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MUSIC IN THE NIGHT

by

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I stood at my window in the guest room of Dr. Schweitzer's Hospital in Africa, listening to the sounds of the tropical night. Crickets and frogs kept up a constant chorus, but added to this were songs and calls strange to my ears, of night birds and insects and the eerie shriek now and then of some savage jungle animal off in the brush. There was a chatter too of human voices in a mixture of tribal languages. Along the outside corridors of the hospital buildings, cooking fires were burning. They glowed in the darkness like pumpkin jack-o-lanterns, and in the shadows the families and tribal kin of the patients squatted over their usual evening meal of manioc and boiled bananas. Their talk was sometimes broken by an angry shout, a song or a burst of loud laughter. And from the wards inside, like a mournful accompaniment, there could be heard the moaning of a sick man or the fretful cry of a child in pain.

Soon another sound came to my ears, the melody of a Bach sonata. It was the hour of repose for Dr. Schweitzer, when the evening meal was over and he could find time out of a busy day to sit at his piano. Even at eighty he was still striving to perfect himself, and I could hear him go over and over a single measure until he was apparently satisfied, then he passed on to the next.

There were so many insects fluttering at my window, beating and bruising their wings against the wire screen that I drew the curtains against them. I had a copy of Dr. Schweitzer's Philosophy of Civilization on my table, and I turned up the wick of the oil lamp to read until bedtime.

I thought then of the many times I had heard the question asked, "Why would a man of Albert Schweitzer's genius choose to

bury himself in the remote jungles of Africa? Even in this age of jet propelled planes, one must travel the last hour of the journey in a small skiff or a dug-out canoe to reach him. But the answer seemed so obvious to me that I wondered why it was ever asked.

It was true that the music coming now to the ears of only the few of us in this jungle hospital would have drawn great crowds in concert halls throughout the world. And it was true that the time which might have been spent writing books of philosophy or theology which would have given enjoyment to many thousands, was spent instead, not only ministering to the sick of this small area, but in doing menial tasks which any unskilled laborer might do. With saw and hammer he had worked beside the native men, putting up the long, low hospital buildings and the houses in the leper village. he had even dragged the heavy timbers into place when he could get no other help. And on Sunday mornings, the voice which the whole world would want to hear in lecture halls, will preach instead, a quiet, simple sermon to the convalescents and theikiin, under the open sky as Christ's own sermons were preached.

"Only an infinitesimal part of infinite being can ever be affected by my personality," he once wrote. "All the rest floats past me utterly indifferent to my existence, like faraway ships to which I make futile signals. But in giving myself for the sake of that which comes into my tiny circle of influence and which has need of my help, I realize the inner spiritual self-surrender to external being, and thus lend meaning and richness to my own poor existence. The river has reached the ocean."

This statement alone is an answer to the questions I have heard. It was in this spirit that, at the age of thirty, Albert

Schweitzer, at the age of thirty, gave up the way of life he had known and loved, lecturing on philosophy at the University of Strasbourg, preaching at the little church of St. Nicholas beside the river Ill, and the music that had meant so much to him. With the promise of a brilliant career in any one of these, he started over as a freshman in the medical school instead, so he could become a medical missionary and go where, in all places of the world, help was most needed.

His friends and relatives did all they could to discourage him. They asked that same question that has been asked now for forty years and more. Why should a man with his ability, go off and offer that the world had need of, go off and live among the savages of the jungles?

"You're like a general going into a firing line," one said.

"You could do so much more for the Africans by staying here and lecturing on their need for medical help," another said.

What was the reason behind it all, they asked. Was it an unfortunate love affair? Wasn't success and recognition coming to him as quickly as he wanted it?

Why would they not understand, Albert Schweitzer wondered. Surely they must realize that one was often swept into a new way of life when he answered the call of God to serve Him.

These same friends who reproached him and called his decision a foolish one, could read in their Bible without thinking twice about it of how Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew, casting their nets. And he called to them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And they straightway left their nets and followed Him.

Albert Schweitzer too had heard the call. This was not a sudden, impulsive decision that he made. It was something he had thought about and planned since he was a schoolboy. He had had a happy, secure childhood, good health and the strength of a young giant, for he never knew what it was to feel tired, no matter how hard he worked nor how many hours he studied. Why should he not work now to help others not so fortunate?

