JACQUES LUSSEYRAN

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PARABOLA BOOKS

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BY Jacques Lusseyran

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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For George and Virginia McMillan

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Introduction

Surely there have been few lives in our century as extraordinary, as truly notable, as that of Jacques Lusseyran, yet his name is hardly a household word. Born in Paris in 1924, he was fifteen at the time of the German occupation, and at sixteen he had formed and was heading an underground resistance movement called Les Volontaires de la Liberté, which from a beginning with fifty-two boys, all under twenty-one years old, within a year had grown to six hundred. In our less urgent times this would seem remarkable enough, but add to it the fact that from the age of eight, Lusseyran had been totally blind. Yet—or in fact, as he says, <u>because</u> he was blind—it was he whom the Volunteers' Central Committee insisted be in charge of the delicate and dangerous job of recruiting. He had "the sense of human beings," he could "hear more acutely and pay better attention." He "saw" men through the tones of their voices, through some sense that sighted people lack, and every person who wished to join the Volunteers was sent to him to accept or refuse. "The light that shone in my head was so strong," he writes, "that it was like joy distilled. Somehow I became invulnerable. Then too I became infallible, or nearly. . ." Nearly. There was one man he admitted to the movement of whom he was not absolutely sure, and it was

he who later betrayed them.

This book is the story of his youth, and it is an absorbing account of Paris under the Occupation, of the young people of the Underground and the dangers they escaped or, eventually, did not escape. For they were betrayed, and Lusseyran spent six months in the infamous prison of Fresnes and fifteen months in a German concentration camp. "I am not going to take you through Buchenwald," he tells his readers, "not all the way. No one has ever been able to do it." The glimpse he gives is both hideous and heroic. This is an epic story. But most of all it is a story about blindness and seeing, and how they can exist together to create an inner light.

Lusseyran considered his blindness a great blessing. As a child, very soon after the accident that blinded him, he became aware "of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about. . . I saw light and went on seeing it though I was blind." And "from that moment on," he writes elsewhere, "blindness became for me a fascinating experience and the attempt to live in a new way." That this "inner light" was not merely an exalted mood nor a religious allegory is made very clear by his description of his childhood, of the games he played with his friends, the shapes and colors he perceived, the joys of the seashore and mountains that he explored in vacation times with the zest of any small boy, and the sensitivity of few. His parents, whom he describes as marvelously wise and loving, decided to keep him in a regular, unspecialized school, and he proved himself to be an outstanding student, especially

in literature and philosophy. He was at the University of Paris and preparing for the Ecole Normale Supérieure at the same time that he was organizing the Volontaires de la Liberté and helping to publish and distribute their underground newspaper, with whatever information could be gathered from forbidden radio broadcasts from the free world.

In January of 1943, Lusseyran and his Central Committee merged their group with a larger one called Défense de la France, under the leadership of a man named Philippe, and together they were able to publish a paper of much wider scope and distribution, also called Défense de la France. *But in the summer, Lusseyran was arrested by the Gestapo, and his almost two-year imprisonment began. When the United States Third Army arrived in April 1945, he was one of thirty survivors of the shipment of two thousand men who had been sent to Buchenwald at the same time. Stunned by their deliverance, they could not at first even rejoice in their freedom. Philippe, the only other man among the group's leaders to survive the war, was there to meet Lusseyran and the two other living members of the DF, as they had called themselves. Their newspaper, they found, had become* France Soir, *the most important daily in Paris.*

Lusseyran's account ends here. He was twenty years old. But after the war was over another struggle began for him. In spite of the effectiveness and distinction of his service in the Underground, in spite of a brilliant record at the Sorbonne, he was refused admission to the Ecole Normale Supérieure because of a decree

passed by the Vichy government barring "invalids" from public employment. For years he was prevented from gaining his professorship; but he never stopped presenting his case and eventually won it. In the 1950s he was teaching in France. Later he moved to the United States where he lectured at Hollis College and then became first an associate and later a full professor at Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He was teaching at the University of Hawaii in 1971 when, at the age of forty-six, he was killed in a motor accident, with his wife Marie, not far from Juvardeil in France where he had been happy as a boy.

Jacques Lusseyran's story, like all real stories, is on more than one plane; it is a drama of both the outer and the inner worlds, told with simplicity and directness, with great feeling and a total lack of sentimentality. PARABOLA *Magazine has published several excerpts from his writings, and the response to them has been such that we feel a wider audience than he has hitherto had is now waiting for him. We feel privileged to be able to present his book once more to those who wish to listen to the blind man from Paris, who has so much to say and says it with such conviction.*

The closing words of this book are the statement of his credo, "two truths," he calls them, of his own intimate knowledge: "the first of these is that joy does not come from outside for whatever happens to us it is within. The second is that light does not come to us from without. Light is in us, even if we have no eyes."

The Editors of PARABOLA

AND THERE WAS LIGHT

When you said to me: "Tell me the story of your life," I was not eager to begin. But when you added, "What I care most about is learning your reasons for loving life," then I became eager, for that was a real subject.

All the more since I have maintained this love of life through everything: through infirmity, the terrors of war, and even in Nazi prisons. Never did it fail me, not in misfortune nor in good times, which may seem much easier but is not.

Now, it is no longer a child who is going to tell this story and that is regrettable. It is a man. Worse yet, it is the university professor I have become. I will have to guard myself very carefully from trying to expound and demonstrate – those two illusions. I will have to return to the simplicity of a child and in addition reach back to France, leaving in thought this America where I live reassured and protected, to find again the Paris which held for me so many frightening experiences and so many happy ones.

