

# CHRONICLE

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## Albert Schweitzer

A book has recently been published which cannot fail to arouse the interest of many of our readers, especially of all those who have followed in one way or another the life of this great friend of mankind.<sup>1</sup> A friend of mankind is indeed what he was—and continues to be—in many fields, for, as is universally known, his gifts are remarkable in more than one sphere. This book is not only an autobiography, but also a kind of “ focussing mirror ” in which a variety of topics seem to be reflected in a unity of thought : the desire to reconcile the impulses of his heart and mind with his actions. Thus, in writing his life-story, the author analyses the various influences which have inspired his writings and combined to make him a thinker of world-wide renown.

The first chapter, which deals with Albert Schweitzer's childhood and his years at school and University, shows us that, from his earliest days, he experienced the influence which was later to prompt him to seek in his faith and in music, especially in Bach, the moral inspiration which has guided him throughout his life's work. This eminently spiritual atmosphere left a lasting mark on Schweitzer and helped to form his moral philosophy in which thought and action become one, a perfect unity, in spite of the variety of spheres in which he moves.

We should like to remind our readers in this connection of a very interesting and moving publication, written by 30 outstanding figures at the request of the “ Amis d'Albert Schweitzer ” association—a publication which was commented on in the *Revue internationale* several years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> ALBERT SCHWEITZER : *Ma vie et ma pensée*, Editions Albin Michel, 22, rue Huyghens, Paris.

The book which we wish to present to our readers to-day admirably reflects the variety of Schweitzer's interests ; he discusses an extremely wide range of subjects, revealing a mind which inclines equally towards contemplation as towards action. A few of the chapter headings prove this point : Musical studies—Piano technique—Research work into the Life of Jesus—French and German languages—Work on Bach—Fight to save old organs—Civilization and Ethics—Higher and lower forms of life, etc.

But apart from these chapters, which reveal Schweitzer's pre-occupation with moral and spiritual problems, we read with the same interest those which deal with the man of action whose life is dedicated to an ideal contiguous to our own : *to serve*. We shall linger awhile on this aspect of the book.

" I decide to become a doctor in the jungle " is the title of the chapter in which Schweitzer describes how a slow evolution, prepared by philanthropic ideas which were to mould him for his future task, led to a turning-point in his life: " It seemed unthinkable to me that I should be able to live a happy life while so many others around me were fighting against necessity and illness. Already at school I had been troubled on discovering in what unhappy family circumstances some of my friends lived and comparing them with my own almost ideal home-life in Gunsbach... "

In 1905, at the age of 30 and already Professor of Theology in Strasburg and preacher at St. Nicolas' Church in the same town, Schweitzer determined, much against the wishes of his family and friends, especially of those who admired his talent as an organist, to undertake active humanitarian work; he thus embarked on the road which was to lead him, in accordance with his own desire, into the jungle, choosing what is perhaps the most arduous task of the medical profession : complete self-sacrifice in order to look after the outcasts of the African bush.

" I wanted to become a doctor so that I could work without words. My work had consisted in words for years ; I had taken pleasure in my rôle as professor of theology and preacher. But now, my new work would consist not in speaking of the religion of love, but of practising it ". These few lines, chosen at random, seem to reveal the whole man.

He knew that in the jungle he would be able to devote himself to his task as he wished, that is, unreservedly. However, that did not prevent him from keeping in touch with Europe, especially in his campaign to save old organs which the enthusiastic organist in him considered vastly superior to those built according to modern techniques. This caused his friends to remark: "In Africa he saves old negroes, in Europe old organs".

Albert Schweitzer describes, not without a touch of humour, the period of his life in which he was studying to become a doctor. The chapter "Medical studies (1905-12)" opens with the pungent remark: "When I presented myself to Professor Fehling, then Dean of the Faculty of Medicine (of Strasburg) as a student, he wanted to refer me to one of his colleagues in the psychiatric department".

The reader cannot help being struck by the remarkable courage and perseverance of this 30-year-old student, already eminent in the field of thought. We see him not only attending the courses of the Faculty of Medicine in Strasburg and later at the centre for tropical diseases in Paris, but also finding the time and energy to write treatises on music and the history of religion and organizing concerts and collections in order to fulfil a plan he had been dreaming about for a long time: to set up a small hospital in Africa after completing his studies. The reader heaves a sigh of relief when, after overcoming so many obstacles, the author finally arrives in Lambaréné in the spring of 1913, accompanied by his wife, equally dedicated to his task.

