibly remember my name when he met thousands of people?
Buchman's apparently simple idea was that every person can receive thoughts, directives and inspiration from his Creator. Our conscious mind is a listener but, our nature being at times perverse, all the messages it receives are not always necessarily good. He therefore suggested that they should be assessed according to four criteria – absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute selflessness and absolute love.
At first in this great gathering of people I felt really small, humble, sometimes even overwhelmed. Later, when I was climbing high in the mountains, I had the same sense of being a tiny grain of sand on a formidable wall of rock and ice. I wondered what place a former farm-hand could

have amongst such people from all countries, some of whom were high-level leaders. There were, in fact, ministers, industrialists who employed tens of thousands of workers, trade unionists like Maurice Mercier, who represented both the male and female textile workers of France. And yet I felt that I was in my right place, because of what God had done for me. My experience was genuine, and it could at times help others. I was a worker ant, not wanting to become the Queen, but content to serve joyfully. Caux was an essential and worthwhile broadening of my thinking and faith.

One day a friend invited me for a trip in his sailing boat – what a difference when he unfurled the sails! I had spent my spiritual life with my sails furled up. I was learning to move forward with sails spread, to let myself go with the wind.

As soon as I arrived in 1948 I had to replace at a moment's notice a friend who was a professional cleaner, and who was leaving the next day with a team for the north of France. I had no experience whatever of cleaning a house as large as that, nor had I ever been responsible for about twenty paid cleaners, who were all older than me. With them, I learned to work, operate the machines of that time, organise the night shift during conferences and work out wages. I saw numerous travelling salesmen, tested their products before buying them. The hardest thing was to find which was the miracle product which didn't leave any smudges on the windows, even when they were cleaned in bright sunlight.

The total cleaning of the two hundred bedrooms, commonrooms, bay windows of the dining room, the hundreds of yards of corridors meant thousands of hours of work for me and my men – but there was also the human side, such as jealousies within the team, and the family problems I got involved in.

After having used the good old-fashioned wax-polish, we received from America some cleaning products with extraordinary resistance, which simplified our life enormously. Because the 450 square metres of parquet flooring in the dining room had been so scrubbed by steelwool pads, the time was coming when it would need to be changed, but, thanks to the new impregnation products, it wasn't necessary. So we used the same method for the thousands of metres of parquet flooring.

I took part in the conference programme whenever I could in my free time. One of the outstanding events for me was the arrival of the first delegation of Germans. I resented and mistrusted them, but I learnt tolerance and open-mindedness. As I spoke with them, I realized what an ideology can mean, what its power and its consequences can be.

Then there were the Africans, with their varied, colourful dress. One night, while I was busy cleaning with some of my men, we were surprised by the sudden appearance of a very tall black man. He asked in a serious voice where the door was, as he wanted to go out into the garden. What could he possibly want to do at three o'clock in the morning? I discovered a few days later what was on his mind. He was the organiser of a youth movement in the ANC (African National Congress) in South Africa, and at the meeting he announced that he had decided to rechannel his revolutionary fervour so that it was not directed against anyone. He was going to devote himself from then on to a programme to draw together all men and all ethnic groups.

I too went to join an international team in the North of France. We were about ten people. Shortly after my arrival I was invited by my friend Braquier to eat mussels, which I had never tasted and which I found strange. I took to them so much that the third time I ate them I developed a huge rash which hung on for weeks. The people I was staying with took great care of me. The man was the personnel manager in a millers' business. After a while, they said: «There is a family who would be very happy to have you from now onwards».
He was a contractor called Jean, with a wife called Jeanne; my name was Jacques, or rather Jacky, so it was very easy. They had three children. The firm employed 113 people, of whom a third were North-Africans. They were putting up about fifty low rent subsidised buildings. There were three huge Pyrenean mountain dogs in the house – when they stood on their hind legs and put their paws on my shoulders, I had to really stand my ground, so as not to be knocked over. It was raining on the day I arrived, so, in order not to stain the carpets, I took my brand-new shoes with non-slip soles down to the cellar. Next morning I could only find the soles, because the rest had been chewed up by the dogs, who no doubt enjoyed it. I had to buy another, much cheaper pair, because I didn't have enough money, but they didn't quite keep out

the water. Yet despite this incident, the dogs and I became quite good friends. So did my new hosts, as you will discover.

It was the custom in the North to let children under three taste beer during meals – when they were older they were even allowed a glass of wine; so, the little Swiss man who only drank water was very amusing for them, and was constantly teased. After a couple of weeks, Jean tried to make me understand that everybody drank alcohol in that region: «It would be easier if you did the same as the others». «No», I answered, «because, if I decided to stop drinking, it was to help my father. I don't want to impose this on anyone else, but I must insist on keeping my promise».

