

VISITS THE LEPERS

The mother of the renowned singing Trapp family tells of their unforgettable trip to Molokai, island of the "untouchables"

OUR PLANE headed for Molokai, the grim heap of black rock that Robert Louis Stevenson had once called "a pitiful place to visit and hell to dwell in."

In those early days before Father Damien (a missionary who dedicated his life to the colony in the last century), it *must* have been hell—no hospital, no doctor, no priest; no food, no clothing, no houses; with each fresh shipment of lepers being met on the shore by hundreds of hostile "residents" who pushed the newcomers back into the water in an attempt to keep themselves from starvation.

We knew that Father Damien's coming had changed all that; that he had stormed the government with repeated appeals for building materials, water pipes, and financial aid; that, with his own hands, he had carpentered over a thousand coffins to bury his parishioners and had slept for many weeks with the living on the bare ground. We knew that every day he had faithfully dressed their wounds, even after that historic Sunday morning sermon, "And We Lepers," told his parishioners that he, too, had contracted the disease.

We knew that Brother Joseph Dutton (who was born in the Trapps' adopted home town of Stowe, Vt.), later had effected even better conditions in the settlement; but, just the same, as we actually flew over the precipice, the black rocks and jagged coastline looked most unfriendly.

So with mixed feelings, we dropped steadily down, past the 1,600 feet of gloomy rock, to the tiny triangle of the leper settlement. We were somewhat apprehensive. In all our travels, our only encounter with lepers had been through the Gospels, in the pleading entreaty of the poorest of the poor: "Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make us clean." And in the compassionate answer: "I will. Be thou made clean."

Now we were to meet them face to face. My heart beat wildly as we crossed the narrow landing strip toward Father Logan (present-day successor to Father Damien) and his group. As we greeted Father, each one of us made a great effort not to look too closely, not to give an impression of curiosity; yet we could not help noticing their mutilated features.

The sight drew from us such a wave of compassion that our one desire was to show that it did not matter a bit, that we loved them all the more. With outstretched hands I went forward, completely forgetting the instructions I had received: don't touch the patients; don't touch anything they may have touched.

What happened next pierced our hearts. The whole row of people took a few steps back. Arms and hands all vanished behind their backs; and, though the poor featureless faces smiled at us, their whole bearing signaled, "We are the untouchables."



Mary Martin shares an opening-night waltz with Maria Trapp, whom she plays in musical, "The Sound of Music."

Mercifully, Father Logan took over. We were speeded into waiting cars, with our first destination to be Brother Dutton's grave in the cemetery of Kalawao, three miles away. The narrow dirt road took us past many graves—Buddhist, Catholic, and Protestant—until at last we found ourselves standing in a little church graveyard close under that dark perpendicular wall that had always so impressed us in pictures.

Father Damien had built the church with his own hands. Brother Dutton's grave was marked only with a simple cross and an inscription: "Joseph Dutton. Born April 27, 1843." Gently, Johannes placed our Mount Mansfield pine wreath at the foot of the cross.

Then we began to sing. How often have I felt with deepest gratitude this great glory of our life as a singing family: that, whenever words failed to say what was taking place in our hearts, we could always express it in music. We sang and sang and sang—our whole New England repertoire—until, finally leaving, we sang a *Te Deum*, too, for Father Damien by the spot where his grave had been before his body was taken back to Belgium.

As Father Logan drove us back across the peninsula, we were impressed to see many attractive little houses, each one surrounded by a beautiful

garden with flowering trees and bushes, each little lanai covered with brightly blooming flowers. "Those belong to the patients," Father explained, and went on to tell us that these pretty, comfortable cottages with their lava-stone walls are privately owned. The Territorial Government, through the board of health, has done everything within its power to provide for the comfort and accommodation of these people.

"And now the sisters are waiting," Father said suddenly, pulling his car to a stop in front of a low, comfortable little house, half-hidden in the trees and flowers of the hospital grounds. Three nuns, dressed in white, were standing on the porch to greet us and, as Father introduced Sister Hermine, the superior of the Sisters of Saint Francis, I realized that we had all met before in their convent in Syracuse, N. Y.

We had a fine reunion over lunch, while the sisters patiently relived for us the story of their Mother Marianne's first coming to the island 30 years before with five others, and of her firm and reassuring prophecy: "No one of our sisters will ever contract the disease."

To this day, not one has; but the one condition specified by Mother Marianne, along with her prophecy, was scrupulous cleanliness.

After lunch, Sister Hermine showed us through the spacious, airy hospital, explaining, "The hospital is scrubbed every day, and everyone dealing with the patients washes her hands immediately afterward."

I noticed that she drew us past several closed doors—"the worst cases"—and later, when we were alone together for a few minutes, I pleaded with Sister for permission to be allowed to visit some of them. In her great kindness, she let me, and to the end of my days I shall be grateful.

WE CALLED FIRST on Lahale (Hawaiian for Rachel). She was sitting on her bed dangling what had once been her legs. "Lahale," said Sister, "here is the mother of the singing family, come to visit you."

At that, Lahale lit up and burst into a torrent of questions. How was Ruper, and had Johannes come along with us? She had read "The Story of the Trapp Family Singers" and was so sorry that I had lost my husband.

Obviously, it did not dawn on her that she had any reason for complaining herself, but she was all interest in the Trapp family and looking forward, oh so much, to their evening concert.

I was taken from room to room, through a living sermon. These people were cheerful and happy, completely resigned to God's Will, so interested in

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