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Revelation of Light

FOR SEVEN years I jumped, I ran, I covered the paths of the Champ de Mars. I scoured the sidewalks of the narrow Paris streets where the houses were crowded into the fragrant thoroughfares. For in France each house has its characteristic smell. Grownups hardly notice this, but children know it well, and can recognize the buildings by their odors. There is the smell of the creamery, the smell of the pastry shop, the confectioner's, the shoemaker's, the druggist's, and the smell of the shop belonging to the man who has such a beautiful name in France, "the merchant of colors." These buildings I knew by sniffing the air like a small dog.

I felt sure that nothing was unfriendly, that the branches I used to swing on would hold firm, and that the paths, no matter how winding, would take me to a place where I would not be afraid; that all paths, eventually, would lead me back to my family. You might say that I had no story, except the most important of all, the story of life.

Still, there was light, and light cast a spell over me.

I saw it everywhere I went and watched it by the hour. None of the rooms in our three-room apartment has remained clear in my memory. But the balcony was different, because on the balcony there was light. Impetuous as I was, I used to lean patiently on the railing and watch the light flowing over the surface of the houses in front of me and through the tunnel of the street to right and left.

This light was not like the flow of water, but something more fleeting and numberless, for its source was everywhere. I liked seeing that the light came from nowhere in particular, but was an element just like air. We never ask ourselves where air comes from, for it is there and we are alive. With the sun it is the same thing.

There was no use my seeing the sun high up in the sky in its place in space at noon, since I was always searching for it elsewhere. I looked for it in the flickering of its beams, in the echo which, as a rule, we attribute only to sound, but which belongs to light in the same measure. Radiance multiplied, reflected itself from one window to the next, from a fragment of wall to cloud above. It entered into me, became part of me. I was eating sun.

This fascination did not stop when night fell. When I came in from outdoors in the evening, when supper was over, I found the fascination again in the dark. Darkness, for me, was still light, but in a new form and a new rhythm. It was light at a slower pace. In other words, nothing in the world, not even what I saw inside myself with closed eyelids, was outside this great miracle of light.

Whenever I ran across the Champ de Mars I was still chasing light. I was just about to jump into it, with my feet together, at the end of the path; to catch hold of it as you catch a butterfly over the pond; to lie down with it in the grass or on the sand. Nothing else in nature, not even the sounds to which I listened so attentively, was as precious to me as light.

When I was about four or five years old, I suddenly discovered that you can hold light in your hands. To do this you only need to take colored crayons or blocks and play with them. I began to spend hours doing all kinds of coloring, without much form I am sure, but I kept diving in, as you plunge into a fountain. My eyes are still filled with those colors.

They told me later that even at this early age I had poor sight. Myopia I think it was, a condition which positive people would think quite adequate to explain my obsession. But as a young child I was not aware that I did not see very well. I was not concerned about it, because I was happy to make friends with light as though it were the essence of the whole world.

Colors, shapes, even objects, the heaviest of them, all had the same vibration. And today, every time I assume the attitude of tender attention, I find the same vibration once again. In those days, when people asked me what was my favorite color, I always answered "Green." But I only learned later that green was the color of hope.

I am certain that children always know more than they are able to tell, and that makes the big difference between them and adults, who, at best, know only a

fraction of what they say. The reason is simply that children know everything with their whole beings, while we know it only with our heads. When a child is threatened by sickness or trouble, he knows it right away, stops his games and takes refuge with his mother.

In just this way, when I was seven years old, I realized that fate had a blow in store for me. It happened in the Easter holidays in Juvardeil, a little village in the Anjou where my maternal grandparents lived. We were about to go back to Paris and the buggy was already at the door to take us to the station. In those days, to travel from Juvardeil to the railroad station at Etriché-Chateauneuf, seven kilometers away, we used a horse and buggy. The grocer's truck was the first automobile I really knew in the village, and that was not until three or four years later.

That day in the country, as the buggy was waiting and jingling its bells, I had stayed behind in the garden, by the corner of the barn, alone and in tears. These are not the kind of tears they tell you about later, for I still feel them deeply whenever I think of them. I was crying because I was looking at the garden for the last time.

I had just learned the bad news. I couldn't say how, but there was absolutely no doubt. Sunlight on the paths, the two great box trees, the grape arbor, the rows of tomatoes, cucumbers and beans, all the familiar sights which had peopled my eyes, I was seeing for the last time. And I was aware of it. This was much more than childish sorrow and when my mother, after looking for me, finally found me and asked what the trouble was, I could only say: "I am never going to see

the garden again." Three weeks later it came about.

On the third of May, I was at school as usual, the elementary school in the part of Paris where my parents lived on Rue Cler. At ten o'clock I jumped up with my classmates who were running for the door to the playground outside. In the scuffle, an older boy who was in a hurry came up from the back of the room and ran into me accidentally from behind. I hadn't seen him coming and taken off guard lost my balance and fell. As I fell, I struck one of the sharp corners of the teacher's desk.

I was wearing glasses because they had discovered I was nearsighted. The glasses were made of shatterproof glass, and it was just this precaution that was my undoing. The lenses did not break, but the blow was so violent that one arm of the spectacles went deep into the tissue of the right eye and tore it away.

I lost consciousness but came to immediately after being carried to the school playground. The first thing that occurred to me, I remember vividly, was, "My eyes, where are my eyes?" I could hear frightened people around me talking in panic about my eyes. But even without the voices and the pain I should have known where I had been hit.

They bandaged me up and took me home with fever raging through my body. There everything blacked out for more than twenty-four hours. I learned later that the distinguished specialist my family called at once had declared the right eye was lost and must be removed. As soon as they could they would do the necessary surgery. As for the left eye, there was little doubt that it too was gone since the blow had been so

hard as to cause sympathetic ophthalmia. At any rate, the retina of the left eye had been badly torn.

The next morning they operated and with success. I had become completely and permanently blind.

Every day since then I have thanked heaven for making me blind while I was still a child not quite eight years old.

