

1903 and 1904

Frida Semler Seabury¹

Edited by Claude Sonnet 4.6 and Minh-Tâm Quang Trinh

The summers I spent at the Berghof are among my freshest memories, because I was so ecstatically happy there — and knew it at the time. I was sixteen — a prim young thing whose reading [a]nd acquaintance had been carefully supervised. [Left] [w]ith my friend Nora Kahle at the Berg[s] [sic], while my father attended to business affairs, I came into a totally new and thrilling world. We lived in a simple farm house, eating our eggs and milk and salads on the open terrace. It seems to me the sun shone all day and the moon was full every night. I was in such perfect physical well being — so utterly contented that I can remember lying in the deep grass under an apple tree, watching clouds slide over a blue sky and saying, “You’ll never be so happy again.” Mine has been a very happy life, but I still think that ecstasy of youth has never been captured again. Those days were packed with joy. I loved the cool smell of morning as we breakfasted outdoors, the long swim in the lake before lunch, the afternoons of music and reading, the evening walk, the talks in the garden in the moonlight with a dripping fountain adding to the sense of peace. Each of these had a perfection of its own.

Let me describe them in turn. Alban and Smaragda, Nora and Mrs. Berg and I and occasionally other paying guests swam every morning. While we were in the water the mail arrived, and we read our letters floating about. Alban wore black bathing trunks and a black top with sleeves to the wrists. He was a picture[sque] figure with his thin, poet’s face, his long front locks that he tossed back in moments of excitement. But he was no mean swimmer in spite of the unusual costume. He swam across the lake several times while I rowed a boat beside him in case he should grow tired (which he never did). The lake must have been over a mile across. Once when we reached the other shore we went to a friend’s house for Jause. Next day the lady swam over for Jause with us, and the day after spurred by their activities I swam over while Alban rowed. It took me an hour and fifty minutes. Though I am a very slow swimmer, it was not all my fault as Alban was anything but a help. He rowed the boat in circles around me and then pretended to have imaginary conversations with a whole lake full of swimmers. “Ach ja — [F]rau [Grabin] sie schwimmen auch zu Besuch auf Frau X — we [sic] nett!”² “Guten Tag Herr R[itt]ineister — wie geht es heute [Ihrer] schonen Fraulein

1 Alban Berg Material Collected by Frida Semler Seabury, Music Division, Library of Congress. Gift; Frida Semler Seabury; 1948.

2 “Ah indeed, Mrs. Grabin — so you’re swimming to go visit Mrs. X, too — how nice!”

Tochter.”³ I laughed and swallowed water and choked my way to the other shore. These were special swims. Usually we swam only in the mornings before lunch. Lunch — like [b]reakfast was eaten outdoors. There was always interesting talk — sometimes serious discussions about music or books or politics — and much delightful nonsense. We were all in irrepressible high spirits.

One of us must have read somewhere a phrase, “Was ist der me[n]sch — ein nichts!”⁴ It may have been in one of the Ibsen plays we read aloud with divided parts. At all events, it became a slogan. At any happening in which it was at all applicable, one of us would say sombrelly, “Was ist der me[n]sch!” confident of the resounding reply — “Ein Nichts!” Only young people in the joy of very positive living could have rejoiced so in the mockery of negativism.

Another game might have been called “tact a l’Americaine [sic].” I had told a story of Mrs. Cleveland when mistress of the White House; at a diplomatic dinner the pricelass glasses were much admired. Alas — in the midst of the ecstasies over them, an ambassador broke his. There was an infinitesimal pause of dismay. Then Mrs. Cleveland said, “O, don’t be distressed. You see they break at a touch.” And tapping a knife against her glass — broke that. (The story never said whether the glass was empty!) The Bergs were not at all properly impressed with my admiration for the former first lady’s quickness. They greeted the tale with whoops of joy. Soon after, I dropped something — a spoon, I think. At once the Bergs hurled all their own tableware to the floor, beaming graciously at following “American” standards of politeness. I had to be very careful what I dropped or broke, lest I become a target for rolls or radishes.

We were artistic between courses. The inside dough of the brown peasant bread made wonderful clay. We did statues of each other and funeral monuments were particularly popular giving as they did an opportunity not only for sculptural effects in the grand manner, but also for jibes at each other’s idiosyncrasies.

We used to discuss the last words of great men — whether they planned them long ahead or whether they just happened, —Goethes [sic] symbolical “Mehr Licht”, etc., and we used to try out various phrases on each other. We little dreamed that what one of us said would one day be so important.

Nora Kahle was at the Berghof during the first only of my two summers. She was a very pretty, well-behaved, young girl with an acute case of female adolescent refinement and the robust humor at table offended her sensibilities. Being less refined they did not disturb me, but they did sometimes embarrass me. The Ossia cher See [sic]⁵ seemed surrounded by villas where some prominent opera singer lived in sin with a famous novelist or where a popular playwright shared his days with a glamorous actress not tied to him

3 “Hello Mr. Rittineister — how is your beautiful young daughter today.”

