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The Man Who Planted Trees

Translation from French by Peter Doyle

In order for the character of a human being to reveal truly exceptional qualities, we must have the good fortune to observe its action over a long period of years. If this action is devoid of all selfishness, if the idea that directs it is one of unqualified generosity, if it is absolutely certain that it has not sought recompense anywhere, and if moreover it has left visible marks on the world, then we are unquestionably dealing with an unforgettable character.

About forty years ago I went on a long hike, through hills absolutely unknown to tourists, in that very old region where the Alps penetrate into Provence.

This region is bounded to the south-east and south by the middle course of the Durance, between Sisteron and Mirabeau; to the north by the upper course of the Drôme, from its source down to Die; to the west by the plains of Comtat Venaissin and the outskirts of Mont Ventoux. It includes all the northern part of the Département of Basses-Alpes, the south of Drôme and a little enclave of Vaucluse.

At the time I undertook my long walk through this deserted region, it consisted of barren and monotonous lands, at about 1200 to 1300 meters above sea level. Nothing grew there except wild lavender.

I was crossing this country at its widest part, and after walking for three days, I found myself in the most complete desolation. I was camped next to the skeleton of an abandoned village. I had used the last of my water the day before and I needed to find more. Even though they were in ruins, these houses all huddled together and looking like an old wasps' nest made me think that there must at one time have been a spring or a well there. There was indeed a spring, but it was dry. The five or six roofless houses, ravaged by sun and wind, and the small chapel with its tumble-down belfry, were arrayed like the houses and chapels of living villages, but all life had disappeared.

It was a beautiful June day with plenty of sun, but on these shelterless lands, high up in the sky, the wind whistled with an unendurable brutality. Its growling in the carcasses of the houses was like that of a wild beast disturbed during its meal.

I had to move my camp. After five hours of walking, I still hadn't found water, and nothing gave me hope of finding any. Everywhere there was the same dryness, the same stiff, woody plants. I thought I saw in the distance a small black silhouette. On a chance I headed towards it. It was a shepherd. Thirty lambs or so were resting near him on the scorching ground.

He gave me a drink from his gourd and a little later he led me to his shepherd's cottage, tucked down in an undulation of the plateau. He drew his water - excellent - from a natural hole, very deep, above which he had installed a rudimentary windlass.

This man spoke little. This is common among those who live alone, but he seemed sure of himself, and confident in this assurance, which seemed remarkable in this land shorn of everything. He lived not in a cabin but in a real house of stone, from the looks of which it was clear that his own labor had

restored the ruins he had found on his arrival. His roof was solid and water-tight. The wind struck against the roof tiles with the sound of the sea crashing on the beach.

His household was in order, his dishes washed, his floor swept, his rifle greased; his soup boiled over the fire; I noticed then that he was also freshly shaven, that all his buttons were solidly sewn, and that his clothes were mended with such care as to make the patches invisible.

He shared his soup with me, and when afterwards I offered him my tobacco pouch, he told me that he didn't smoke. His dog, as silent as he, was friendly without being fawning.

It had been agreed immediately that I would pass the night there, the closest village being still more than a day and a half farther on. Furthermore, I understood perfectly well the character of the rare villages of that region. There are four or five of them dispersed far from one another on the flanks of the hills, in groves of white oaks at the very ends of roads passable by carriage. They are inhabited by woodcutters who make charcoal. They are places where the living is poor. The families, pressed together in close quarters by a climate that is exceedingly harsh, in summer as well as in winter, struggle ever more selfishly against each other. Irrational contention grows beyond all bounds, fueled by a continuous struggle to escape from that place. The men carry their charcoal to the cities in their trucks, and then return. The most solid qualities crack under this perpetual Scottish shower. The women stir up bitterness. There is competition over everything, from the sale of charcoal to the benches at church. The virtues fight amongst themselves, the vices fight amongst themselves, and there is a ceaseless general combat between the vices and the virtues. On top of all that, the equally ceaseless wind irritates the nerves. There are epidemics of suicides and numerous cases of insanity, almost always murderous.