I bless my lot for practical reasons first of all. The habits of a boy of eight are not yet formed, either in body or in mind. His body is infinitely supple, capable of making just the movement the situation calls for and no other; ready to settle with life as it is, ready to say yes to it. And the greatest physical miracles can follow from this acceptance.

I am deeply moved when I think of all the people whom blindness strikes when they are fully grown, whether it is caused by accident or injury in war. Often they have a hard lot, certainly one harder than mine.

At all events, I have other reasons, not material, for thanking fortune. Grown-up people forget that children never complain against circumstances, unless of course grownups are so foolish as to suggest it to them. For an eight-year-old, what "is" is always best. He knows nothing of bitterness or anger. He may have a sense of injustice, but only if injustice comes from people. For him events are always signs from God.

These simple things I know, and I know that since the day I went blind I have never been unhappy. As for courage, which adults make so much of, children do not see it as we do. For a child courage is the most natural thing in the world, the thing to do, through life,

at each moment. A child does not think about the future, and so is protected from a thousand follies and nearly every fear. He relies on the course of events, and that reliance brings him happiness with every step.

From now on I shall find obstacles in my way, very serious ones, as I tell my story: first, obstacles of language, because in what I have to say about blindness, little known and almost always surprising, I shall run the risk of sounding either trite or extravagant; then, obstacles of memory. I went blind at the age of eight, and am still blind, and what I experienced then I still experience every day. Without wanting to, I am bound to confuse dates and even periods. But such barriers are more literary than real. Facts are facts, and I only need to rely on their eloquence.

I recovered with a speed that can only be explained by my extreme youth. Blinded on May 3, by the end of the month I was walking again, clinging to the hand of my father or mother, of course, but still walking and without any difficulty. In June, I began learning to read in Braille. In July, I was on a beach on the Atlantic, hanging by the trapeze, by the rings and sliding down the slides. I was part of a crowd of children who ran and shouted. I was building castles in the sand. But I shall come back to this later, for at the time other matters were more important.

It was a great surprise to me to find myself blind, and being blind was not at all as I imagined it. Nor was it as the people around me seemed to think it. They told me that to be blind meant not to see. Yet how was I to believe them when I saw? Not at once, I

admit. Not in the days immediately after the operation. For at that time I still wanted to use my eyes. I followed their usual path. I looked in the direction where I was in the habit of seeing before the accident, and there was anguish, a lack, something like a void which filled me with what grownups call despair.

Finally, one day, and it was not long in coming, I realized that I was looking in the wrong way. It was as simple as that. I was making something very like the mistake people make who change their glasses without adjusting themselves. I was looking too far off, and too much on the surface of things.

This was much more than a simple discovery, it was a revelation. I can still see myself in the Champ de Mars, where my father had taken me for a walk a few days after the accident. Of course I knew the garden well, its ponds, its railings, its iron chairs. I even knew some of the trees in person, and naturally I wanted to see them again. But I couldn't. I threw myself forward into the substance which was space, but which I did not recognize because it no longer held anything familiar to me.

At this point some instinct – I was almost about to say a hand laid on me – made me change course. I began to look more closely, not at things but at a world closer to myself, looking from an inner place to one further within, instead of clinging to the movement of sight toward the world outside.

Immediately, the substance of the universe drew together, redefined and peopled itself anew. I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside

me as within. But radiance was there, or, to put it more precisely, light. It was a fact, for light was there.

I felt indescribable relief, and happiness so great it almost made me laugh. Confidence and gratitude came as if a prayer had been answered. I found light and joy at the same moment, and I can say without hesitation that from that time on light and joy have never been separated in my experience. I have had them or lost them together.

I saw light and went on seeing it though I was blind. I said so, but for many years I think I did not say it very loud. Until I was nearly fourteen I remember calling the experience, which kept renewing itself inside me, "my secret," and speaking of it only to my most intimate friends. I don't know whether they believed me but they listened to me for they were friends. And what I told them had a greater value than being merely true, it had the value of being beautiful, a dream, an enchantment, almost like magic.

The amazing thing was that this was not magic for me at all, but reality. I could no more have denied it than people with eyes can deny that they see. I was not light myself, I knew that, but I bathed in it as an element which blindness had suddenly brought much closer. I could feel light rising, spreading, resting on objects, giving them form, then leaving them.

Withdrawing or diminishing is what I mean, for the opposite of light was never present. Sighted people always talk about the night of blindness, and that seems to them quite natural. But there is no such night, for at every waking hour and even in my dreams I lived in a stream of light.

Without my eyes light was much more stable than it had been with them. As I remember it, there were no longer the same differences between things lighted brightly, less brightly or not at all. I saw the whole world in light, existing through it and because of it.

Colors, all the colors of the rainbow, also survived. For me, the child who loved to draw and paint, colors made a celebration so unexpected that I spent hours playing with them, and all the more easily now they were more docile than they used to be.

Light threw its color on things and on people. My father and mother, the people I met or ran into in the street, all had their characteristic color which I had never seen before I went blind. Yet now this special attribute impressed itself on me as part of them as definitely as any impression created by a face. Still, the colors were only a game, while light was my whole reason for living. I let it rise in me like water in a well, and I rejoiced.

I did not understand what was happening to me, for it was so completely contrary to what I heard people say. I didn't understand it, but no matter, since I was living it. For many years I did not try to find out why these things were going on. I only tried to do so much later, and this is not the time to describe it.

A light so continuous and so intense was so far beyond my comprehension that sometimes I doubted it. Suppose it was not real, that I had only imagined it. Perhaps it would be enough to imagine the opposite, or just something different, to make it go away. So I thought of testing it out and even of resisting it.

At night in bed, when I was all by myself, I shut my eyes. I lowered my eyelids as I might have done when they covered my physical eyes. I told myself that behind these curtains I would no longer see light. But light was still there, and more serene than ever, looking like a lake at evening when the wind has dropped. Then I gathered up all my energy and will power and tried to stop the flow of light, as I might have tried to stop breathing.