The initial difficulties which faced them would have seemed insurmountable to anyone but Schweitzer. "The missionaries gave us a warm welcome in Lambaréné. Unfortunately they had not been able to erect the little corrugated-iron hut, in which I had intended to start 'practising', through want of labour... I therefore had to choose as my 'consulting-room' an old hen-house close to our own house". At the very outset, Schweitzer was able to confirm the wisdom of his choice of Lambaréné, for patients came from all directions, from as far as 200 miles away, in their dug-out canoes along the Ogooue river and its tributaries. But the work was overwhelming and Schweitzer needed all his energy

and will to serve, sacrificing himself to the utmost, in order to bring relief to this place of misery, need and disease : malaria, leprosy, sleeping sickness, pneumonia, heart troubles, etc., all of them illnesses which require continuous treatment ; in addition, we should mention the surgical cases, for in these countries a doctor has to deal with every aspect of the medical profession.

Schweitzer's remarks on his first contacts with the native population are very striking, as is shown by the psychologically interesting passage which follows : " Among primitive peoples one must never try to give the patient or his family hope if there is no reason to hope. If a patient should die without the doctor having warned his family, they conclude that he did not know the illness nor its consequences. With native patients one has to speak bluntly and tell them the truth... Death is something very natural to them. They do not fear it, but look upon it calmly ".

Thus Dr. Schweitzer set to work, ably seconded by his wife, herself an equally courageous nurse. And indeed, courage is what was needed ! "... In a few months, the hospital was offering shelter to about forty patients daily ". We should add that not only did they have to be provided for, but also all those who had accompanied them and were waiting to take them back to their villages.

This was the beginning of a memorable period of long friendship with these natives whom Schweitzer came to understand and love. Necessarily, things did not always run smoothly and the European intellectual and sensitive artist often had to face incomprehension or struggle to keep his own enthusiasm in the right perspective. One of Schweitzer's remarks in this connection is significant : writing of the unfortunate period when he and his wife were interned during the First World War, he recalls two policemen sent to conduct them, who were particularly patient with them : " How many times the memory of those two policemen has made me practise patience when I considered that my impatience was justified ! "

Then came the dark years of the First World War, his and his wife's arrest, the internment camps and all the misery and unhappiness of this period of violence and contempt. The author speaks of it with magnificent serenity and detachment, his philoso-

phical mind enabling him to draw the lesson of this great upheaval. In this connection, the passages entitled " August 1914 ", " The crisis of civilization " and " The negation of life " contain valuable guidance.

Moreover, Albert Schweitzer draws a lesson even from the most insignificant events—and often with a touch of humour. For example, at the internment camp, circumstances made a shoe-maker become camp cook and when he succeeded in delighting the internees with his meals, he explained : " You have to know a bit about it, maybe, but the main thing is to cook with love "—and the author adds : " Since then, whenever I hear of someone becoming Minister of something about which he knows nothing, I no longer worry about it as I used to, but on the contrary, I hope that he is just as capable as the shoemaker at Garaison was as a cook ".

To his great satisfaction, Schweitzer was able to continue acting as a doctor at the camp of Garaison ; since he had brought most of his medicaments and instruments, he treated a large number of patients, especially those brought back from the colonies.

We should like to quote another passage which demonstrates Schweitzer's thirst for knowledge in all fields : " Books were not necessary in order to learn at the camp. There was a specialist on hand for every subject one wanted to know about. I made good use of this unique opportunity and gathered information which I should normally never have been able to obtain on subjects such as finance, architecture, the building and running of mills, cereal crops, stove manufacture and many other things ". We can be sure that all this knowledge proved useful when he had returned to Lambaréné and faced the immense task of turning this village into a hospital centre of world-wide fame with the sole help of a few assistants.

He did indeed return to Lambaréné after the war, shortly before Easter 1924. But the sight which awaited him was discouraging to say the least : apart from one small corrugated-iron hut, nothing remained of all he had built up with so much difficulty. During his seven years' absence, all the other buildings had disintegrated and lay in ruins. He therefore set to work afresh : " In the mornings I was the doctor, in the afternoons an architect ". In addition, it was impossible to obtain labour and the number of patients

grew. By the autumn of 1925, the old hospital was more or less rebuilt, but inadequate : dysentery, mental illnesses, etc., added to the difficulties. " We went through terrible moments ". And the reader shares in the despair of Schweitzer's position until in 1927 part of the buildings of the new hospital were completed and ready to receive the patients, including the mental patients, who could at last be lodged in attractive cells with wooden floors instead of the damp earth which was all they had known until then : " For the first time since I had been working in Africa, my patients had accommodation worthy of human beings ". What a wonderful reward for such a generous man as Schweitzer !

The book closes on this period of his life, that is, in 1931.

The depth of Schweitzer's thought makes this a remarkable book. The reader will find an abundant store of profound and valuable reflections, while the philosopher, theologian, sociologist and musicologist will all be able to draw on the interesting ideas put forth and perhaps find encouragement in the author's perseverance and dedication. Finally, in spite of the occasional austerity of the subject-matter, the book cannot fail to appeal with its frequent touches of humour.

J.Z.