The shepherd, who did not smoke, took out a bag and poured a pile of acorns out onto the table. He began to examine them one after another with a great deal of attention, separating the good ones from the bad. I smoked my pipe. I offered to help him, but he told me it was his own business. Indeed, seeing the care that he devoted to this job, I did not insist. This was our whole conversation. When he had in the good pile a fair number of acorns, he counted them out into packets of ten. In doing this he eliminated some more of the acorns, discarding the smaller ones and those that showed even the slightest crack, for he examined them very closely. When he had before him one hundred perfect acorns he stopped, and we went to bed.

The company of this man brought me a feeling of peace. I asked him the next morning if I might stay and rest the whole day with him. He found that perfectly natural. Or more exactly, he gave me the impression that nothing could disturb him. This rest was not absolutely necessary to me, but I was intrigued and I wanted to find out more about this man. He let out his flock and took them to the pasture. Before leaving, he soaked in a bucket of water the little sack containing the acorns that he had so carefully chosen and counted.

I noted that he carried as a sort of walking stick an iron rod as thick as his thumb and about one and a half meters long. I set off like someone out for a stroll, following a route parallel to his. His sheep pasture lay at the bottom of a small valley. He left his flock in the charge of his dog and climbed up towards the spot where I was standing. I was afraid that he was coming to reproach me for my indiscretion, but not at all: It was his own route and he invited me to come along with him if I had nothing better to do. He continued on another two hundred meters up the hill.

Having arrived at the place he had been heading for, he began to pound his iron rod into the ground. This made a hole in which he placed an acorn, whereupon he covered over the hole again. He was

planting oak trees. I asked him if the land belonged to him. He answered no. Did he know whose land it was? He did not know. He supposed that it was communal land, or perhaps it belonged to someone who did not care about it. He himself did not care to know who the owners were. In this way he planted his one hundred acorns with great care.

After the noon meal, he began once more to pick over his acorns. I must have put enough insistence into my questions, because he answered them. For three years now he had been planting trees in this solitary way. He had planted one hundred thousand. Of these one hundred thousand, twenty thousand had come up. He counted on losing another half of them to rodents and to everything else that is unpredictable in the designs of Providence. That left ten thousand oaks that would grow in this place where before there was nothing.

It was at this moment that I began to wonder about his age. He was clearly more than fifty. Fifty-five, he told me. His name was Elzéard Bouffier. He had owned a farm in the plains, where he lived most of his life. He had lost his only son, and then his wife. He had retired into this solitude, where he took pleasure in living slowly, with his flock of sheep and his dog. He had concluded that this country was dying for lack of trees. He added that, having nothing more important to do, he had resolved to remedy the situation.

Leading as I did at the time a solitary life, despite my youth, I knew how to treat the souls of solitary people with delicacy. Still, I made a mistake. It was precisely my youth that forced me to imagine the future in my own terms, including a certain search for happiness. I told him that in thirty years these ten thousand trees would be magnificent. He replied very simply that, if God gave him life, in thirty years he would have planted so many other trees that these ten thousand would be like a drop of water in the ocean.

He had also begun to study the propagation of beeches. and he had near his house a nursery filled with seedlings grown from beechnuts. His little wards, which he had protected from his sheep by a screen fence, were growing beautifully. He was also considering birches for the valley bottoms where, he told me, moisture lay slumbering just a few meters beneath the surface of the soil.

We parted the next day.

The next year the war of 14 came, in which I was engaged for five years. An infantryman could hardly think about trees. To tell the truth, the whole business hadn't made a very deep impression on me; I took it to be a hobby, like a stamp collection, and forgot about it.

With the war behind me, I found myself with a small demobilization bonus and a great desire to breathe a little pure air. Without any preconceived notion beyond that, I struck out again along the trail through that deserted country.

The land had not changed. Nonetheless, beyond that dead village I perceived in the distance a sort of gray fog that covered the hills like a carpet. Ever since the day before I had been thinking about the shepherd who planted trees. "Ten thousand oaks," I had said to myself, "must really take up a lot of space."

I had seen too many people die during those five years not to be able to imagine easily the death of Elzéard Bouffier, especially since when a man is twenty he thinks of a man of fifty as an old codger for whom nothing remains but to die. He was not dead. In fact, he was very spry. He had changed his job.

He only had four sheep now, but to make up for this he had about a hundred beehives. He had gotten rid of the sheep because they threatened his crop of trees. He told me (as indeed I could see for myself) that the war had not disturbed him at all. He had continued imperturbably with his planting.

