


*The Saturday Review*

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## Lambarene and the Image of Schweitzer

**A**FTER only a few minutes at the Schweitzer Hospital in Lambarene in French Equatorial Africa, I could understand why so many short-term visitors would come away with negative impressions. But after a few days, it was equally easy to realize that they had seen only a small part of the total picture.

The idea of a hospital creates instant images in the mind of immaculate corridors, white sheets, total sanitation. These images are badly jolted when you see the hospital at Lambarene for the first time. Countless numbers of goats wander at will all over the place; even when they are not visible their presence is clearly perceptible. The ground is made moist and slippery by an equally large number of chickens. Hanging heavily in the dank air is the smoke from the dozens of crude burners used by the Africans for their cooking. There is also an inexplicably sweet and somewhat sticky smell—perhaps from the cooking or from fallen and fermented fruit.

The sanitary facilities are at an absolute minimum. There are only two outhouses, one for each sex. The sewer underneath is open and sometimes the wind blows from the wrong direction.

There are no bedsheets. The Africans bring their own blankets. There are no "wards" as the term is used elsewhere. There are long, bungalow-like affairs with small cubicles. When a patient comes to the hospital, he is generally accompanied by his entire family. The mother does the cooking, as she would at home. The children are usually on their own.

The difficulty, of course, is with the

term "hospital" as applied to the Schweitzer colony. It creates false images and expectations by outsiders. The proper term should be "jungle clinic." Dr. Schweitzer did not come to Africa for the purpose of building a towering medical center. He came in order to meet the Africans on their own terms. What he built was an African village attached to a functional medical and surgical clinic. The doctors on the Schweitzer staff emphasize this in talking to visitors. They point out that Africans are attracted to Schweitzer because of the man himself and because this is a village and a way of life familiar to them rather than a forbidding building where they would be cut off from their families and frightened by a world of total whiteness, of people and walls and machines. Modern medicine has come to accept the emotional security of the patient as a vital part of any therapy. Dr. Schweitzer knew this almost a half-century earlier when he made his plans to serve in Africa.

Most visitors who stay long enough become aware of these things. While they may never be able to accept completely all the crudeness, at least they develop a useful perspective. Some visitors, however, can hardly wait to get back to Europe or America in order to make known their discoveries. I have read at least four articles in recent years by disillusioned visitors to Lambarene who have misunderstood and misjudged Dr. Schweitzer and what he is trying to do in Africa.

In addition to exposing the lack of sanitation, the articles would invariably talk about the gruffness of Dr.

Schweitzer, especially towards the Africans. They would be disturbed especially by his references to the "noble savage." These were some of the things Clara Urquhart, one of Dr. Schweitzer's closest friends, had cautioned me about before I left for Lambarene. I, too, was surprised when I first noticed it, but after a while I realized it was more apparent than real.

The doctor would bark out his orders to the Africans and scold them when they were doing something wrong. The impression he gave was that he was dealing with children. There did not seem to be sufficient respect in his manner towards the Africans. But this was not the complete story. To get the full picture, one had to find out how the Africans themselves reacted to the doctor, how they interpreted his manner.

I watched the Africans closely as they worked directly under Dr. Schweitzer's orders, pushing back the jungle or gathering up stray pieces of lumber or moving crates of medicines. When he appeared to be arbitrary or gruff in what he told them to do they would smile broadly and carry out his instructions. Sometimes when he called out sharply, he would have a glint in his eye which they would catch and it would amuse them.

**I**N TALKING to one of the African leper workers at some length, I learned that the ones who have been with the doctor for any length of time have no trouble in understanding him. They know that he is somewhat short-tempered when things do not go just right; but they know, too, something about the pressures under which he works. And what is most important to them is that the stern manner does not reflect any displeasure by Dr. Schweitzer.

"Even when the doctor seems to lose his temper, it is only for the moment," the leper said. "Sometimes, if he has been too severe, he will go out of his way later to make amends. Once he scolded the wife of one of the patients. Fifteen minutes later he beckoned to her when no one was looking, said he was sorry and gave her thirty francs.

"We do not become angry. How could we? Could a man become angry at his own father for telling him what to do?"