What happened was a disturbance, something like a whirlpool. But the whirlpool was still flooded with light. At all events I couldn't keep this up very long, perhaps only for two or three seconds. When this was going on I felt a sort of anguish, as though I were doing something forbidden, something against life. It was exactly as if I needed light to live – needed it as much as air. There was no way out of it. I was the prisoner of light. I was condemned to see.

As I write these lines, I have just tried the experiment again, with the same result, except that with the years the original source of light has grown stronger.

At eight I came out of this experiment reassured, with the sense that I was being reborn. Since it was not I who was making the light, since it came to me from outside, it would never leave me. I was only a passageway, a vestibule for this brightness. The seeing eye was in me.

Still, there were times when the light faded, almost to the point of disappearing. It happened every time I was afraid.

If, instead of letting myself be carried along by confidence and throwing myself into things, I hesitated,

calculated, thought about the wall, the half-open door, the key in the lock; if I said to myself that all these things were hostile and about to strike or scratch, then without exception I hit or wounded myself. The only easy way to move around the house, the garden or the beach was by not thinking about it at all, or thinking as little as possible. Then I moved between obstacles the way they say bats do. What the loss of my eyes had not accomplished was brought about by fear. It made me blind.

Anger and impatience had the same effect, throwing everything into confusion. The minute before I knew just where everything in the room was, but if I got angry, things got angrier than I. They went and hid in the most unlikely corners, mixed themselves up, turned turtle, muttered like crazy men and looked wild. As for me, I no longer knew where to put hand or foot. Everything hurt me. This mechanism worked so well that I became cautious.

When I was playing with my small companions, if I suddenly grew anxious to win, to be first at all costs, then all at once I could see nothing. Literally I went into fog or smoke.

I could no longer afford to be jealous or unfriendly, because, as soon as I was, a bandage came down over my eyes, and I was bound hand and foot and cast aside. All at once a black hole opened, and I was helpless inside it. But when I was happy and serene, approached people with confidence and thought well of them, I was rewarded with light. So is it surprising that I loved friendship and harmony when I was very young?

Armed with such a tool, why should I need a moral code? For me this tool took the place of red and green lights. I always knew where the road was open and where it was closed. I had only to look at the bright signal which taught me how to live.

It was the same with love, but let us see how. The summer after the accident my parents took me to the seashore. There I met a little girl my own age. I think she was called Nicole. She came into my world like a great red star, or perhaps more like a ripe cherry. The only thing I knew for sure was that she was bright and red.

I thought her lovely, and her beauty was so gentle that I could no longer go home at night and sleep away from her, because part of my light left me when I did. To get it all back I had to find her again. It was just as if she were bringing me light in her hands, her hair, her bare feet on the sand, and in the sound of her voice.

How natural that people who are red should have red shadows. When she came to sit down by me between two pools of salt water under the warmth of the sun, I saw rosy reflections on the canvas of the awnings. The sea itself, the blue of the sea, took on a purple tone. I followed her by the red wake which trailed behind her wherever she went.

Now, if people should say that red is the color of passion, I should answer quite simply that I found that out when I was only eight years old.

How could I have lived all that time without realizing that everything in the world has a voice and speaks?

Not just the things that are supposed to speak, but the others, like the gate, the walls of the houses, the shade of trees, the sand and the silence.

Still, even before my accident, I loved sound, but now it seems clear that I didn't listen to it. After I went blind, I could never make a motion without starting an avalanche of noise. If I went into my room at night, the room where I used to hear nothing, the small plaster statue on the mantelpiece made a fraction of a turn. I heard its friction in the air, as light a sound as the sound of a waving hand. Whenever I took a step, the floor cried or sang – I could hear it making both these sounds – and its song was passed along from one board to the next, all the way to the window, to give me the measure of the room.

If I spoke out suddenly, the windowpanes, which seemed so solid in their putty frames, began to shake, very lightly of course but distinctly. This noise was on a higher pitch than the others, cooler, as if it were already in contact with the outside air. Every piece of furniture creaked, once, twice, ten times, and made a trail of sounds like gestures as minutes passed. The bed, the wardrobe, the chairs were stretching, yawning and catching their breath.

When a draft pushed against the door, it creaked out "draft." When a hand pushed it, it creaked in a human way. For me there was no mistaking the difference. I could hear the smallest recession in the wall from a distance, for it changed the whole room. Because this nook, that alcove were there, the wardrobe sang a hollower song.

It was as though the sounds of earlier days were only

half real, too far away from me, and heard through a fog. Perhaps my eyes used to make the fog, but at all events my accident had thrown my head against the humming heart of things, and the heart never stopped beating.

You always think of sounds beginning and ending abruptly. But now I realized that nothing could be more false. Now my ears heard the sounds almost before they were there, touching me with the tips of their fingers and directing me toward them. Often I seemed to hear people speak before they began talking.

Sounds had the same individuality as light. They were neither inside nor outside, they were passing through me. They gave me my bearings in space and put me in touch with things. It was not like signals that they functioned, but like replies.

I remember well when I first arrived at the beach two months after the accident. It was evening, and there was nothing there but the sea and its voice, precise beyond the power to imagine it. It formed a mass which was so heavy and so limpid that I could have leaned against it like a wall. It spoke to me in several layers all at once. The waves were arranged in steps, and together they made one music, though what they said was different in each voice. There was rasping in the bass and bubbling in the top register. I didn't need to be told about the things that eyes could see.

At one end there was the wall of the sea and the wind rustling over the sand. At the other there was the retaining wall, as full of echoes as a talking mirror. What the waves said they said twice over.