4 “What is man? — A mere nothing!”

5 Ossiacher See, a lake in Carinthia.

in any way. The innocent question — “Who lives in the yellow house?” would of necessity bring a reply a New York maiden of sixteen hardly expected but the bald facts were generally couched in picturesque language that made the hearing doubly difficult. In time I could sense the turn the talk would take as a mariner senses change of weather, and pouring myself a deep glass of milk, I buried myself in that to hide my red cheeks. My little ruse seemed to me so comforting and undetected, but nothing escaped Alban. One day Mrs. Berg asked him about some new arrivals. Alban said, “Well, the truth is — one moment Mama,” and poured me out a huge glass of milk amidst general laughter.

My younger brother spent the summer at Berghof the year after I left. He was a most puritanical young person of twelve. On one of the evening walks when a famous Wagnerian singer and her playwright companio[n] were of the group, little Herbert insisted on walking twelve paces behind the main party. Solicitously Alban inquired, “Are you tired? Shall we turn back?” “No, I’m not tired,” my brother replied gravely. Pressed further as to whether he felt unwell or was bored or what, he replied firmly, “I do not care to walk with that woman. I do not approve of her morals.” That woman was delighted at young America’s [smugness].

[After lunch] Alban continued on whatever composition had engaged him earlier, and late in the afternoon he and Smaragda played or she sang his newest song. He was reading volume after volume of modern poetry to find words for songs, and he wrote many things that summer that I thought exquisite — among them “G[r]abstein” and a duet “Viel Träume.” When they had tried out Alban’s songs they played symphonies in duet form. They were extraordinarily kind to me — who knew so little. I had but to name the composer I wanted and off they dashed. They both read very rapidly, although neither pretended to be a pia[n]ist[.] Those afternoons I sat by the window embroidering — or looking out across the fields as twilight gathered, — held in a spell by their music. One felt at the birth of beauty when Smaragda tried a new phrase Alban had just written. It seemed the center of life. The Bergs could take most things lightly, but music was a sacred thing. So it was very funny when occasionally a party came for tea (the place was run like a tearoom) and some guest wandered into the music room and tinkled off second-rate waltzes or set “pieces” — thinking to impress us all.

After the music hour we walked till it became quite dark. Once Alban was reluctant to go because he had some pages of someone’s poems he wished to read. Finally he couldn’t resist the walk so he brought a candle and read walking along the road in the dusk until the book was finished when he said “So” — blew out the candle — [p]opped it in his pocket and was immediately “with” us. There was no affectation in this or anything else he did. He wanted our company, and he wanted his book — so he contrived to have both.

In the evenings we read Ibsen aloud with divided parts. In 1903 Ibsen was a discovery, and we thrilled over Baumeister Sollness⁶ and Hedda and Ghosts. It was in the second summer that we all read — not aloud — Wedekind's *Reigen*⁷ and *Erdgeist*. Alban was greatly entertained a[t t]he advance I had made in courage from one summer to the next. Coming upon me at [b]reakfast one morning he found "*Erdgeist*" open beside my coffee cup. "Mm — Jungfern lecture [*sic*],"⁸ said Alban to his mother. That play — read in his eighteenth year made such a strong impression that it became the inspiration for his most notable — and last work "*Lulu*."

We had one evening with fireworks — when the neighboring peasants serenaded us. "Do you keep them at the barn so they won't be embarrassed?" I asked. "No," said Alban, "So you won't hear the words." In truth the peasants were a bit casual in word and deed. The daughter of one of them had a baby. "If Seusi says I'm the father, I'll marry her," said a young man. "How should I know," was Seusi's honest answer.

We had little outside social life — and did not miss it. I contrived a costume composed of as little as possible — that began with a sunburnt, Victorian neck decolletage and ended with bare legs and sandals. In 1903 that was not done. Alban decorated my instep with my initials done in purple ink — one day at tea-time — it was to him just an open spot that called for decoration. But weeks later at a dance at the end of the lake, a second-rate, little Austrian officer introduced himself and told me all about my initials. What a busy garrison it must have been[!]

The end of summer was dreadful. To get into a tight high collar, hour glass [*sic*] stays, and high button shoes was constraint every muscle resisted.

I don't know when I was in Vienna with Alban and Smaragda, but that was fun too. Once in midsummer we were given orchestra seats at the opera. Smaragda and Alban generally sat in the gallery — following the score with a flashlight and giving free vent to their opinions on the performance (I'm not sure the police didn't threaten to eject them at times). On this occasion, they both assumed bored and haughty expressions and looking about at the empty seats, "Alle Unser Freunde sind auf Ihren Land gutern [*sic*] — (adding [hastily]) — "Oder in der [dritten] Gallerie."⁹

We all saw [Kainz¹⁰] play Hamlet and I cried [and] Alban's brother Charley said "Na Fridl was hast,"¹¹ which bit of cheek revived me. Another time we were at some play and when I removed a little blue and beige satin toque Alban said, "Couldn't you introduce me to your

6 *Bygmester Solness*, in English normally titled *The Master Builder*. See also p. 31 in Bryan Simms and Charlotte Erwin's biography of Berg.