In his firm, Jean had set up open meetings after work hours, to which anyone could go. There were trade unionists, manual and white-collar workers. Every question was debated, and anyone was allowed to have his say. I was invited to several of these meetings. Jean-Marie, big Jean-Marie, was always there. He was not very clever or very well educated, but he had a great heart. He could distinguish the true from the false, and was never afraid to say so, in his own gritty way. I often went to the building site to have my midday snack with him.

One day, Jean said to me:

«Listen, next Tuesday we are having a family gathering at home and I can't invite anyone from outside the family. Don't be offended, but it would be better if you weren't there».

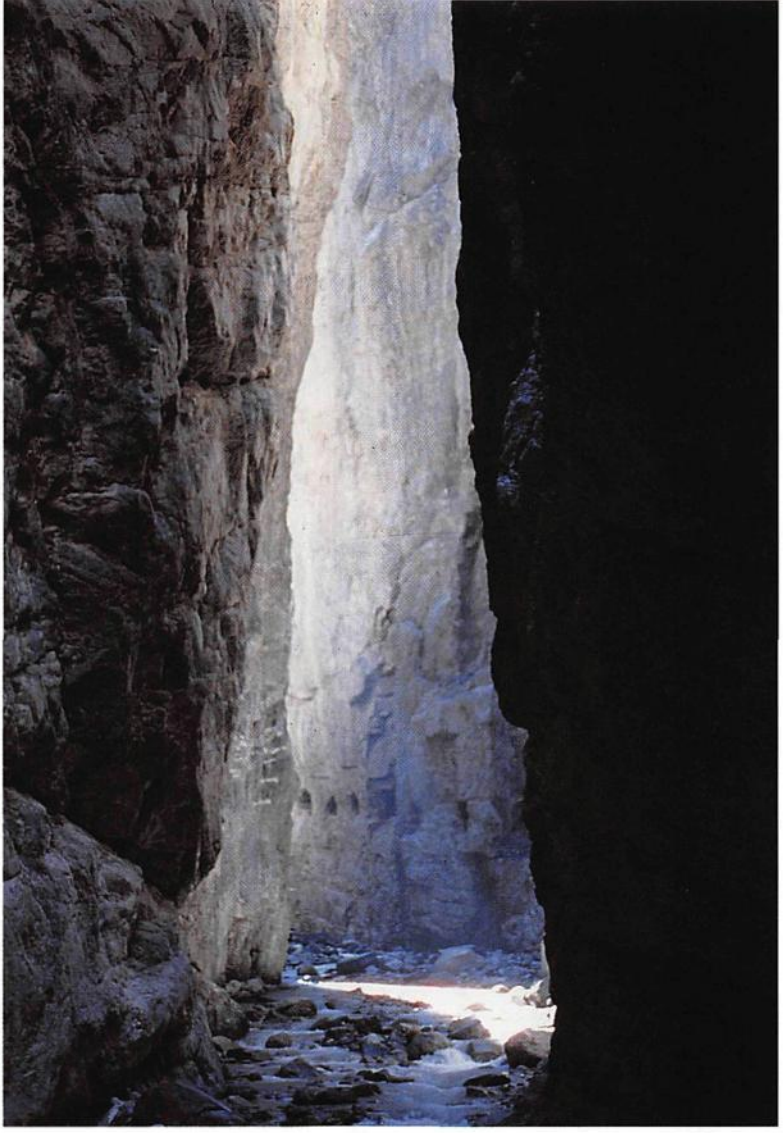
And I said:

«That suits me fine. We're going to the mines next Tuesday and I won't be back before half past eleven».

We went to see an old deep-pit miner, who lived in a little redbrick house, in front of which was some subsidence like a great crater.

«There used to be a house here», he said, wheezing noisily because of the silicosis, «fortunately, ours is still standing».
The inevitable fate just made him laugh.
Once the seams are used up they are not shored up, and they gradually collapse. We went into the house, and halfway through the evening we heard a dull explosion below us which made the window panes shake.
«Is it a seam collapsing?»
«No, it's the shift changing over», explained the old man. Just before they leave the cutting face, 1800 metres down, the team coming off duty prepares the fuses to explode the rock face. Most of the dust will have been sucked away before the new team arrives on duty.
He spoke slowly; for me and for my friends, who had come from the world outside, it was an initiation into the life of this mining region.
We left by car. My friends dropped me off at Lille, where I had to take the *Monji*, the tram which links with the suburban transport. But, when I wanted to buy my ticket, I didn't have enough money to get me to my destination. I emptied out what I had, and said to the booking clerk: «Take me as far as you can for that».
«Fine. That will take you to Croisée-la-Roche». There were still five kilometres after that. I had a lovely hat I had been given. It was navy-blue. And I had a mac. The weather was awful, very windy and rainy, and after a quarter of an hour I was soaked – the water ran down my shoulders, my back, my thighs, my legs, and into my shoes. When I reached the house, at about half past midnight, I saw the light still on in the lounge, so I would have to get past unnoticed. First of all, I called the dogs, who were outside; they knew my voice, and I soon had all three all over me – luckily, they didn't bark.
I opened the front door quietly; there were bursts of