People often say that blindness sharpens hearing,

but I don't think this is so. My ears were hearing no better, but I was making better use of them. Sight is a miraculous instrument offering us all the riches of physical life. But we get nothing in this world without paying for it, and in return for all the benefits that sight brings we are forced to give up others whose existence we don't even suspect. These were the gifts I received in such abundance.

I needed to hear and hear again. I multiplied sounds to my heart's content. I rang bells. I touched walls with my fingers, explored the resonance of doors, furniture and the trunks of trees. I sang in empty rooms, I threw pebbles far off on the beach just to hear them whistle through the air and then fall. I even made my small companions repeat words to give me plenty of time to walk around them.

But most surprising of all was the discovery that sounds never came from one point in space, and never retreated into themselves. There was the sound, its echo, and another sound into which the first sound melted and to which it had given birth, altogether an endless procession of sounds.

Sometimes the resonance, the hum of voices all around me, grew so intense that I got dizzy and put my hands over my ears, as I might have done by closing my eyes to protect myself against too much light. That is why I couldn't stand racket, useless noises or music that went on and on. A sound we don't listen to is a blow to body and spirit, because sound is not something happening outside us, but a real presence passing through us and lingering unless we have heard it fully.

I was well protected from these miseries by parents

who were musicians, and who talked around our family table instead of turning on the radio. But all the more reason for me to say how important it is to defend blind children against shouting, background music and all such hideous assaults. For a blind person, a violent and futile noise has the same effect as the beam of a searchlight too close to the eyes of someone who can see. It hurts. But when the world sounds clear and on pitch, it is more harmonious than poets have ever known it, or than they will ever be able to say.

Every Sunday morning, an old beggar used to play three tunes on his accordion in the courtyard of our apartment house. This poor sour music, punctuated at intervals by the metallic scraping of rails from the streetcars on the avenue nearby – these in the silence of a lazy morning created a thousand dimensions in space; not just the steep drop into the court and the parade of the streets on the ground, but as many paths from house to house and court to roof as I could hold with my attention. With sound I never came to an end, for this was another kind of infinity.

At first my hands refused to obey. When they looked for a glass on the table, they missed it. They fumbled around the door knobs, mixed up black and white keys at the piano, fluttered in the air as they came near things. It was almost as if they had been uprooted, cut off from me, and for a time this made me afraid.

Fortunately, before long I realized that instead of becoming useless they were learning to be wise. They only needed time to accustom themselves to freedom. I had thought they were refusing to obey, but it was

all because they were not getting orders, when the eyes were no longer there to command them.

But more than that it was a question of rhythm. Our eyes run over the surfaces of things. All they require are a few scattered points, since they can bridge the gap in a flash. They "half see" much more than they see, and they never weigh. They are satisfied with appearances, and for them the world glows and slides by, but lacks substance.

All I needed was to leave my hands to their own devices. I had nothing to teach them, and besides, since they began working independently, they seemed to foresee everything. Unlike eyes, they were in earnest, and from whatever direction they approached an object they covered it, tested its resistance, leaned against the mass of it and recorded every irregularity in its surface. They measured it for height and thickness, taking in as many dimensions as possible. But most of all, having learned that they had fingers, they used them in an entirely new way.

When I had eyes, my fingers used to be stiff, half dead at the ends of my hands, good only for picking up things. But now each one of them started out on its own. They explored things separately, changed levels and, independently of each other, made themselves heavy or light.

Movement of the fingers was terribly important, and had to be uninterrupted because objects do not stand at a given point, fixed there, confined in one form. They are alive, even the stones. What is more they vibrate and tremble. My fingers felt the pulsation distinctly, and if they failed to answer with a pulsation of

their own, the fingers immediately became helpless and lost their sense of touch. But when they went toward things, in sympathetic vibration with them, they recognized them right away.

Yet there was something still more important than movement, and that was pressure. If I put my hand on the table without pressing it, I knew the table was there, but knew nothing about it. To find out, my fingers had to bear down, and the amazing thing is that the pressure was answered by the table at once. Being blind I thought I should have to go out to meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead. I have never had to go more than halfway, and the universe became the accomplice of all my wishes.

If my fingers pressed the roundness of an apple, each one with a different weight, very soon I could not tell whether it was the apple or my fingers which were heavy. I didn't even know whether I was touching it or it was touching me. As I became part of the apple, the apple became part of me. And that was how I came to understand the existence of things.

As soon as my hands came to life they put me in a world where everything was an exchange of pressures. These pressures gathered together in shapes, and each one of the shapes had meaning. As a child I spent hours leaning against objects and letting them lean against me. Any blind person can tell you that this gesture, this exchange, gives him a satisfaction too deep for words.

Touching the tomatoes in the garden, and really touching them, touching the walls of the house, the materials of the curtains or a clod of earth is surely

seeing them as fully as eyes can see. But it is more than seeing them, it is tuning in on them and allowing the current they hold to connect with one's own, like electricity. To put it differently, this means an end of living in front of things and a beginning of living with them. Never mind if the word sounds shocking, for this is love.

You cannot keep your hands from loving what they have really felt, moving continually, bearing down and finally detaching themselves, the last perhaps the most significant motion of all. Little by little, my hands discovered that objects were not rigidly bound within a mold. It was form they first came in contact with, form like a kernel. But around this kernel objects branched out in all directions.

I could not touch the pear tree in the garden just by following the trunk with my fingers, then the branches, then the leaves, one at a time. That was only a beginning, for in the air, between the leaves, the pear tree still continued, and I had to move my hands from branch to branch to feel the currents running between them.

At Juvardeil, in the holidays, when my small peasant friends saw me doing these magic dances around the trees and touching the invisible, they said I was like the medicine man, the man with an old secret who heals the sick by mesmerism, sometimes at a distance, and by methods not recognized by medical science. Of course, my young friends were wrong, but they had a good excuse, and today I know more than one professional psychologist who, for all his scientific knowledge, cannot account for these incongruous motions.