"There are ^{the} poor and sick in Europe too," some reminded him.

It was true. But nowhere in Europe or America suffer pain and die needlessly for lack of doctors and hospitals. In Africa, in the region where he planned to go, there were no doctors and no medical help of any kind for a hundred miles or more.

When the long years of preparation were over, and Albert Schweitzer, with his wife, set out to establish their hospital in the remote jungles of French Equatorial Africa, He had resigned himself to giving up how old way of life completely, the music and books he loved, his writing and his lecturing. For all he knew, he would spend the rest of his life unknown except to the few who came to him to be healed.

"But I found, like Abraham of old, that I was spared these sacrifices," he later said.

I think the doctor still does not quite understand just why the highest honors the world can bestow upon a living person, have come to him. He has been called by many the greatest man in the world today. But with the humility of the truly great, he still tries to live his life as simply as he always has lived it. In every mail great sacks of letters come to him from countries far and wide, and he would like to answer them all, as if each one was from a personal friend.

During my stay at the Hospital, I saw many visitors come and go. There was a Negro doctor from Chicago, a social worker from Washington, a musician from Germany, a philosopher from Japan, a Hindoo mystic. And there was a shy young Danish boy who spoke no language but his own, and none of us could talk to him. But we knew, from his love of animals, that he, ~~like the others~~ like the others, had come to find, in Dr. Schweitzer, a kindred spirit.

When Dr. Schweitzer returns to Alsace for one of his rare visits to his native village, crowds of people come, all through the day, to see and talk to this great man.

"You cannot see them all," his friends advise.

But he will allow no one to be turned away. And the same hospitality is shown to each one who comes, whether it is the Queen Mother of Belgium or a simple peasant woman with a bouquet of wild flowers as a tribute, in her hand.

The world, grown weary of hate and war and threats of war, and greed for power among so many of its leaders, has chosen to honor, instead, this simple man of God, who had quietly turned his back on the acclaim and riches which might have been his, that he might give help where help is most needed. The sick and the needy, the lepers, those plagued with sores or pain or tropical diseases are not the only ones who have benefited when Albert Schweitzer gave up the serene, contented life that was his, to live among them. We have all benefited, for we have been given new faith through him and others like him, in the triumph of the power of good over evil.

"The deepest thinking is humble," Dr. Schweitzer has said. "It is only concerned that the flame of truth which it keeps alive should burn with the stringest and purest heat. It does not trouble about the

distance to which its brightness penetrates."

But he has shown, by his own example, that when the flame of truth is strong and pure enough, its brightness penetrates around the world, even to the darkest corners.

Among the letters that come to him, many are from young people asking his opinion and advise about taking up the kind of work that he has chosen, in foreign missions. One must be very sure, he feels, that this desire comes from something more than a restless or adventuresome spirit, a need to do something exotic and different. Such people are bored with the smaller, ordinary tasks close at hand, and want to go off to faraway places. Only a person who can devote himself faithfully to these smaller tasks, and finds a true value in them, has the inward right to take on some extraordinary activity. Only a person who feels his choice to be simply a matter of course, not something unusual, who has no thought of heroism, but simply accepts what he considers his duty, with sober enthusiasm, is capable of becoming a spiritual adventurer such as the world needs. There are no heroes of action, he says. Only heroes of renunciation and suffering.

At nine o'clock the hospital bell rings the curfew hour. There must be quiet so the patients can sleep. All cooking fires are put out, and the sounds of voices along the corridors stop as suddenly as when one turns off a radio or phonograph. The music also stopped suddenly. I put down the book I was reading and blew out the lamp to get ready for bed. Through the drawn curtains I could see a moving light, and I heard the crunching of footsteps along the path that led from the doctor's cottage to the hospital wards. Dr. Schweitzer was on his way, I knew, to pay his last rounds of the day, to see that all was well, before his own bedtime.

would
Dark faces ~~wild~~ light up at his approach, and the expression of
gratitude he'd see in the eyes turned toward him would be well worth
the choice he made in coming here.