laughter and a great jazz music coming from the gramophone. I could see myself full-length in the great mirrors at the foot of the hall stairs – my hat had lost its colour, and there were blue stains on my face: I looked just like a clown. My shoes squelched as I went upstairs. Just as I was about to push my bedroom door open, the lounge door opened. It was Jean:
«Ah, Jacky, listen. This is a good moment to introduce you to my family».
I said:
«Just look at the state I'm in. I'm dripping from head to foot».
He insisted, so I said:
«Let me at least put a comb through my hair».
There were about thirty people in the lounge; on the glass table there were a lot of empty bottles and they were up to the champagne stage. Jean announced:
«In honour of our Swiss friend, we'll open a new bottle of champagne».
Everyone was very well dressed, the men in evening jackets and bow ties, the ladies in low-cut gowns. It was a glittering occasion, but they were all a bit tipsy.
«Jean», I whispered in his ear. «Don't go and get a bottle. You know I don't drink».
Yet he went down to the cellar, and Jeanne went to get a glass. He went round the glasses on the table and I said:
«Don't give me any».
But this joker took the filled glass and gave it to his wife, so that she could offer it to me. I couldn't very well refuse, so I said: *Cheers! Cheers!* To which everyone responded by toasting me and raising their glasses to their lips. I put mine down on the table. There was sudden total silence – even the music stopped. Jean turned white with anger and said: «You people, and you above all, have come to France to bring your fine moral ideas,



A decision which touches us at the deepest point, like a canyon in our life. In the Gorges-d'en-bas, at Grindelwald, in autumn the sun lights up the bottom of the canyon for only seven minutes each day.

but you have no idea at all of good manners. What do you want to teach us? I'm ashamed of you. It's just not done. If I'd known, I'd never have invited you into my house».
I was caught off guard. I said a quick silent prayer, asking what I should answer. Then I said:
«Jean, and Jeanne too, you know very well why I don't drink, and you can tell your family, if you like. But if your friendship, Jean, means that I have to break a promise which I made in all sincerity, then I prefer to do without your friendship. I'm sorry if I've caused you any problem. It would be better if I left».
I went out, up to my room, and started to pack my things. It didn't take long. I was just putting my razor in and was about to close the top of the case when there was a knock at the door; it was Jean, very upset:
«Forgive me. We got carried away. You took me by surprise, because I thought you would take just a tiny drop. Don't go. Besides, where would you go at this time of night?»
«I wouldn't have liked to trouble my friends. I would have gone to the police station. There are cells there for tramps and criminals. I would have gone there, that's all.»
He and Jeanne again apologised next morning and we were happy to be together again.
Very shortly after that came the very grave news (which would have serious social implications) that the Pinay government had fallen; the government which had lent money to people like Jean so that they could build houses. There would be no more subsidies, therefore no more work.
Jean called his usual team together to talk to them about the situation; he wondered if his workers had any suggestions to offer. At first sight, he would not be able to avoid laying off some of his staff.

When I got up the morning after the meeting, I looked through the window at the weather, and I saw the boss's Citroen oddly parked. Its rear was on the roadway, but the front, on the pavement, was touching the garden wall. It had braked suddenly. I wondered what on earth had happened. Then I heard a slight movement at the bottom of the stairs. It was Jeanne, in a blue dressing gown and looking as if she had not slept. She was furious, and said:

«Jacky, have you seen it?»

«Yes. I've seen the car».

«They made fun of you the other night, and yet, instead of trying to find a solution to our problems, all they managed to do yesterday was get as drunk as Poles. They came in completely pickled».

Then she said:

«Could you come to lunch? I've got some things to say to my husband. I'd like to have you there because otherwise, with his glib tongue, he'll answer me back too quickly.»

I was there at midday. The children ate first, and were then asked to go into the playroom. Then Jeanne could say to Jean what was on her heart:

«You've all been cowards, and you more so than anyone. You could at least have set an example. A whole evening, for nothing more than killing hope».

He opened his mouth to try to answer, but she cut him short: «No, don't speak. Don't make excuses for yourself. First of all I want to finish saying what I feel. We, who've accumulated money by your work, should be able to get through this crisis without too many problems; but those who haven't got any savings, what are they going to do when they've no work? In your drunkenness, you didn't think of that – you, who claim to live for the good of others. Well, I'm not going to accept that sort of atti-

tude, because it doesn't agree with my faith. I will always be your wife, I'll take care of the meals, the washing and our three children. But I am making a kind of vow of poverty. I shall sell the Deux-Chevaux and the three dogs. I shall do without a cleaning lady. I won't buy any more new clothes for a while, and I shall devote all my spare time to the wives of our workers. I'm prepared to start knitting woollies for their babies, or babysit if one of them finds a job. And I suggest that you, Jean, go to the local church where the priest blessed our marriage, get down on your knees before the cross, and stay there till God inspires you. Then you can speak, if you want.»

