

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 27 (1959)
Heft: 11

Artikel: Letter from Athens
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570413>

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Letter from Athens

This is Alfred's birthday.

Every year for the past fifteen, I have managed to be alone on this day. The children are upstairs fast asleep, and my wife — on a skillfully planted suggestion — has gone to see her parents. While the sunset lingered before the long twilight of late October, I sat and smoked a little, and listened to some of his favored music: an aria of Handel's, a song cycle of Beethoven's. From the window there moves a vague small breeze from the lake, fluttering the thin lawn curtain; the peaks of the snowy mountains across the water are pulsing with the angry rose and gold and purple of a magnificent sky.

I have finished re-reading the poems that Alfred wrote during the war. The last photograph I took of him in his old blue uniform stands in its thin silver frame before me on the desk. And all that remains now of this ritual of autumn are the letters, fitted into the enamelled brass box, and a reading of them. In the last glow of light the jewels set in the peacock's tail wink, or seem to — almost hypnotically they pull me out of my comfortable study, and back the many years . . .

. . . to the spring of 1944, when I was stationed with my military unit in northern Germany, on the shores of the cold North Sea. To a cool April evening, late, when — my orderly having left for the day — I sat alone in the bungalow assigned to me as an officer, and waited for my friend's knock upon the door. I was drinking a bit of wine, thinking of him, so tender, so amiably indolent, content to remain an enlisted man in the ranks while I — driven by an uncomfortable ambition within me — strove always to rise higher. Yet there were rewards, and not the least of them was having quarters private enough to entertain my friend for as long as he could stay.

The knock came, so suddenly that I spilled a bit of wine on the table. I opened the door. He stood against the darkness, the light from the small fireplace full on him — big, loose-jointed with the easy animal grace of the young, the early tan dark upon his young skin, his blond hair a riot of untameable curls tight upon his head.

I grabbed his hand and pulled him in, and with one foot closed the door. And then for a long moment without words, our arms were around each other in tight embrace. He sighed at last, and raised his head from my shoulder.

«Two weeks?» I asked, and he nodded and smiled, and fitted his head once more against me, so that the faint male odor of his hair came into my nostrils . . .

Those were two weeks of cloudless days for us — or almost so. The time blended into one unbroken harmony. During the first days after his arrival, Alfred spent hours upon the couch while I was about my duties. He had books to read and cigarettes to smoke, a bottle at hand should he want it, and his writing materials near. When I returned from duty at night, he always seemed serene and happy — serene, that is, after the first resting calmed him, for when he came his nerves were raw from soldiering — his moods changed quickly, from passion to affection to withdrawal, almost; and sometimes he smoked and drank too much.

Or was *all* the unease from soldiering? I said cloudless days, and in truth we hardly felt any shadow, save one small thing . . .

I had taken part of my own leave for his last week with me, and surprisingly enough, we had a few days of wonderfully warm weather. We walked for hours along the shore of the sea, sometimes picking up small shells, or kicking fountains of sand with our boots. We found some driftwood and took off our clothes, and lay upon it naked.

And lying there, the little shadow . . . my coming marriage. I was a fool, I suppose, but that burning inside me, that ambition to rise, told me that an officer — to be a good officer — must be married and have children.

He turned sidewise to me as we lay on the driftwood, and smiled with his lips, but his blue eyes did not. «Yes,» he said, «you must get married. A man like you, strong and healthy as you are, and with your instincts, needs children of his own.» It was hard for him to say it. He understood, but could not share, the mixture of attractions within me that pulled me first to him, and then to the woman that I was to marry.

I looked at the little golden river of hair that ran from his chest down the center of his belly. «Yes, I suppose I must,» I said absently, wondering what kind of new way we would find to be together after I had a wife, wondering if it would be fair. I reached over to touch his arm, and his hand closed tightly over mine, and for an instant he pressed it hard into his flesh. And then he let me go, and laughed. «The water . . .» he said. The landward tide already curled around his toes, and we left the driftwood and went slowly up the beach.

When the day of his leaving came, I hated it. I hated the old blue uniform he put on again, I hated the war. He lifted his heavy rucksack and shouldered his gun. And at the door he turned and looked around and said, «This room — it'll always be home for me, for you made it so.» In that moment I realized how lonely he was, and what the war had done to him, and how much he needed the protection of my love, and yet how forthrightly he faced what was to come.

His train was overcrowded. He was just able to squeeze on, and keep a foot-space near a window. When the train started, he stretched his hand out and down for a last touch. It was a silent goodbye, yet we were sure not a final one — a parting of the moment, with the promise of a better future soon.

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I sighed. The room had grown dark, and I reached over to turn on the lamp on the desk. All that remained of him now was the letters; the rest was gone — the laughter, the handclaps, the presence of his magnificent young body — and where? I shall never know, I presume, what part I played in his death — if die he did. But my conscience is severe with me.

The letters in the box are in order. I was always meticulous, I suppose. Alfred laughed at me for it; and later there was Lucille to twit me for my methodical habits.

The first: a postcard from Berlin. «I spent a sleepless night in an air-raid shelter; we had a very bad raid.»

The second, a letter: southward to Silesia. «On the summits of the Altvater hills there is still some snow. The sky is cloudlessly and brilliantly blue. The silver birches along the way glitter white and black in the sunshine of spring. We must go walking here after the war.»