The fact that Dr. Schweitzer's role at Lambarene is father—with respect to patients, their families, the workers, the white doctors and nurses, and even the visitors—is vital to any understanding of his manner. He has a sense of total personal responsibility for everyone and everything at Lambarene. Time is his most precious

commodity and he is no longer able to expend it in lengthy and cordial explanations for what he would like to see done. When, for example, he orders the staff and visitors to wear pith helmets, he does not have time to explain that when he first came to Lambarene he had to deal with serious cases of sunstroke suffered by white people who had insufficient respect for the striking power of the equatorial sun. Once he had to take an overnight trip by canoe to attend the wife of a French planter who became seriously ill because she had thought it was unnecessary to wear a helmet even though the sky was overcast. She hadn't understood that even the diffused rays of a hidden sun can cause trouble. Dr. Schweitzer does not intend to use all his time in Africa treating white people for sunstroke; his purpose is to provide medical treatment for Africans. And it becomes a little wearisome, having to go through detailed explanations to each new visitor. Hence his "take-my-word-for-it" approach, whether with respect to sun helmets or other matters, each of which has its reasons.

One of the important things to consider in connection with criticism of Dr. Schweitzer's relationship with the Africans is that the somewhat arbitrary or patriarchal manner is not reserved for blacks only. Once, while Dr. Schweitzer was supervising a jungle clearing operation, he ordered the blacks to rest. Then he turned to three white members of the staff and to me and said, "Now it's your turn." We obediently took up the work, pulling stubborn weeds from near the trunks of young trees. After about ten minutes we looked as though we had been working ten hours. Our white shirts and khaki pants were drenched. All the while the Africans stood by, looking on us with boundless compassion and appearing desperately eager to spare us further effort. Then the doctor said we could stop; he just wanted us to have some respect for the requirements of physical labor in Lambarene. He had made his point.

Not infrequently, his seeming brusqueness is leavened with humor. When Adlai Stevenson visited Lambarene he was escorted on a tour around the hospital by the doctor. The former Presidential candidate noticed a large mosquito alighting on Dr. Schweitzer's arm and promptly swatted it.

"You shouldn't have done that," the doctor said sharply. "That was my mosquito. Besides, it wasn't necessary to call out the Sixth Fleet to deal with him."

Mrs. Urquhart, a frequent visitor

to the hospital, and the author of "With Dr. Schweitzer in Lambarene" gave me another illustration of the fact that his sternness knows no color lines. Once, he became particularly exasperated at an African who was putting boards of lumber in the wrong place. He mumbled that he could almost slap the man. Mrs. Urquhart, who was standing nearby, was shocked and said so to the doctor.

"Well, Clara," he said, "I don't think I am going to slap him. But if I should do so, I want you to close your eyes and imagine that I am slapping a white man. In that case, it will probably be all right with you."

What is most important to an understanding of Albert Schweitzer is that, however severe he may be with others, he is even harder on himself. He makes incredible demands on his body and his mind. He is not concerned about the attainability of perfection; he is concerned, however, about the pursuit of perfection. He considers the desire to seek the best and work for the best as a vital part of the nature of man. When he sits down to play the organ, and he is alone, he may stay with it for hours at a time. He may practise a single phrase for two hours or more. The difference between the phrase when he first played it and when he himself is satisfied with it may be imperceptible even to a trained musical ear. But he has a stern idea of his own capacity for interpreting Bach, for example, and he feels he must stretch himself to whatever extent is necessary to achieve it. This is no mere obsession. He seeks his own outermost limits as a natural part of purposeful living. If he seems to prod and push others, it is an almost auto-

matic carry-over of his own work habits.

Any attempt to evaluate Dr. Schweitzer's personal relationships with the Africans must begin with some understanding of his initial contacts with them. When he first came to Lambarene the life of the African had barely been touched by industrial civilization. It was difficult to get Africans to work steadily in putting up the buildings and in doing hard jobs for the hospital.

**T**HERE was the temptation at first to think that the Africans were naturally lazy. But Dr. Schweitzer very early realized that it makes a difference when one lives in a climate and in an environment where the needs are few. Living close to nature, the African saw no need to work beyond that which was necessary to the immediate well-being and the minimal needs of his family. The idea of putting up extensive buildings, making concrete piles, sawing and storing woods—all this seemed to have little connection with reality as the African lived it. But the lack of incentive did not mean, as Dr. Schweitzer soon came to realize, that the Africans would not work hard under any circumstances. Once, when the doctor had to make a long journey by canoe to attend a critical case, it became necessary for the Africans to paddle virtually at top speed for six hours. They understood the reason for the special effort that was required and they were more than equal to the challenge.