Jean stood up without a word, and came back at about five o'clock. His face looked different and, full of emotion, he said to his wife:

«I think I can see clearly now. You're right. I am going to make offers for houses and villas, without working out what profits I'm entitled to first, so that our prices will be the lowest. The main thing is to give bread to the workers. I'll get the team together for tonight, and there won't be any alcohol.»

Jeanne simply said to him that she too was very moved. In the evening he announced his intention to fight to protect everybody, and then a series of suggestions were made. Some said that they were prepared to work 50 kilometres away from Monday till Friday, if their transport was guaranteed. Someone said that the farmers needed help to harvest the sugar beet.

They would accept lower pay – the main thing was to put bread on the table.

During the days which followed, Jean contacted agricultural centres and co-operative societies, to try to find temporary jobs. Then one day he had a telephone call from the priest of a neighbouring village:

«Listen, Monsieur Jean, the plans for our new church

have been ready for years. At last we've got enough money to start the work. I'd like to give it to you. When can you begin?»

«This afternoon,» was the immediate response.

When Jean put the phone down, he looked fifteen years younger.

For years he had been wanting to get a new crane, to allow him to build more than three storeys high. This was the opportunity. He would buy the crane to build the church, then it would belong to the society.

The better-equipped rival firms did not look very favourably on Jean's sudden good fortune; they tried to outbid him and make him invest beyond his means – but the outcome was not what they had expected.

Jean had developed an incurable disease, probably a cancer. Right at the end, he again wanted to invite his friends, his neighbours and competitors. One fine Sunday afternoon, he told them:

«This is to say farewell to you. I don't think I have much longer. I have nothing against anyone. I am going in peace. As a sign of the communion amongst ouselves and with God, I suggest we sing together a song which everyone knows.»

Jean died while they were singing...

Jeanne decided to carry on the work, and became the manager of the business. It seems that at one point she had five hundred workers.

To India and back

In 1954 I accepted a proposal to go to India and Sri Lanka with a team of about fifty people. We were travelling with three plays, a new way of presenting a message. I was one of the stagehands.

My friend Jules Rochat, who, with his wife Marguerite, had been a missionary in India, wanted to see me before I left. He told me about the beliefs and way of life of the people there, and also about their fatalism. This helped me to fit more easily into their rhythm of life and their customs. As he left, Jules said mischievously:

«I've got a little present for you. Here are the sandals and colonial helmet I used to wear in India. Take them. I'll be pleased to think that you're the one who will wear them as you carry out the work which we began, but you'll do it your way. And you'll also find that the English you learned will be useful to you...»

When I was twenty, Jules had given me a psychotechnical test to find out my aptitudes. «Your muscles are well developed», he had told me at the end, «but you'll have to develop that as well,» he added, tapping his forehead. «I give English lessons, and a new course starts next Tuesday. Come and join us.»

I had burst out laughing and answered, as a joke:

«That will be very useful when I do the muck-spreading for Paul Porchet.»

Yet I had taken his course, and, to my great astonishment, I caught on to it. It even made sense to me.
In India our team performed one of its plays on the tea plantations of Nilgereese. The Maharajah and Maharani of Mysore were in the audience. At the end of the performance they applauded the actors, then went up on to the stage to thank those who had worked in the wings and set up the scenery.
I felt close to the ordinary poor people of India. We lived for a time in a house whose whole staff had been lent to us. Every day, a woman from the Untouchable caste cleaned the bathroom and toilets, work reserved for her caste. With the help of Tom, the chief «boy», I asked this woman if she would like a photograph of herself. She always looked at the floor while she was attending to the housework, but when I took my camera she stood up straight, proud as a princess. And when I gave her the photo, I had great trouble stopping her from kissing my feet. After that, she dared to look at me when I greeted her.
Unfortunately, I fell ill after a few months. As well as dysentery, I caught trichocephalus, a touch of malaria and a sort of sleeping sickness. I had to return to Europe to get over this. Throughout my stay I had worn Jules Rochat's helmet – it was useful in protecting me, not only from the sun, but from the snakes lying in wait in the trees. Although it was a symbol of a past epoch, the colonial helmet was still widely worn by the whites; it was also very much coveted by the natives. When I left I gave mine to one of the boys – I might have been giving him the moon.
I was sorry to leave that vast country, where I found the people so charming. And when the steamer was moving slowly away from the coast, I felt that I could still hear their plaintive melodies, which had gradually become

familiar to me. Amongst the numerous medical tests I was given on my return was a gaseous encephalograph. Examining the results, the doctor asked whether I had ever had an epileptic fit. I said no. He deduced from this that I did not drink, because it showed in me a clear tendency to this disease, which is stimulated by the absorption of alcohol. I had given up drinking to help my father, and discovered that I had helped myself. What an astounding discovery.