With smell it was the same as it was with touch –

like touch an obvious part of the loving substance of the universe. I began to guess what animals must feel when they sniff the air. Like sound and shape, smell was more distinctive than I used to think it was. There were physical smells and moral ones, but of the latter, so important for living in society, I shall speak later on.

Before I was ten years old I knew with absolute certainty that everything in the world was a sign of something else, ready to take its place if it should fall by the way. And this continuing miracle of healing I heard expressed fully in the Lord's Prayer I repeated at night before going to sleep. I was not afraid. Some people would say I had faith, and how should I not have it in the presence of the marvel which kept renewing itself? Inside me every sound, every scent, and every shape was forever changing into light, and light itself changing into color to make a kaleidoscope of my blindness.

I had entered a new world, there was no doubt about it, but I was not its prisoner. All the things I experienced, however remarkable and however remote from the everyday adventures of a child my age, I did not experience in an inner void, a closed chamber belonging to me and no one else. They took place in Paris during the summer and fall of 1932, in the small apartment near the Champ de Mars, and on a beach on the Atlantic, between my father and mother and, toward the end of year, a new little brother who had been born.

What I mean to say is that all these discoveries of sound, light, smell, and visible and invisible shapes established themselves serenely and solidly between the dining-room table and the window on the court, the

bric-a-brac on the mantelpiece and the kitchen sink, right in the midst of the life of other people and without being put out of countenance by them. These perceptions were not phantoms which came bringing disorder and fear into my real life. They were realities and, to me, the simplest of them all.

But it is time to make it clear that, along with many marvelous things, great dangers lie in wait for a blind child. I am not speaking of physical dangers, which can well be circumvented, nor of any danger which blindness itself brings about. I am speaking of dangers which come from the inexperience of people who still have their eyes. If I have been so fortunate myself — and I insist that I have — it is because I have always been protected from perils of that sort.

You know I had good parents, not just parents who wished me well, but ones whose hearts and intelligence were open to spiritual things, for whom the world was not composed exclusively of objects that were useful, and useful always in the same fashion; for whom, above all, it was not necessarily a curse to be different from other people. Finally, mine were parents willing to admit that their way of looking at things, the usual way, was perhaps not the only possible one, and to like my way and encourage it.

That is why I tell parents whose children have gone blind to take comfort. Blindness is an obstacle, but only becomes a misery if folly is added. I tell them to be reassured and never to set themselves against what their small boy or girl is finding out. They should never say: "You can't know that because you can't see"; and as infrequently as possible, "Don't do that, it is danger-

ous." For a blind child there is a threat greater than all the wounds and bumps, the scratches and most of the blows, and that is the danger of isolation.

When I was fifteen I spent long afternoons with a blind boy my own age, one who went blind, I should add, in circumstances very like my own. Today I have few memories as painful. This boy terrified me. He was the living image of everything that might have happened to me if I had not been fortunate, more fortunate than he. For he was really blind. He had seen nothing since his accident. His faculties were normal, he could have seen as well as I. But they had kept him from doing so. To protect him, as they put it, they had cut him off from everything, and made fun of all his attempts to explain what he felt. In grief and revenge, he had thrown himself into a brutal solitude. Even his body lay prostrate in the depths of an armchair. To my horror I saw that he did not like me.

Tragedies like this are commoner than people think, and all the more terrible because they are avoidable in every case. To avoid them, I repeat that it is enough for sighted people not to imagine that their way of knowing the world is the only one.

At the age of eight everything favored my return to the world. They let me move around, they answered all the questions I asked, they were interested in all my discoveries, even the strangest. For example, how should I explain the way objects approached me when I was the one walking in their direction? Was I breathing them in or hearing them? Possibly, though that was often hard to prove. Did I see them? It seemed not. And yet, as I came closer, their mass was modified,

often to the point of defining real contours, assuming a real shape in space, acquiring distinctive color, just as it happens where there is sight.

As I walked along a country road bordered by trees, I could point to each one of the trees by the road, even if they were not spaced at regular intervals. I knew whether the trees were straight and tall, carrying their branches as a body carries its head, or gathered into thickets and partly covering the ground around them.

This kind of exercise soon tired me out, I must admit, but it succeeded. And the fatigue did not come from the trees, from their number or shape, but from myself. To see them like this I had to hold myself in a state so far removed from old habits that I could not keep it up for very long. I had to let the trees come toward me, and not allow the slightest inclination to move toward them, the smallest wish to know them, to come between them and me. I could not afford to be curious or impatient or proud of my accomplishment.

After all, such a state is only what one commonly calls "attention," but I can testify that when carried to this point it is not easy. The same experiment tried with trees along the road I could practice on any objects which reached a height and breadth at least as great as my own: telegraph poles, hedges, the arches of a bridge, walls along the street, the doors and windows in these walls, the places where they were set back or sloped away.

As with the sense of touch, what came to me from objects was pressure, but pressure of a kind so new to me that at first I didn't think of calling it by that name. When I became really attentive and did not oppose my

own pressure to my surroundings, then trees and rocks came to me and printed their shape upon me like fingers leaving their impression in wax.

This tendency of objects to project themselves beyond their physical limits produced sensations as definite as sight or hearing. I only needed a few years to grow accustomed to them, to tame them somewhat. Like all blind people, whether they know it or not, these are the senses I use when I walk by myself either outdoors or through a house. Later I read that they call this sense "the sense of obstacles," and that some kinds of animals, bats, for instance, are highly endowed with it.