"Watching them that day as we made that emergency trip in the canoe," Dr. Schweitzer said, "I marvelled at their stamina and their determination and I resolved never



—Photo by N. C.

On the dock at Lambarene: Dr. Schweitzer and the staff wave goodbye to a nurse returning to Europe.



to fall into the careless habit of regarding them as shiftless."

Despite this resolve, which represents his basic feelings about the African as a worker, he can be seemingly harsh in what he says to the blacks or about them. But this, again, is more the reflection of pressure and impatience than of any fundamental attitude.

Albert Schweitzer is not above criticism. Few men of our century have come closer to attaining the Greek idea of the whole man—the thinker, the leader, the man of action, the scientist, the artist. But like all great figures in history, he becomes real not despite his faults but because of them.

Men, like history, come to life in their paradoxes. Gandhi welded a nation of 400 million people but he couldn't hold his own family together. The cause he defined required a Congress Party to fight for it, but Gandhi never gave it the power of his own name. He was the apostle of non-violence in the attainment of national freedom, but once the freedom was won he did not object to the use of military force in the Kashmir.

No man was more meaningful in defining and working for the liberties of the American people than Thomas Jefferson. He was permeated with the cause of human rights; he saw it in all its aspects—historically, philosophically, spiritually. His great subject in life was the anatomy of freedom. Yet he owned slaves. Like Solon and Pericles centuries before him, he made prodigious contributions to the democratic design of his nation. But, also like the Greek leaders, he did not become passionately involved in the fight against human slavery. All this is now seen in perspective. It is what Jefferson did rather than what he failed to do that inspired his generation and has given him his place in history. Moreover, the principles defined by Jefferson later became the philosophical structure for the victorious fight against slavery.

The American name most associated with the uprooting of slavery, of course, is Abraham Lincoln. Yet only a few days before he became President, Abraham Lincoln said that he did not argue against slavery where slavery existed; he would argue only against its extension to new states. He said he would not eliminate slavery in the South even if he had the power to do so. He appalled those who did not want to compromise on the issue. But when the moral summons was presented by history in its final form, Lincoln accepted magnificently.

The story of Lincoln in his relations with the Negroes would be in-

complete if told only in terms of his attitudes during the early days of the Presidency. The inconsistencies and the paradoxes are neither ignored nor set aside by history; they merely yield to the consequential and to the main impact made by the man on the lives of others.

**T**HE sublimest paradox of all, of course, is represented by the fact that the most important prophecy of Jesus was proved to be historically false, yet this did not interfere with the establishment of a religion based on the total truth of his mission. Jesus prophesied the imminent end of the world. By imminent he did not mean a matter of several generations; he meant a few years. The fact that this did not eventuate was no obstacle to the creation or the growth of Christianity, based on the divinity and omniscience of Jesus. What was central and what made its impact on the spiritual nature of man were the Godlike qualities of Jesus. His example and moral teachings awakened the natural spiritual responses of people; the rest was subordinated or forgotten.

History is willing to overlook almost anything—errors, paradoxes, personal weaknesses or faults—if only a man will give enough of himself to others. The greater the ability to identify and serve, the more genuine the response. In the case of Schweitzer, later generations will not clutter their minds with petty reflections about his possible faults or inconsistencies. In his life and work will be found energy for the moral imagination. This is all that will matter.

Albert Schweitzer will not be immune from attack. There will be a period in which his weaknesses and his faults will be exposed and exploited, much of it with an air of fresh discovery and all of it in a mood of disillusion. But in the long run the inconsistencies and paradoxes will be as nothing alongside the real meaning of Albert Schweitzer and his place in history. For Albert Schweitzer has done more to dramatize the reach of the moral man than anyone in contemporary Western civilization. No one in our times has taught us more about the potentiality of a human being. No one in our times has done more to liberate men of darkened skin. No one in our times has provided more inspiration.