During my crisis periods, I could sleep for thirty-six hours at a stretch; once it was fifty-four hours. I was sweating profusely without having any fever. When I woke up I felt drained of strength. My metabolism needed readjusting, and the doctor suggested that I go back to the country. I went to find my old boss Paul Porchet, and told him:

«I'm so weak that I'm not sure my work will be good enough to earn my keep.»

He looked at me and answered:

«I know you. You're not a malingerer. I'll take you on».

My strength and my stamina gradually returned, but my concentration was not good. I had to cut short my trips down to town for shopping, because my head spun so much, and the traffic panicked me. My calm and poise came back when I returned to the country.

It slowly became clear to me that I could no longer carry on living at the international centre at Caux. Since my health was variable, and I was subject to prolonged sleeping bouts, I could not expect an employer to take me on. So I chose to become an independent gardener. I had to learn as I went along, reading the subject up, asking advice from professionals, but above all observing the laws of nature.

I had learnt a lot from Paul Porchet. He had sent me on pruning courses and for many years I was the one who pruned the trees in the orchard. I could recognise a good

rich soil, and I knew what to do to improve poor ground. I could sow parsley just as well as I could sow corn...
I very soon had fifteen properties to look after. One of them had about fifty fruit trees, not counting the soft fruits. Another had hundreds of different flowers. By the edge of the lake I planted kiwis which, after four years, produced eight hundred succulent fruit. In all, I had six hundred metres of hedge to trim, and in winter, when the old and weak trees had to be cut down, I rediscovered my job as a woodcutter. One of my clients had two hundred rose trees, but the blooms had become very small. I cut them back to ground level, right down to the graft. The owner was furious and said:
«They'll never grow again».
«Don't worry, Madame.»
And in fact, eight weeks later, she said:
«I was wrong. My roses are as beautiful as when they were first planted.»
One day, when I was working on a small property, the neighbour, a doctor-dentist, was sunning himself as usual by the pool. We knew each other and I greeted him from a distance. But on that day he parted the hedge of arbora vitae and said:
«I need a gardener. Would you come and work for me?»
«Unfortunately, I can't. I've already got more than I can cope with.»
«How much do they pay you by the hour?»
When he heard my reply, he said:
«Well, it's simple. Leave them, and I'll give you 20% more». I felt it would be mean to play such a trick on my clients, and I was trying to find a way to tell him when he added: «I could even go to 25%».
«No, it's not that. If I accept your offer, I won't be able to look your neighbours in the face when I meet them in the street. And I can't be bought like a leek in the market.»

«So money doesn't interest you?»
«Yes, but clean money».
«As you like».
And the abora vitae closed up again. like a curtain.
Integrity and sincerity can sometimes shock, but I've noticed that, in general, simple honesty lived out every day creates trust, and can simplify life at the same time.
One of my clients lived in a villa which housed works of art and silverware. One night when she was on holiday, thieves got in and made off with a very good haul. For the twenty-six years that I had been working there I had been entrusted with the key to the property; well, neither the police nor the investigators questioned me. The gardener clearly was completely above suspicion.

Farewell Mother

When my father had to be kept in hospital, and then in a detoxification unit for eight months, Mother was left on her own, which was very hard for her to bear, because she loved her Ernest. I watched her deteriorate, and she was not feeding herself properly, so I suggested going to live with her – she could feed me and would have my company. That was when I left Madame Favrat and her son-in-law Paul Porchet, and when I began gardening work.

Mother was not looking forward to my father's return home; when we visited him he spoke bitterly. He was convinced that it was his wife and son who had had him put away. He was a bit tipsy on the day he came home, talking loudly and banging his fist on the table and against the walls. He stopped suddenly in front of me and yelled:

«This is my home. The lease is in my name. I didn't invite you here – you can leave tomorrow». Then Mother replied in her quiet but firm voice: «If Jacky goes, I'm going with him. It's up to you.»

He was lost for words, and went off to bed. So I stayed.

Mother said to me shortly after my father's death:

«I don't know how many years I have left to live, but I do know that I feel as if I'm starting my summer holidays. It's so nice not to have to worry all the time, to

feel safe, to say just what I feel, and to enjoy being happy.»
We could have friends at home, which had never been possible before.
I would take my holidays in October, when the main gardening work was over, and we would go to the mountains together. She introduced me to l'Engadine, the great valley of the Grisons, where the village houses are built close together for better protection against the rigours of the climate. The mountain folk there have learned how to use the long winters by forming choirs, producing plays or doing wood-carving. We went regularly into the Valais, in the heart of Switzerland and the Bernese Oberland. During the holidays I would forbid Mother even to peel a potato or wash the dishes:
«You do it all year for me; you're on holiday now».
She would tell everyone:
«This awful lad, he doesn't even want me to do the cooking, even when I've nothing else to do».
She was tireless; at 75, she could still walk for eight hours and be in the kitchen next morning at half-past six, while I was lighting up the wood stove.
«The sky is magnificent, have you seen it? Where shall we go today?»
«We'll go round our mushroom places. That'll take four hours or so.»
When we returned to Lausanne, we would show our slides, and she would keep up a constant commentary. This way we did all our trips out again – without the sweat.
In 1978 her strength weakened. After our usual holidays, she confessed to me that, just before we left, she had noticed a little lump about the size of a hazelnut, in the fold of her groin;
«I didn't want to tell you before we went away, because