According to many traditions of the occult, man has a third eye, an inner eye, generally called "the eye of Siva," located in the middle of his forehead, an eye which he can bring to life in certain conditions by certain exercises. Finally, the researches undertaken by the French writer and member of the Academy, Jules Romains, have demonstrated the existence of visual perception outside the retina, situated in certain nervous centers of the skin, particularly in the hands, the forehead, the nape of the neck and the chest. I hear that more recently this kind of research has been carried on with success by physiologists, especially in the U.S.S.R.

But whatever the nature of the phenomenon, I experienced it from childhood, and its effects seem to me much more important than its cause. The indispensable condition for accurately pointing out trees along the road was to accept the trees and not try to put myself in their place.

All of us, whether we are blind or not, are terribly greedy. We want things only for ourselves. Even without realizing it, we want the universe to be like us and give us all the room in it. But a blind child learns very quickly that this cannot be. He has to learn it, for every time he forgets that he is not alone in the world he strikes against an object, hurts himself and is called to order. But each time he remembers he is rewarded, for everything comes his way.

3

The Cure for Blindness

THE responsibility my parents faced was so heavy and so uncertain that they had to gamble on it. Should they keep me with them or put me in a special boarding school, the National Institute for Blind Children in Paris? This solution seemed the wisest by far, perhaps the only wise one, and they came very close to choosing it. But they ended by making the other choice, betting on the long shot, and for this I shall never stop being grateful to them.

But don't mistake me. I never had and still have no reason to think that schools for the blind are a bad thing. In any case there are some (and the Paris Institute is among them) where the teachers are intelligent and completely devoted. Many such schools in France, the United States, England and Germany have adopted the freest and frankest methods of up-to-date pedagogy, and have entirely abandoned both the stifling prejudice of the nineteenth century and the old policy of patronage.

I have met many former students of these schools, and I am aware that many of them have grown into

16

My New World

PROGRESSIVELY, from day to day, the Eastern front and the Western front were closing Germany in a vise between them. The liberation of Europe was approaching, but the more the Allies' chances of victory grew, the more our chances of survival shrank. We were not ordinary prisoners. There were no codes of international law for us, no humane conventions. We were the hostages of Nazism, the living witnesses of its crimes. If Nazism was going to blow up, it had to blow us up at the same time.

In September 1944, a rumor was spreading. The SS corps had been ordered not to leave a man alive in the concentration camps in case of defeat. The charges of dynamite were ready, and whatever explosions and fires might not accomplish, machine guns would finish off. Soon it was not just a rumor, it was a directive which even the SS were not trying to hide.

At Buchenwald, as in all the rest of the camps, we were caught in a trap. Seven concentric circles of electrified barbed wire cut us off from the world. Nothing less than a divine accident could save us. No fragment

of the future belonged to us. We didn't even have the right to look ahead. Besides, we didn't have the strength.

During the winter of 1944–1945 the food ration had been cut down to less than a quarter of a pound of bread, and less than a half pound of thin soup a day. Whatever we had in the way of energy we consumed on the spot, for it was the only thing we had left. Our nervous vitality was so reduced that it could no longer nourish our dreams. Hope is a luxury — a thing one doesn't ordinarily realize — because as a rule there is a superabundance of the life force.

In March 1945, when the Allies crossed the Rhine, a strange indifference blanketed Buchenwald. The news was impressive, but to us not sufficient to diminish or increase our courage. Leaden bodies and muted hearts were the only things to be found those days, and the ones like me who hadn't given up life held it pressed close to them. It was not a thing they were expending or talking about.

From this time on, every night long flights of planes we couldn't see passed over the Buchenwald hill. The whole sky resounded like a metallic shell. Giant firebrands rose from the surrounding plains — factories blown up, cities destroyed. One night the fire was in the distance toward the east — this time the flames burned for twenty-four hours — they said it was the synthetic gas factories at Merseburg.

SS control over the camp had been somewhat relaxed, but when it came back it came back in furious force. March was the time for the most ghastly public hangings. At last, on April 9, there was no longer

any doubt about it, those concentrated bombardments over Weimar and near the camp, that cannonade to the west in the suburbs of Erfurt, some fourteen miles from us, could only mean that our forces had arrived.

The news fell on us as though it had been dropped into a well that was too deep. We could see it falling and then lost sight of it. Our bodies were terribly weak, and then on the same day the food ration stopped altogether. On the tenth an order was suddenly passed along. We were given a choice, but just what did that mean?

The SS command offered an alternative to the Buchenwald prisoners. They could either stay in camp at their own risk and in great danger, or they could leave within two hours on the roads to the east, escorted by SS guards. That was the hardest blow of all. How could we choose? No one was capable of it. There was no reasoning power, no human reckoning to go by. Which way lay safety? Which way life? What was the SS offering?

I saw panic all around me. The ultimate absurdity, the false freedom to choose their destiny, held men by the throats more tightly than any threat. Some said, "They will exterminate the ones who stay. They are giving a chance to the ones who leave." But the opposite was just as likely.

At this point I made my decision to stay. More than that, I dragged myself across my block and across the ones next to it. I called to everyone to stay, cried out that stay they must. I remember hitting a comrade brutally to keep him from taking off. Why? I didn't know any more than the others. Nothing had been revealed to me. Still, I was determined not to go, I knew

I must not go. Instead of arguing, I spoke the words without any plan: "You don't run away. You stick to the ship." What ship? God save us. In the course of the afternoon, of the one hundred thousand men at Buchenwald, eighty thousand left. We, the twenty thousand who stayed, had nothing to say. We didn't have the courage. On the morning of the eleventh hunger was such agony that we were chewing the grass in the paths to fool our famished stomachs. The fight was raging six miles off, at the foot of our hill. We could barely hear it.

Towards noon I couldn't take it any longer. I had to have news. I suddenly recalled the existence of the loud-speakers. There was one in each block connected to the General Headquarters of the SS, and it was through this channel that they always gave their orders.