Albert Schweitzer is no myth. But even if he were, the myth would be more important than the reality. For mankind needs such an image in order to exist. People need to believe that man will sacrifice for man, that he is willing to walk the wide earth in the service of man. Long after the

hospital at Lambarene is forgotten, the symbol of Albert Schweitzer will be known and held high. It would simplify matters if Albert Schweitzer were totally without blemish, if his sense of duty towards all men carried with it an equally high sense of forbearance. But we cannot insist on the morally symmetrical. In the presence of renunciation and dedicated service such as few men are able to achieve, we can at least attempt responsible judgments and we can derive spiritual nourishment from the larger significance of his life as distinct from the fragmented reality.

There is something else we can respect: we can respect the image of Schweitzer that exists in the souls of people. This image gives them strength and purpose; it brings them closer to other people and establishes connections beyond the power of machines and explosives to alter or sever. This is what men most need for today and tomorrow but especially for today. For the making of tomorrow requires most of all a sense of connection beyond reward or compulsion. Also a sense of service that has something to do with reverence and compassion for life. This is more meaningful to man than the things he makes or the conveniences he acquires or the ornamental props of his personal kingdoms. For he reaches his full growth only as he believes in the essential beauty of the human soul. It is this that Albert Schweitzer gives him.

Albert Schweitzer is a spiritual immortal. We can be glad that this is so. For each age has need of its saints. A saint becomes a saint when he is claimed by many men as their own, when he awakens in them a desire to know the best that is in them, and the desire to soar morally.

We live in eternal dread of hunger; but we shall never escape the hunger inside us if we are starved for inspiration or are empty of vital purpose. And if we see not at all into these things, the things that make for a single body of all those who now live or who have ever lived, then we shall have lived only half a life. It is in this sense that Albert Schweitzer has helped to make men whole.

We can rejoice in this fact, for it means that he has given an infusion of spiritual energy to our age that is real and that will persist as we wish it to persist.

I left Lambarene without disillusion. The image of Albert Schweitzer I carried away with me was intact—fortified, if anything, by a view of his weaknesses, such as they were. For at Lambarene I learned that a man does not have to be an angel in order to be a saint.

—N. C.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

## MR. DURANT CORRECTS

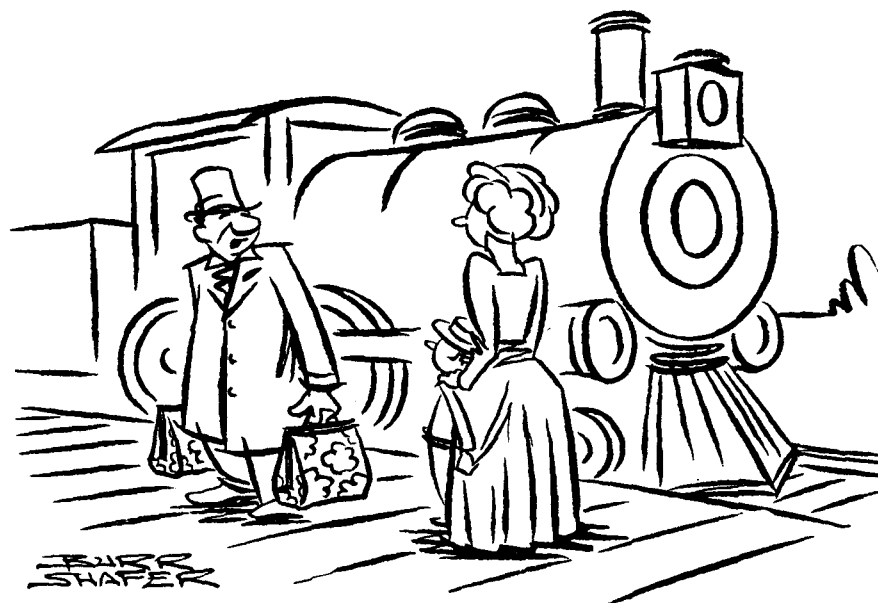
PROFESSOR Mattingly's reproof (SR Dec. 7) for not always going to the original sources gives me an opportunity to restate my purpose in writing "The Story of Civilization." My chief interest, as this title indicated, has been the history of culture; I have merely sketched in the political and economic history as background for a history of civilization—which is the real history of man. States are the transient vehicles and domiciles of civilization; their rise and fall is a dramatic and lugubrious record; civilization uses them, and moves on; it "does not die, it migrates." In describing the cultural contributions of each epoch, especially in literature, philosophy, art, and religion, I have recognized an obligation to go to the original sources, to study them at first hand, or see them *in situ*—at the cost of eight trips to Europe, two around the world, and fifty years of work. But I have not felt a like obligation to base my sketch of the political and economic background upon original sources. How foolish it would be for me, having only one life, to repeat for my present study of Elizabeth I the painstaking researches that Froude gathered in his five great volumes on her reign. To expect of a man to write the history of every phase of sixty centuries of human life in the same way in which he would write a monograph on one figure or aspect of one period in one nation is either to be rigorous beyond decency, or to object to any attempt at a humanized synthesis of knowledge. I believe that synthesis is needed; that specialist historians may reasonably welcome any sincere effort to bring their results to unity; and that we must labor together lest knowledge become the technical privilege and jargon of a few men isolated from the people.