you'd have made me see the doctor, and we might not have had any holiday».
The doctor wasn't at all happy, and three days later she was on the operating table. It was cancerous; it had reached the womb, and one kidney was not working either – they had to be removed.
She had never been ill, and the doctors were amazed that, at her age, she had never been in hospital. She told them: «I only went into hospital once, and that was the maternity hospital in 1925, to have my son – but that wasn't an illness».
She regained some strength, and we were able to go for some beautiful walks which would not tire her too much. We often stopped to admire the scenery.
I had a little Deux-Chevaux van at that time, and we often went out for trips. She loved the freshly-fallen snow, which reminded her of the winters of her youth, but she was always a bit afraid that we might get stuck in a snowdrift.
She was examined regularly, and in 1981 she had to have radiotherapy. Finally, when I went with her for her consultation, the orderlies had to hold her up on both sides so that she could walk a few steps – but this radiotherapy extended her life by three years.
She asked me a little later:
«Could you keep me here and look after me at home? I'll soon be gone; it'll be the natural end of my life, but I don't want to go to hospital. What's the good of putting tubes in everywhere just to extend life by a few days?»
«Oh, Mother. I'll be only too happy to look after you».
I frequently asked her what she would like.
«Some apple cake».
I'd call her when the cake was warm and crisp, but then she would say:
«I'm sorry, but I don't feel like it now».
It was the same with a good mixed vegetable soup.

She was getting weaker, until one day she couldn't swallow any more, or even drink. On a nurse's advice, I arranged a dripfeed for her, so that she wasn't thirsty. She died three days later.

Message which I sent to those who expressed their sympathy

It would have been a polite way of showing my appreciation if I had sent out one of those printed messages – it would also have been easier; but I prefer to share with you certain feelings and events which I experienced recently with Mother. Because of a slight heart attack a year ago, and several fainting fits since, I thought that the thread which linked Mother to life might easily snap, especially as she was so weak. Weighing only 35 kilos, she slept a good twenty hours each day. But I was wrong – Heaven knows, life is extremely tenacious.

Having spent several years working with cable cars, I was familiar with the make-up of a cable – the central part is called the core, and the steel wires are plaited in strands round it. Without the core, the heart, the cable would flatten under the weight as it goes round the pulley, and it would be useless. And without the strands the core could not support the tonnes of traction. When the strands give way, the core breaks; it was the same with Mother – it was the casing which gave way. But peacefully; God took back her soul.

A week before she died, I was washing her face:

«This time, wait until I rinse your eyes, so you can't say I'm putting soap in them. You know, you look so good like that...»

She opened them, looked me straight in the face, and asked quietly:

«Would you like me to close them for ever?»

«I like your frank question, Mother. But for me, no, I wouldn't, because I love you. For you, yes. I hope that God will close them soon, because I don't want you to suffer too much».

This satisfied her and, in a voice already almost inaudible,

she whispered, trustingly:
«Don't worry, I believe it's what He means to do».
By Saturday she couldn't swallow any more liquid, and, in an effort to encourage her, I said:
«I feel as if I'm giving a drink to a baby chick».
She lifted a finger and panted; «A hen chick».
Throughout her approach to the threshold which we call death, I was convinced of an unforgettable and immortal meeting between her and her Father. I felt the power of the love which God has for each of us, and this conviction helped me to bear the pain of the separation. Those days and nights when I undertook to watch her and take care of her were a wonderful opportunity for me.
On the Wednesday afternoon she had a few hours of perfect lucidity, with her eyes wide open.
«Mother, I think I can see God, sitting on a bench in front of his house, with his arms wide open to welcome you».
Since she couldn't talk any more, she lowered her eyelids three times to say yes – it was our way of communicating. Her face, already rather stiff, began to radiate. Her breathing became shallower and slower by the minute... ten times, eight, seven... Then she stopped breathing, so it was over – as simple as that. Like falling asleep; like a candle wick that has no more wax.
She must have grimaced and cried when she was born, but it wasn't necessary when she died. It was as if her inner peace was intensified in death. Two Yugoslav workers who helped me on Saturdays came to the funeral parlour and said, «She looks so peaceful, you'd think she was asleep».
I witnessed this mystery; it's part of God's intention for man, his victory. I also had the opportunity to see it, almost in slow-motion, so that I could understand it better – it was a time of growth for me.
People say to me: «How sad it is».

Sometimes, death can seem like an insurmountable rock face, but, from behind, a light can shine through which blots out every shadow, and which is never extinguished.