I dragged myself towards the private room reserved for the prisoner who was in charge of our barracks. That was where the loud-speaker was located. Nobody else was around. All the men were outside, trying to follow the sounds of the battle.

I knew that out of this loud-speaker would come life or death – one or the other. The instrument was obstinately silent. At one-thirty, I heard the familiar SS voice, very deliberate, ordering the SS troops to proceed with the plan for exterminating all surviving prisoners within the half hour.

What hand was holding my senses in check at that moment, what voice was addressing me? I have no idea. But I do remember not being frightened. I don't remember believing the SS, and I decided not to inform my companions.

Twenty minutes later, a fourteen-year-old Russian

boy, supple as a monkey, who had climbed up on the roof of the block, fell into the middle of the crowd from a height of twelve feet. He was shouting, "The Americans. Here come the Americans."

They picked him up. He had hurt himself badly when he fell. Some people were running, others were crying out. A French comrade took me by the arm and dragged me outside. He was looking and kept looking toward the entrance of the camp. He cursed and blessed between his teeth. He looked again and it was there, quite real – an American flag, an English flag, a French flag were flying from the control tower.

The days after that were days of stupefaction. We were drunk but with an evil drunkenness. We still had thirty-six hours to go without food, for the SS had spread poison over the stores in the camp, and so we had to wait. One doesn't pass over all at once from the idea of death to the idea of life. We listened to what they were saying to us, but we asked for a little time to believe in it.

There was a very strong American army, the Third Army, under a bold, supremely bold general, Patton. Patton knew what Buchenwald was and what dangers it held. He knew that a three-hour wait meant twenty thousand dead. Against every rule of caution in strategy, he had mounted an armored attack, an enveloping attack on the hill. At the last minute, the SS troops were cut off from the camp, forced to flee or surrender. The underground receiving set, in the hands of the prisoners in the cellars of the medical block, told the Americans what to do.

But where was the joy of freedom, or the joy of liv-

ing? The camp was under an anesthetic, and it would take hours and hours to lay hold on life. Finally, all of a sudden, it burst upon you, blinding your eyes, stronger than your senses, stronger than reason. It came in great waves, every wave hurting as it came in. Then the tension relaxed, and everyone fell into a stupor as small boys would if you gave them a strong drink. It wasn't always a pretty sight, for in happiness men reveal themselves as much as in misfortune. Besides, in the first week people were dying in great numbers. Some died of starvation. Others died from eating too much too fast. Some were thunderstruck by the mere idea of being saved. It was like an attack which carried them off in a few hours.

On April 13, the camp radio — its free radio — announced the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. His was the first name of a real man that we had heard — Roosevelt, one of our liberators — and it was he who had died and not we. When the news came I was carrying my pail in a water detail with about fifty other men. Most of the pipes had burst. I remember it well. The whole team put the pails down on the ground, and everyone knelt, French and Russians together. For the first time in a year, the death of a man had meaning.

Life came back to most of us, mixed up, incoherent, tempestuous, ironical, difficult, like life itself. I was proud of the comrades who had survived. It may have been foolish, but I was proud of them.

Seventeen hundred officers and soldiers of the SS, taken prisoner by the American army, had been placed

in a block of the camp at our disposition. It is certainly worth reporting that there was not a single act of vengeance, not one SS man killed by a prisoner, not a blow struck, not an insult. Nobody even went to look at them.

On April 16 we learned through official channels that the eighty thousand prisoners who had gone off on the roads on the tenth had been machine-gunned en masse by the SS, at a place sixty miles southeast of Buchenwald. They said first there was not a single survivor. We learned later that this was wrong; ten were still alive.

On April 18, just a week after the liberation, as I was coming in from a water detail, a voice suddenly burst out fifteen feet away from me, warm as sunlight, impossible to believe, but crying, "Jacques." It was Philippe's voice. It was Philippe himself. He was holding me against him. He was there, Philippe the chief, Défense de la France, France personified. I was not dreaming. Philippe, that daredevil, a captain now in the army of the liberation, had crossed France and Germany in three days and three nights, throwing caution to the winds, without a military pass, a real Resistance fighter, a real man of the Maquis, to call for his own men, at least those who were in Buchenwald, those of them who were still alive.

Philippe was life itself. It was the triumphant equation. He was the last man I had seen before I went to prison. He was the first man I saw when I came out. I was alive, and two others from Défense de la France were also living. Philippe gathered the three of us together. A French car was waiting for us, a car belonging

to *DF*, for *DF* was no longer underground; it had become *France-Soir*, the most important daily newspaper in Paris. When we got to Paris, the chauffeur, a boy who had never been in prison, drove us around the Place d'Appel in his car, to pay tribute.

Epilogue

THERE are still some facts to report. François died on March 31, twelve days before the liberation of Buchenwald, somewhere near Leipzig, in circumstances unknown. Georges died in the first days of April, it seems of exhaustion, aboard an armored car, near Halle an der Saale. Denis died in Czechoslovakia on April 9, killed by an SS bullet on the roadside. Twenty-four other members of DF, arrested along with me on July 20, 1943, did not return. You certainly have the right to know about them.

Here my story ends, as it must, for the man I am now, husband, father, university professor, writer, has no intention of telling you about himself. He wouldn't know how, and he would only burden you. If he has recorded the first twenty years of his life at such length, it is because he believes they no longer belong to him as an individual but are an open book, for anyone to read who cares to. His dearest wish was to show, if only in part, what these years held of life, light and joy by the grace of God.

And now, in conclusion, why has this Frenchman from France written his book in the United States to

present to his American friends today? Because today he is America's guest. Loving the country and wanting to show his gratitude, he could find no better way of expressing it than in these two truths, intimately known to him and reaching beyond all boundaries.

The first of these is that joy does not come from outside, for whatever happens to us it is within. The second truth is that light does not come to us from without. Light is in us, even if we have no eyes.

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