WILL DURANT.

Los Angeles, Calif.

## MR. MATTINGLY REPLIES

I WOULD no more reprove Will Durant for anything than I would question the validity and usefulness of the enterprise he describes so eloquently and has carried forward so well. I merely deprecated the use of the term "scholarly" in reference to his book in a fashion calculated to mislead the unwary. (Not his use of it, of course.) I specifically said that, in universal history, scholarship meant not working from the sources but some discrimination as to the merits of secondary works and some effort to keep abreast of recent findings. For instance, without duplicating Froude's researches it is possible, even easy, to check its results by comparison with reputable later studies. If Dr. Durant does not want to do that, and I don't see why he should, he could easily avoid misunderstanding by removing from his "Bibliographical Guide" and footnotes all the items which he has not



THROUGH HISTORY WITH J. WESLEY SMITH

"And if McKinley doesn't win, send the wagon for me because the trains won't be running."

had the time or the inclination to examine critically. What would remain would be genuine scholarship of the kind in which Dr. Durant is interested, and there would be enough of it to satisfy anybody.

GARRETT MATTINGLY.

New York, N. Y.

## ASTRONOMICAL VASTNESSES

THE AUTHOR of "Who Owns the Moon?" (SR Dec. 7) seems to lack all conception of the vastness of astronomical distances. His declaration that "The future of mankind lies in the stars" is exceeded in improbability only by his further statement that there are "billions upon trillions of other Solar Systems . . . beckoning to the human spirit." To his spirit, yes; to his body, no.

No rocket which either the Russians or the Americans have a possibility of developing within the near future will even approximate the speed of light. At the speed of light, which is apparently the absolute velocity which matter can approach—and never exceed—it would require four-and-a-third light years to reach the nearest star, Proxima Centauri. If visitors bound for Proxima Centauri should find that star lacking a hospitable planetary system, as is most likely the case, it might entail them more inconvenience than missing a street-car. P. R. is probably correct in believing that there are billions or even trillions of planetary systems within the universe; if even one star in a thousand was so furnished, it would be sufficient to guarantee that many. But the possibility of discovering a planetary system attached

to a star at some reasonable distance, say ten light years away, is remote.

ALFRED GRAY REID.

San Francisco, Calif.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Russian scientists have recently announced that they are at work on a "photonic" rocket, which would be theoretically capable of acceleration to the speed of light. Of course, no one denies that such an extraordinary machine is generations, or centuries, in the future. But the true scientist's head is always several jumps ahead of his hands; to the scientist (as well as the philosopher) centuries are only seconds; and it is the ultimate possibilities of the Universe which fascinate him most.

## MIXTURE AS BEFORE

WHAT WITH corporate rivalries reaching around the earth, chips on governmental shoulders, and ear-splitting yowls about "supremacy," P.R.'s blueprint for action looks (and sounds) like the mixture as before.

JOHN M. FISHELL.

St. Louis, Mo.

## MAN'S PROBLEM OF HIMSELF

P.R. SAYS we must blast off into the wild blue to avoid "spiritual suffocation." Man's big unsolved problem has always been the problem of himself. How's he going to solve that one through space travel? It's a question P.R. might tangle with when he is sober.

ROBERT B. SEARS.

Roanoke, Va.