It would be sad, if she had died with no faith.
«Now you're alone». But I already knew all about that. Mother used to say:
«You'll be alright if you think of others. Then you'll never be alone».
A few days ago, I was trying to answer the numerous questions of a little seven-year-old girl:
«Why are you sad, since your Mum is in Heaven? Do you pray? Oh, your eyes look as if you've been crying. I thought it was only children who cried».
I replied that, unfortunately, grownups often go and hide away to cry. Before she went skipping off, she gave her considered opinion:
«So you're an old man with a child's heart. 'Bye».
If I interpret correctly this sentence, uttered in the autumn of my life, it is this; try to think of others with the sensitive heart of a child – a challenge and a way of life which I accept.

It was the Autumn of her life,
It was in Spring she left.
A symbol of life
New and eternal.

A great many fine people

Over the centuries, man has gathered a lot of information from marshes, peat-bogs and ponds. In northern Europe vast stretches of forest have been destroyed by *armillaria mellea* (an edible fungus). So far, the specialists efforts to fight against it have not been successful, because of the fibres (called rhizomorphs) which it sends out into the wood. It attacks the roots and goes right up to the branches, so the tree rots and dies. Years and years later, new seeds produce new forests, and the fungus returns – that's the cycle of things. Very recently, on the property of one of my clients, we had to cut down a tall birch tree which had been affected by this parasite.

I learnt that it is the same with cancer. Present methods of treatment can contain the illness, cure it for the time being, but it is usually only a remission, and you have to watch it all the time.

The announcement that I had it was a profound shock to me; when I was told that I had a prostate cancer I felt condemned to suffer, perhaps to an early death, at the very least condemned to live with it. I saw myself as being imprisoned, surrounded on all sides by thick walls, in overwhelming silence. The light was diffused; a door from outside opened into the hallway, and right at the end of a dark narrow corridor there was another door

with a handle on one side only. Once through this door, there was no way back. Which of these doors would I go through? Already I found it hard to look at the blue sky, or a young child skipping or a carefree young woman smiling.

I could feel what those condemned to death must have to go through, and I could understand those who take a revolver, or some other convenient method, to try to solve all their problems at once. And those who keep telephoning repeatedly to shout their confusion, or who turn the music up full-blast to stop themselves thinking any more.

Another way is to give up the struggle, to go to all kinds of excess without regard to your health – the enemy is quite happy to take over. Others think it is sad but noble to die of cancer. In fact, you die of cowardice more than anything. I chose a third way – to accept this cunning and unpredictable «Companion» in my flesh; I wanted to learn to live with it, halt its advance, maybe even cure myself of it.

At first I wept over my terrible fate; I felt as if I were walking with leaden soles, carrying a basket full of damp soil. But what was I really afraid of? Dying, suffering or living day by day with this illness? In the end I put the basket down; I accepted that I was going to die sooner than expected, but, in the meantime, I would live, not in passive acceptance, but by continuing to be open to others. Now that I have faced death, I want to live better and more intensely. I have grown closer to God. If I can compare my life to a mountain climb, I let go for a moment, but the steel spike embedded in the rock held. Faith is not a Utopia – it allowed me to pull myself together again. The radiotherapy sessions began. I was getting weaker each week, and I understood what Mother had gone through. My strength came back gradually after the treat-

ment. During a first operation, as I was only partly unconscious from the epidural injection, I could see what was happening, and it was very exciting. I also prayed for the surgeon, because it was vital that he didn't sneeze at the wrong moment. Then I suddenly stopped praying – God was there, inside and out, like a beloved friend at my side. All I had to do was say thank you. I was also aware of the thoughts and prayers of many friends; and, in that little operating theatre, that amounted to an awful lot of good people.

I had to undergo a second operation in 1991, in Holy Week. Holy Communion was celebrated, and I attended, supported by another patient because I was very weak. I expected a great deal, but the service left me unmoved. I went back to bed, and then experienced something which had a great effect on me. I was completely peaceful, and I heard a voice coming, apparently, from the pillow: «You are still alive. I am here in spite of your weakness. The reason you are alive is to express your dependence on me». Just when I was tempted to give up, there was such intensity and affection in the words that I accepted them just like a vitamin tonic. Before then, I had often spoken of the strength and the love of God – but since that unforgettable moment, I can also speak about the tenderness of the Father.

This spring, neither my doctor nor my chiropractor could relieve the intense pains in one of my legs. A scanner (what a marvellous machine!) revealed a bone cancer, so I had to stop work immediately, and was forbidden to lift more than four or five kilos at the most.

In my prayers I said: «I've grown up now, and I don't want to rebel. Obviously, I am not thrilled about it but, if it's Your will, I accept it because I know You love me».