The oaks of 1910 were now ten years old and were taller than me and than him. The spectacle was impressive. I was literally speechless and, as he didn't speak himself, we passed the whole day in silence, walking through his forest. It was in three sections, eleven kilometers long overall and, at its widest point, three kilometers wide. When I considered that this had all sprung from the hands and from the soul of this one man - without technical aids - , it struck me that men could be as effective as God in domains other than destruction.

He had followed his idea, and the beeches that reached up to my shoulders and extending as far as the eye could see bore witness to it. The oaks were now good and thick, and had passed the age where they were at the mercy of rodents; as for the designs of Providence, to destroy the work that had been created would henceforth require a cyclone. He showed me admirable stands of birches that dated from five years ago, that is to say from 1915, when I had been fighting at Verdun. He had planted them in the valley bottoms where he had suspected, correctly, that there was water close to the surface. They were as tender as young girls, and very determined.

This creation had the air, moreover, of working by a chain reaction. He had not troubled about it; he went on obstinately with his simple task. But, in going back down to the village, I saw water running in streams that, within living memory, had always been dry. It was the most striking revival that he had shown me. These streams had borne water before, in ancient days. Certain of the sad villages that I spoke of at the beginning of my account had been built on the sites of ancient Gallo-Roman villages, of which there still remained traces; archeologists digging there had found fishhooks in places where in more recent times cisterns were required in order to have a little water.

The wind had also been at work, dispersing certain seeds. As the water reappeared, so too did willows, osiers, meadows, gardens, flowers, and a certain reason to live.

But the transformation had taken place so slowly that it had been taken for granted, without provoking surprise. The hunters who climbed the hills in search of hares or wild boars had noticed the spreading of the little trees, but they set it down to the natural spitefulness of the earth. That is why no one had touched the work of this man. If they had suspected him, they would have tried to thwart him. But he never came under suspicion: Who among the villagers or the administrators would ever have suspected that anyone could show such obstinacy in carrying out this magnificent act of generosity?

Beginning in 1920 I never let more than a year go by without paying a visit to Elzéard Bouffier. I never saw him waver or doubt, though God alone can tell when God's own hand is in a thing! I have said nothing of his disappointments, but you can easily imagine that, for such an accomplishment, it was necessary to conquer adversity; that, to assure the victory of such a passion, it was necessary to fight against despair. One year he had planted ten thousand maples. They all died. The next year, he gave up on maples and went back to beeches, which did even better than the oaks.

To get a true idea of this exceptional character, one must not forget that he worked in total solitude; so total that, toward the end of his life, he lost the habit of talking. Or maybe he just didn't see the need for it.

In 1933 he received the visit of an astonished forest ranger. This functionary ordered him to cease building fires outdoors, for fear of endangering this *natural* forest. It was the first time, this naive man told him, that a forest had been observed to grow up entirely on its own. At the time of this incident, he was thinking of planting beeches at a spot twelve kilometers from his house. To avoid the coming and going - because at the time he was seventy-five years old - he planned to build a cabin of stone out where he was doing his planting. This he did the next year.

In 1935, a veritable administrative delegation went to examine this “natural forest”. There was an important personage from Waters and Forests, a deputy, and some technicians. Many useless words were spoken. It was decided to do something, but luckily nothing was done, except for one truly useful thing: placing the forest under the protection of the State and forbidding anyone from coming there to make charcoal. For it was impossible not to be taken with the beauty of these young trees in full health. And the forest exercised its seductive powers even on the deputy himself.

I had a friend among the chief foresters who were with the delegation. I explained the mystery to him. One day the next week, we went off together to look for Elzéard Bouffier. We found him hard at work, twenty kilometers away from the place where the inspection had taken place.

This chief forester was not my friend for nothing. He understood the value of things. He knew how to remain silent. I offered up some eggs I had brought with me as a gift. We split our snack three ways, and then passed several hours in mute contemplation of the landscape.

The hillside whence we had come was covered with trees six or seven meters high. I remembered the look of the place in 1913-- a desert... The peaceful and steady labor, the vibrant highland air, his frugality, and above all, the serenity of his soul had given the old man a kind of solemn good health. He was an athlete of God. I asked myself how many hectares he had yet to cover with trees.

