



THE MAN WHO PLANTED SOME TREES

Posted on November 1, 2022 by Jean Giono



For a human character to fully disclose its truly exceptional qualities, one needs the good fortune to observe its actions through the span of long years. If these actions are stripped of all selfishness, if these actions function according to the principle of matchless generosity, if it is made absolutely clear that these actions were done for no reward whatsoever, but rather that they made a visible mark upon the world – only then can we say, without the risk of being wrong, that before us stands an absolutely unforgettable human character.

Some forty years ago, I set out on a long trip, on foot, through the highlands that were then entirely unknown to tourists in that very old region where the Alps thrust down into Provence. I speak of that part of France which, to the south-east and the south, is hemmed in by the middle course of the River Durance between Sisteron and Mirabeau, and to the north by the higher course of the River Drome, which flows out from its source to the municipality of Die. In the west, the area is bounded by the plains of Comtat Venaissin and the buttresses of Mount Ventoux. In all, I walked through the northern part of the province of the Low Alps, and the southern section of the province of Drome, including a small portion of the province of Vaucluse.

In those days, this entire area was a barren and monotonous expanse of land, more or less a desert, some 4000 feet above sea-level. Nothing could grow there, except wild lavender.

I had wanted to cross this region at its widest part and after a three-day walk found myself in a place more desolate than anyone could imagine. I set up camp near the skeleton of an abandoned village. I had been without water since the day before and I really needed to find some. The cluster of houses, now in ruins and resembling an old wasps' nest, suggested to me that at one time there must have been a spring or a well nearby. And indeed, there was a spring, but it had gone dry. The five or six houses, all roofless and blasted by the wind and rain, and the small church, with its tumbled-down belfry, were laid out just like those found in living villages – but here all life had vanished.

It was a fine day in June with lots of sunshine, but across that high-perched and shelter-less land the wind blew with an unbearable brutality; it growled through the carcasses of the houses like some savage beast disturbed at its meal.

I had no choice but to raise camp and move on. After walking for five hours, I still had not found water, and nothing indicated to me that I had any hope of coming across any. As far as the eye could see,

there was the same dryness, the same tough, woody growth. Then I thought I saw in the distance a small, black, upright silhouette. I took it for the trunk of some solitary tree. I let chance guide me and headed straight for it. It turned out to be a shepherd. Near him, some thirty sheep crouched on the scorching ground.

He let me drink from his gourd and a little later led me to his cottage tucked away in a fold of the plain. He drew his water – excellent and sweet – from a natural well that was very deep and over which he had set up a makeshift winch.

The man spoke little; such is the way of a recluse. But he was sure of himself, and this gave him confidence and poise – a remarkable thing to see in this land stripped entirely bare. He didn't live in some cabin but in a real stone house, where the work of his hand was perfectly visible – he had renovated the ruin he had found. The roof was solid and watertight; the wind that struck the tiles made a sound like the sea upon the shore.

Inside, his house was in order – his dishes were washed, his parquet floor swept, and his gun well-oiled; soup simmered on the fire. I also noticed that he was freshly shaven, that all his buttons were solidly sewn, and that his clothes were so carefully mended that the patches were nearly invisible.

He shared his soup with me, and afterwards, I offered him my pouch of tobacco; he told me that he did not smoke. His dog, just as silent as he, was friendly without being submissive.

It was understood that I would stay the night; the nearest village was a good walk away, about a day-and-a-half. Besides, I knew perfectly well the character of the few villages that were to be found in this part of the country, four or five of them scattered upon flanks of hills, or in groves of white oaks, hidden away at the farthest ends of roads accessible only by carriage. The houses were dismal and inhabited by woodcutters who made charcoal. Life was harsh. The climate, cruel both in summer and in winter, forced the families to huddle together, to live on top of one another – and this led to selfishness, which coarsened them. Unreasonable ambition knew no limits in the ceaseless desire to escape village life.

The men took charcoal to the city in their trucks; then they returned. The most solid character cracks under such unending severity and starkness. The women stirred up rancor. They festered with competition over everything – whether the sale of charcoal, or a good pew at the church; they fought

over the right things to do and over the wrong things to do, until it became an all-out battle over what was bad and what was good. There was never any let-up. Over all this, the relentless wind chafed the nerves. There was an epidemic of suicides and numerous cases of insanity, nearly always fatal.