There is a fine young woman called Camélia living in my

building. She is French, of mixed race, with a lovely bronze complexion, gorgeous dark hair, eyes just as dark, and is very well built. She wears very, very low-cut necklines and feels completely liberated.
One day she came to the letter boxes at the same time as three or four other tenants were coming to collect their mail. She held the top of her dressing gown while the rest of it flowed loose:
«Oh, I'm sorry. I don't know where I've put the belt, but you don't have to look».
She opened her mailbox with both hands, then went off with no sign of embarrassment.
She has invited me several times to her place for a cup of coffee because, she said, she thought I was very nice. But since she changed menfriends quite often and the coffee was probably just an excuse, I never accepted.
Recently she was away for two or three months and I thought that she had moved away: «Good; that's one less» – because there are two ladies like that in the house.
The other day she showed up again, holding a pathetic little screwdriver and a tiny pair of pliers. She said:
«Oh, Monsieur Henry. I'm in the middle of moving house. Could you help me, because I've lost the key to my cellar, and I want to break the lock open.»
«You see, Madame, since I last saw you I'm a bit hampered because I'm not able to work any more».
«Oh? What's wrong with you?»
«I've got bone cancer and I can do hardly anything with this hand».
«I'm awfully sorry».
And I said, «Thank you».
«So how come you don't look sad? Don't you feel depressed by it?»
I hadn't even thought about it, and I said:
«You know, I think it's my cross to have cancer, so I've

accepted it, but not half-heartedly, otherwise it wouldn't be just a bother for me, but for others as well. I've accepted it completely, and that makes me feel free.»
The caretaker was cleaning the windows in the hall at the time, and she was listening to our conversation. She had children, the youngest of whom had cerebral palsy and at the age of five was still slobbering, had only just learned to walk and was still wetting his trousers; so I said: «You see the caretaker – she has her cross as well. Yet she never complains, and I find that remarkable».
The caretaker just smiled, and went off to work somewhere else.
The Frenchwoman went down a few steps to go back to her place, then turned round, put her hand on her low neckline, and said intensely:
«Monsieur Henry, I'd like you to know that I'll pray for you.» It really threw me to hear the word prayer from the lips of that woman...

Sometimes I have a great desire to talk about essential things rather than banalities, even with strangers.
One day the phone rang. A woman's voice spoke quickly and clearly, singing the praises of my family coat of arms. I told her that my uncle, who does rustic painting, had already offered to paint them for me, but she wasn't listening and carried on without stopping:
«Surely you'd like to give your children the chance to get to know their origins?»
«I haven't got any, and the branch of the Henry family will die out with me.»
«But», she insisted, «you seem to have a relatively young voice.»
Enough of that! I'm going to talk to her about more important things; if I annoy her, she can always hang up. So I cut in: «No. I'm 68 and I have a fairly serious illness,

bone cancer. I don't even know how much longer I've got to live.»
«I'm terribly sorry... Do you know the books on positive thinking? It would help you face your problems in the best way».
«Yes, I've been given some, but I got tired of them after about fifty pages. You see, my faith in God is well-rooted and gives me far more. Instead of being just positive for myself, I can still live for others. What's more, I've learned not to be afraid of death any more».
There's a pause, then she comments:
«Your story is one of the most interesting I've heard».
«You know, it didn't come to me just like the morning dew. When I had my first cancer in 1988 I rebelled against God. After my second operation in 1990 I saw myself on a slippery slope which ended three yards away in an open grave. I only had to let myself go to find myself at the bottom of a pit. At that moment God whispered, «But I'm here». There was so much affection and tenderness there that I said, «I'm sorry, Lord, for only thinking of myself». Then I added: «OK. I'll struggle on to the end». In 1993 I had a fresh attack of cancer, but this time I prayed: «I will not rebel, because I know that you love me».»
She didn't hang up at all throughout this; she seemed so moved on the other end of the line:
«Sir, that's a profound and wonderful experience. With such an attitude you'll be able to slow down the progression of your illness».
«I hope so, because I still have an awful lot of people I'd like to talk to».
There was no further talk of coats of arms.

And so life goes. One day I feel better, another, less so. I have only one wish, which was expressed, I can't

remember where, by a priest whose name I have forgotten: «I would like death to surprise me while I'm still fully alive and kicking».

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Child against the Odds

Those who have met Jacques Henry know his talent as a story teller. They will recognise it in this account, so rich in characters; like, for example, his parents re-united, the teacher couple with whom he was placed, the countryman who engaged him for work at fourteen, René, and so many others – not forgetting the neighbours, the caretakers and the owners of the houses where Jacky worked as a gardener.

When cancer appeared, his first reaction was rebellion. Then the faith which had been firmly established through experience took over, and he was amazed at all that God had given him.

Jacques Henry shows an artist's eye in the photographs which he took of the mountains. He has the inner feeling of a poet in expressing his deepest emotions.

This is a portrait of a charming man – the story of a life which did not have a very good start, but which unveils incomparable riches.

Cover; autumnal view from the Dent de Lys, looking southwards. Left – the Grand and Petit Muveran with, at the end of the range, the Dents de Morcle. In the centre – the two Towers of Aï in front of the Trient glacier, and in the far background, the Grandes Jorasses, the Drus and Mont Blanc, whose summit can be seen behind the Dents du Midi. Far right – the Rochers de Naye.

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