Before leaving, my friend made a simple suggestion concerning certain species of trees to which the terrain seemed to be particularly well suited. He was not insistent. “For the very good reason,” he told me afterwards, “that this fellow knows a lot more about this sort of thing than I do.” After another hour of walking, this thought having travelled along with him, he added “He knows a lot more about this sort of thing than anybody - and he has found a jolly good way of being happy!”

It was thanks to the efforts of this chief forester that the forest was protected, and with it, the happiness of this man. He designated three forest rangers for their protection, and terrorized them to such an extent that they remained indifferent to any jugs of wine that the woodcutters might offer as bribes.

The forest did not run any grave risks except during the war of 1939. Then automobiles were being run on wood alcohol, and there was never enough wood. They began to cut some of the stands of the oaks of 1910, but the trees stood so far from any useful road that the enterprise turned out to be bad from a financial point of view, and was soon abandoned. The shepherd never knew anything about it. He was thirty kilometers away, peacefully continuing his task, as untroubled by the war of 39 as he had been of the war of 14.

I saw Elzéard Bouffier for the last time in June of 1945. He was then eighty-seven years old. I had once more set off along my trail through the wilderness, only to find that now, in spite of the shambles in which the war had left the whole country, there was a motor coach running between the valley of the

Durance and the mountain. I set down to this relatively rapid means of transportation the fact that I no longer recognized the landmarks I knew from my earlier visits. It also seemed that the route was taking me through entirely new places. I had to ask the name of a village to be sure that I was indeed passing through that same region, once so ruined and desolate. The coach set me down at Vergons. In 1913, this hamlet of ten or twelve houses had had three inhabitants. They were savages, hating each other, and earning their living by trapping: Physically and morally, they resembled prehistoric men. The nettles devoured the abandoned houses that surrounded them. Their lives were without hope, it was only a matter of waiting for death to come: a situation that hardly predisposes one to virtue.

All that had changed, even to the air itself. In place of the dry, brutal gusts that had greeted me long ago, a gentle breeze whispered to me, bearing sweet odors. A sound like that of running water came from the heights above: It was the sound of the wind in the trees. And most astonishing of all, I heard the sound of real water running into a pool. I saw that they had built a fountain, that it was full of water, and what touched me most, that next to it they had planted a lime-tree that must be at least four years old, already grown thick, an incontestable symbol of resurrection.

Furthermore, Vergons showed the signs of labors for which hope is a requirement: Hope must therefore have returned. They had cleared out the ruins, knocked down the broken walls, and rebuilt five houses. The hamlet now counted twenty-eight inhabitants, including four young families. The new houses, freshly plastered, were surrounded by gardens that bore, mixed in with each other but still carefully laid out, vegetables and flowers, cabbages and rosebushes, leeks and gueules-de-loup, celery and anemones. It was now a place where anyone would be glad to live.

From there I continued on foot. The war from which we had just barely emerged had not permitted life to vanish completely, and now Lazarus was out of his tomb. On the lower flanks of the mountain, I saw small fields of barley and rye; in the bottoms of the narrow valleys, meadowlands were just turning green.

It has taken only the eight years that now separate us from that time for the whole country around there to blossom with splendor and ease. On the site of the ruins I had seen in 1913 there are now well-kept farms, the sign of a happy and comfortable life. The old springs, fed by rain and snow now that are now retained by the forests, have once again begun to flow. The brooks have been channelled. Beside each farm, amid groves of maples, the pools of fountains are bordered by carpets of fresh mint. Little by little, the villages have been rebuilt. Yuppies have come from the plains, where land is expensive, bringing with them youth, movement, and a spirit of adventure. Walking along the roads you will meet men and women in full health, and boys and girls who know how to laugh, and who have regained the taste for the traditional rustic festivals. Counting both the previous inhabitants of the area, now unrecognizable from living in plenty, and the new arrivals, more than ten thousand persons owe their happiness to Elzéard Bouffier.

When I consider that a single man, relying only on his own simple physical and moral resources, was able to transform a desert into this land of Canaan, I am convinced that despite everything, the human condition is truly admirable. But when I take into account the constancy, the greatness of soul, and the selfless dedication that was needed to bring about this transformation, I am filled with an immense respect for this old, uncultured peasant who knew how to bring about a work worthy of God.

Elzéard Bouffier died peacefully in 1947 at the hospice in Banon.