Since the shepherd did not join me in smoking a pipe, he went instead looking for a sack, from which he emptied out a pile of acorns on the table. Then he sat down to examine them, one after the other, with great care, separating the good from the bad. I went on smoking. When I offered to help, he told me that it was work meant only for him. And seeing the diligence with which he undertook the task, I did not insist. That was the extent of our conversation. When he had a large number of acorns in the good pile, he began to count them out into heaps of ten. By doing so, he further removed the smaller ones and the ones that showed even the slightest of cracks, so closely did he inspect them. When he had before him one hundred perfect acorns, he stopped, and we went off to bed.

The company of this man imparted peace. The next morning I asked his permission to stay on for the day at his place and rest. He only thought it natural; or rather he gave me the impression that nothing bothered him. I did not really need to rest, but I was intrigued and wanted to find out more about him. He led his herd out to pasture, but before he headed off, he took the little sack containing the carefully chosen and counted acorns and left it to soak in a bucket of water.

I noticed that in place of a stick, he carried an iron rod, as thick as his thumb and a yard-and-a-half long. I too set out, as if taking a restful stroll, and followed a route parallel to his. When the sheep found pasture at the bottom of a valley, he left the little herd under the care of his dog and climbed up to the spot where I stood. I was afraid that he was coming up to reproach me for my indiscretion – but not all. It was the way he wanted to go and he invited me to accompany him, if I had nothing better to do. Then, he went two hundred yards further uphill.

Having come to the spot he had set out for, he thrust his rod of iron into the earth. He made a hole into which he placed an acorn; then he covered up the hole. He was planting oaks. I asked him if the land belonged to him. He replied and said, no. Did he know whose it was? He did not know. He supposed it was common land, or perhaps it belonged to someone who did not look after it. He was not really interested in finding out who the owner was. In this way, he planted one hundred acorns with extreme care.

After the midday meal, he began to sort out his acorns once more. I believe this time I was more

persistent in my questions, because he responded. He had been planting trees in this solitary fashion for three years. He had planted a hundred thousand of them. From these hundred thousand, twenty thousand survived. Of these twenty thousand, he reckoned half would be further lost, because of rodents and everything else that is impossible to see beforehand according to the intentions of Providence. This left ten thousand oaks which would endure in this place where there had been no trees before.

Just at that moment, I began to think about the age of this man. He was obviously more than fifty years old. Fifty-five, he told me. He was called Elzéard Bouffier. He once farmed in the plains, where he had been content to live out his life. But he lost his only son, and then his wife. He withdrew into solitude so that he might live out his life slowly, with his sheep and his dog. He said that this land had died for a lack of trees. Then, he added that since he had nothing more important to do he had decided to make up for this lack.

As I too was leading a solitary life at that time, despite my young age, I knew how to touch the hearts of solitary people. But still, I made a mistake. It was precisely my youth that compelled me to imagine the future as I would have it, which included the search for happiness. I told him that in thirty years, these ten thousand oaks would be magnificent. He answered me very simply that if God gave him the years to live, in thirty years he would have planted so many others that these ten thousand would be like a drop in the ocean.

In fact, he had also begun to study how best to propagate beech trees, and near his house he had made a seedbed in which beechnuts had sprouted. These experimental shoots, which he protected from the sheep by a wire fence, were truly beautiful. He was thinking of planting birches in those low-lying areas where, he told me, a little moisture was always to be found a few feet below the surface of the soil.

The following year came the war of 1914 in which I took part for five years. An infantryman hardly thinks of trees. To be honest, the shepherd had not made a deep impression on me; and I took his planting to be nothing more than a hobby-horse, like a stamp-collection – and I forgot all about him.

Coming out of the war, I found myself in possession of a small demobilization allowance and a great desire to breathe some fresh air. With no other idea than that, I headed out along the path of those deserted regions.

The country had not changed. But beyond the abandoned, dead village, I saw in the distance a kind of gray fog that covered the heights like a carpet. Just the day before, in fact, the shepherd who planted trees had come to mind. "Ten thousand oaks," I said to myself, "take up a lot of space."

I had seen too many people die during the last five years not to easily imagine that Elzéard Bouffier was also dead, especially since when one is twenty years old one regards men of fifty as ancient, who have nothing better to do than die. But he was not dead. He was in perfectly good health. He had changed his occupation. He now owned no more than four ewes but, on the other hand, had a hundred beehives. He had gotten rid of the sheep because they threatened his saplings. And the war, he told me, had not bothered him at all. He had peacefully gone on with his planting.