7 *Reigen* is by Arthur Schnitzler, not Wedekind. See also Christina Gier's article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411890701617735>

8 "Mm — maidenlike reading." Presumably, "lecture" means *Lektüre*.

9 "All our friends have gone off to their estates — or to the third gallery."

10 The Austrian actor Josef Kainz.

11 "So, Fridl, what's up?"

milliner? She is obviously a poet.” He took such a vivid interest in everything. (And it was a nice toque.)

Long steps leading from Art Galleries or Royal Palaces were too much for us. Alban always went before us, bowing in [kingly] fashion to right and left and saying “Mein Volk” to astonished scrub women and drosche drivers, occasionally addressing a gracious word over his shoulder to us “Hof Damen!” Whatever the game one fell instantly into it. “I think it would do those people good to have us know them,” Alban or Smaragda might say — and that meant that when you got up to some particularly pompous Mama with a daughter or two, you all bowed low, with utmost gravity and formality. Mother and daughter nudged each other, each sure the other knew us and had rudely forgotten to bow. It gave families something to discuss, we hoped.

Once I dined in an oval dining room at the Bergs. It had belonged to the mistress of an archduke. The archduke who evidently got ideas hard when he got one had had a stucco ceiling made with raised garlands of roses all around and in each garland a scroll saying “Sub Rosa.” I could not eat at once. I turned my face up to read every scroll to make sure some other sentiment hadn’t crept in. Alban was entertained to see my poor neck going around and around — but only commented, “Ja — verrücht [*sic*].”¹² He was always a most sensitive and responsive companion.

I cannot remember his ever doing a selfish thing or saying an unkind one. Once his brother — the successful businessman from America — descended on us at Berghof for a vacation. American energy had to have outlets, so Herman Berg insisted a long disused path to the lake must be clear of brush. It was all very futile as no one wanted the path and no one ever used it after it was cleared. However, Alban politely cleared brush hour after hour. Then the American brother who had decidedly overdone it — with a city man’s frantic attack on the country; went to bed with gruesome rheumatic pains and proved the most i[rr]itable of patients. Alban nursed him solicitously while the rest of us raged at this second onslaught on Alban’s time and patience.

I used his time and patience heavily during my last three days at Berghof. An attack of tonsilitis had given me a high fever which made me very lively. On the first day I wrote an act of a play. I[n] the evening Alban came in and I read it aloud, and he gravely criticized. On each of the two succeeding days I wrote another act which I read him in the evening. And that was my last vivid Berghof impression, as I left for America early next morning. That very bad play was performed at Wellesley College that fall — but its only claim on posterity is that it provided one more occasion for the exercise of Alban’s kindness and sympathy.

Frida Semler Seabury

¹² “Yup — gone mad.”

*I am sending on these very personal notes because of their picture of Alban Berg as a very young man — a very gay, very sweet person.*¹³

¹³ Added in handwriting, like her signature.

Claude's Commentary

Once I dined in an oval dining room ... He was always a most sensitive and responsive companion:

The archduke evidently wasn't a man of many ideas, but when he did have one, he committed to it fully ("got ideas hard"): in this case, the idea of decorating the ceiling with garlands of roses, each containing a scroll reading "Sub Rosa." [...]

Frida's reaction is the comic core of the passage: She's so struck by the cheek of this — a room built for clandestine love, papered in winking reminders of its own clandestineness — that she can't focus on her food. [...]

The closing line — "[Alban] was always a most sensitive and responsive companion" — is dry irony. His "sensitivity" here consists of enjoying her discomfiture rather than reassuring her, which is consistent with the impish, teasing Alban we've seen throughout the essay (the milk-glass anecdote, the "tact à l'Américaine" game, the candle).

I contrived a costume ... What a busy garrison it must have been:

The phrase "it was to him just an open spot that called for decoration" is doing a lot of work — it's her way of assuring the reader (and perhaps herself) that Alban's intentions were entirely innocent and artistic. But the very fact that she feels the need to explain it suggests she's aware how the scene might look to an outside observer.

And there's something telling in the physical intimacy involved: painting someone's bare instep requires kneeling at their feet, holding their foot, attending closely to their skin. That's not nothing, especially in 1903. The officer's reaction confirms that her bare feet and legs were quite visible and noteworthy — which means Alban's access to them was equally noteworthy.

The essay overall has this quality of protesting, gently but repeatedly, that everything was perfectly innocent and cheerful and platonic. She's at pains to describe Alban as universally kind and attentive — to everyone, to his mother, to her brother, to sick guests. [...] Frida was sixteen, Alban eighteen. She's writing this decades later, and the tone is that of someone treasuring a memory while also carefully managing it for public consumption. "It was to him just an open spot that called for decoration" may well be true — and it may also be exactly the kind of thing you'd write if it wasn't entirely true, and you knew your readers would take you at your word.