The oaks of 1910 were now ten years old and were higher than him and me. It was an impressive sight. I was lost for words and grew just as silent as he; we spent the day without speaking as we walked in his forest. It grew in three sections and was nearly seven miles long; three miles at its widest. When one recalled that all this came out of the hands and heart of this single man – and with no technical aid – one understood that people can be just as effective as God in efforts other than destructive.

He had followed through on another idea, and as a testimony to the truth of it, took me out to where there were beech trees all around, shoulder-height, spreading out as far as the eye could see. There were oaks as well, thick and beyond the age where they might be at the mercy of rodents; as for the intentions of Providence itself, it would now require a cyclone to destroy what had been created here. He then showed me fine thickets of birches that went back five years, that is, back to 1915, when I was fighting at Verdun. He had planted them in those low-lying places where he had rightly suspected that there was moisture close to the surface of the soil. These birches were tender as young maidens and quite as determined.

All this creation gave the impression of being linked as by a chain. But he was not concerned with it; he simply and obstinately went about his task. When I went down again by the village, I saw water running in brooks that in local memory had always been dry – this was the most astonishing natural result of his work. These dried-up brooks had carried water long ago, in very ancient times. Some of the sad villages of which I spoke at the beginning of my account were built on the sites of old Gallo-Roman settlements, the traces of which still remained, and in which archaeologists had found fish-hooks. These were the very same places in which the people of the twentieth-century were forced to make cisterns in order to have but a little water.

The wind also began to do its work and spread seeds. When the water reappeared in these villages, there reappeared also willows, osiers, meadows, gardens, flowers, and a certain reason to live.

But the transformation was so slow and gradual that it went unnoticed, without provoking astonishment. The hunters who climbed the solitary high-places to look for hares or wild boars had noticed the growth of little trees, but they assumed it to be some natural caprice of the land. For this reason no one touched the work of this single man. If people had found out, they would have stopped him. But no one suspected him. Who could even imagine, among the bureaucrats and in the villages, this solitary man's determination and splendid generosity of spirit?

After 1920, I did not let more than a year go by without paying a visit to Elzéard Bouffier. I never saw him step back from, or doubt, what he did. And yet, God alone knows how God functions. I have not written about his setbacks. One can only imagine that behind such success lay much adversity that had to be overcome; to ensure the victory of such passion, there had to be struggle and despair. One year, he had planted more than ten thousand maples. They all died. The following year, he did not plant maples, but beech trees, which had proved as hardy as oaks.

To get a true idea of the exceptional nature of this man, we must not forget that he worked in complete solitude – so complete that near the end of his life he lost the habit of speech. Or, perhaps, he no longer had the need for it?

In 1933, he was visited by an entirely astonished forest-ranger. This civil servant came to tell him about the order recently issued – not to build fires, so as not to endanger the growth of this *natural* forest. This naïve man told him that it was the first time he had ever seen a forest appear out of nowhere, all by itself. At that time, Elzéard Bouffier was thinking of planting beeches some seven miles from his house. To avoid a long trip home – he was then seventy-five years old – he planned on building a stone cabin near the place where he was going to start planting. And this is exactly what he did the following year.

In 1935, a veritable delegation of government officials came to have a look at the "natural forest." Among them was an important administrator from the Department of Water and Forests, as well as a Deputy and some technical people. They spoke a lot of useless words. They even decided to take "certain steps," but fortunately did nothing at all, except for one very useful thing – they placed the forest under the protection of the State, which promptly prohibited charcoal-makers from coming there. It was impossible not to be entranced by the beauty of these young trees, so vigorous and

strong. And this forest exerted its power of seduction even on the Deputy himself.

In the delegation was a friend of mine, who also happened to be a captain of the forest-rangers. I explained the mystery to him. One day, in the week that followed, we both went to look for Elzéard Bouffier. We found him, busy at work, some twelve miles from the place where the delegation had stopped by.

This captain of the forest-rangers was not my friend for nothing. He knew the real value of things. He would remain silent. For lunch, I had brought a few boiled eggs, which we three shared. After our meal, several hours passed in silent contemplation of the land.

We looked out towards the direction from which we had come; it was covered by trees some twenty feet high. I remembered the look of this region in 1913 – a desert... Peaceful and regular work, the clear air of the highlands, frugality, and especially serenity of heart had given this old man robust health. He was an athlete of God. I wondered how many more hectares of land he would yet cover with trees.

Before we left, my friend made a simple suggestion about the types of species the land was best suited for, but he did not insist, of course. "For a very simple reason," he told me afterwards, "because that good man knows far more than me." After we had walked for an hour, he gave voice to an idea that he had been pondering for some time: "He knows much more than anybody else. He has found the best way to be happy."

Thanks to my friend not only the forest but the happiness of this old man came to be protected. Being a captain, my friend appointed three forest rangers to look after the forest, and whom he also frightened enough that they became impervious to the many jugs of wine that the woodcutters offered as bribes.

Elzéard Bouffier's handiwork did not face any serious risk until the war of 1939, when cars began to be run on wood alcohol, and there was never enough wood. People began to cut down the oaks of 1910, but the location where they grew was so distant from the major roadways that the entire operation was not financially viable. And it was abandoned. The shepherd saw nothing of this. He was some twenty miles away, peacefully carrying out his work, unaware of the war of 1939, just as he had been unaware of the war of 1914.

I saw Elzéard Bouffier for the last time in June 1945. He was eighty-seven. Once again I set out for that barren region. But now, despite the ravages of war, a bus ran between the valley of the Durance and the mountain. No doubt because of this fast means of travel, I could not recognize any of the places from my previous foot-expeditions. It seemed that the road took me into places entirely new. Only when I found out the name of a village did I realize that I was in that very same region which had once been desolate and barren. The bus let me off at Vergons.

In 1913, this hamlet of ten, maybe twelve, houses had only three inhabitants. They were savages, who hated each other, and who lived by trapping – physically and morally akin to prehistoric men. Nettles stifled the abandoned houses around them. They lived without hope. All they did was wait for death – a situation that hardly makes a person prone to virtue.

Now, everything had changed. Even the very air. Instead of the dry and brutal gusts of wind that had assaulted me long before, I was met by the breath of a fragrant breeze. A noise like that of water came from the highlands – it was the wind in the forests. And most astonishing of all, I heard the real sound of water running into a basin. I saw that people had made a fountain, that it was over-flowing; and what touched me deeply was that near it they had planted a linden tree, which was already four years old, already thick – an undeniable symbol of a resurrection.

In addition, Vergons showed signs of that labor for which hope is necessary. And so, hope had returned. People had cleared the ruins, had knocked down the broken parts of the walls and rebuilt five houses. The hamlet now had twenty-eight inhabitants, including four young couples. The new houses, freshly plastered, were surrounded by gardens where grew, mixed but well-ordered, vegetables and flowers, cabbages and rose trees, leeks and snapdragons, celery and anemones. It was now a place where one would very much want to live.

From there, I made my way onwards by foot. The war, which we had just left behind, had not allowed the full blooming of life; but Lazarus was out of the tomb. On the lower flanks of the mountains, I saw small fields of barley and young rye; at the bottom of the narrow valleys, the meadows were green.

This was only eight years ago. And now, the entire country is filled with well-being and comfort. In place of the ruins I had seen in 1913, there are now good farms, well-built, reflecting happiness and ease. The old springs, fed by rains and snows that fall in the forests, have again begun to flow. People have channeled the water. Beside each farm, amidst thickets of maple, fountain-basins overflow onto

carpets of fresh mint. The villages have been rebuilt a little at a time. An entire population has come from the plains, where property is expensive, and settled on this land, bringing their youth, their energy, their spirit of adventure. On the pathways and roads one meets men and women who are well nourished, boys and girls who know how to laugh and who have rediscovered the joys of country fairs. If the old population, which in fact is unrecognizable now given their good life, is counted along with the newcomers, more than ten thousand people owe their happiness to Elzéard Bouffier.

When I think that one single man, relying solely on his simple physical and moral resources, was able to change this desert into the land of Canaan, I find that, despite everything, the human condition is indeed admirable. But when I take account of all that was constantly needed – the nobility, greatness and generosity of soul – to bring about this result, I am overtaken by immense respect for this old peasant, uncultured, unrefined – but who knew how to accomplish work worthy of God.

Elzéard Bouffier died peacefully in 1947 at the home for the aged in Banon.

Jean Giono (1895-1970) was among the greatest French writers of the previous century. He wrote over fifty novels as well as scores of poems, plays and essays, and he was also the translator of Moby Dick. He was elected to the Goncourt Academy in recognition of his contribution to French literature. The Man Who Planted Trees was first published in 1954, in Vogue magazine, under the title, "The Man Who Planted Hope and Grew Happiness." Giono offered this story to the world, free of copyright. [Translated by N. Dass].

Featured: "L'homme qui plantait des arbres," Frédéric Back, 1987.