The third, on his arrival at the small Czech university town where he was to spend the next three months in training. Descriptions: standing guard, barracks' life, eighty in a 'room', the eight men in his squad group . . .

. . . and the first appearance of the name of Paul, in those last five letters from Czechoslovakia. «I cannot tell you,» he wrote once, «what it means after all those years of mental starvation to meet someone with whom you can really talk, someone who is still a *person*, even after all the dreary years of being a soldier. Paul has kept his judgments and personality intact, and we see alike on nearly everything. We have found a small Czech inn. The landlord speaks some German, and though he hates Germany, his hatred is not *for* us or *against* us as men. Paul and I sit here on many an evening when we're off duty. The schnapps is excellent — and cheap.»

He wrote of even going to the opera, to see *The Bartered Bride* in Czech. Officially it was off-limits to German soldiers, but the landlord got the seats; and Alfred spoke of the thick waves of hostility when they entered, the sea of utter silence through which they moved heavily to their places as through a tangible quicksand. «But at the end of a superb first act, we clapped as wildly as everyone else. The ice was broken; faces turned towards us, and there were some smiles; music had once more won the day.»

Although Paul's name appeared more and more in Alfred's letters, I was not yet jealous; rather, I felt thankful that he had found someone who was a friend. When the final examinations of his special training came, he passed them with honors; and that meant he would be attached to a unit inside Germany. This was great luck, and I felt relieved to know that he would not be going outside the country.

But then — alas! — the beginning of the end. For Alfred, it took the form of a dilemma, and he found himself hanging on its horns. But I felt that he was being honest when he wrote to me:

«I should not have told you that I was given a chance to stay in Germany. But at the moment I felt happy to know that we would not be completely parted, and that is what I had hoped. When I later learned that my friends were going to the Balkans, I felt like a traitor. Paul told me all about it last night at the inn, and we both were depressed. I think it was not until that moment that we realized how much our companionship had meant to us during the last months.» (Why was it always at that point that my hand invariably tightened on the flimsy page of paper, and crumpled it?)

He went on. »I could not but feel that Paul disliked the idea of our being parted. I could not sleep last night. On the one hand, the offer of a relatively secure job in Germany — on the other, my friends going to the Balkans.»

Possibly he could not see, when he wrote those words, the real reason for his wanting to go to the Balkans, for love can sometimes blind even the instinct of self-preservation. But it was as clear to me, at my distance, reading his words, as if he had voiced it aloud. And how often in the nights that followed I saw him tightly in the embrace of the faceless young man whose name was Paul . . .

The rest of that letter emphasized the truth of what I could see, and what was still hidden from Alfred. «Don't be angry, then, when I tell you I volunteered for the Balkans. They must have thought me mad when I reported at the regimental office. The old staff sergeant, sober for a wonder, reminded me of the proverb that no soldier should take fate into his hands. But I was stubborn. The pleasure of my friends in knowing I am going with them is enough reward. I told Paul first. He looked so thunderstruck that I had to smile, and then he smiled too. He grabbed me around the shoulder and said he'd do his damndest never to let me regret my decision. I knew I had done the right thing. Now all I need is a word from you telling me I have. Write me at once, in care of Elisabeth in Vienna; we'll be stopping there.»

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The wind had grown more chill. My hands were trembling as I lighted a cigarette. The Vienna letters lay before me, their postmarks fading, the paper yellowing a little. The golden sunny interlude of Vienna! The desperate hopes and fears of war make each tiny escape from its harrowings all the more precious; and here — in a little bubble encased and protected for the moment — was a small period of time, of joyous time, for Paul and Alfred. And I, hard at work at the now-pleasant, now-painful task of re-creating the past, saw them as the happy guests of Elisabeth.

As Alfred had requested, I wrote at once to him in Vienna; and then on an impulse sent off a short note to Paul. In it I asked him to keep an eye on

Alfred, and told him of Alfred's wild recklessness in the face of danger. Paul's answer was equally short. «Don't worry,» he said, «I'll always be at Alfred's side, no matter what the future holds for us. What happens to him will happen to me as well.»

There were five letters from Vienna, each very long, one for each day they were at Elisabeth's. Their commanding officer, himself liking the idea of a little interlude, asked only for an answer at roll-call twice a day; the rest of the time was theirs.

Elisabeth was an old friend of Alfred's and mine; she knew all about us, and understood and sympathized. On that first evening, she was on air-raid duty, so Paul and Alfred went out to the Schönbrunn gardens to enjoy the velvet evening. And luck was with them. As they stood peering through the wrought-iron gates, already locked against the night, an old park guard and his wife appeared. And since Alfred and Paul were, after all, two of 'their boys', they gave them the key; all they had to do on leaving the park was drop it in a letter box.

So it came about that for two whole hours the lovely gardens of Schönbrunn belonged exclusively to Alfred and Paul. The moon was full; it fell whitely upon the statues, and turned the grass darker, into a black and silver carpet. It was a night for love and lovers, and in the two hours as they wandered through the gardens, they knew that their friendship was past, that it had been a stage for passing, and that they were now upon the high plateau of love.

They sat on a bench high up in the gardens, and watched the cold and misty light upon the ancient castle down below them. «It is still as Canaletto painted it centuries ago,» Alfred said once. And Paul's arm crept around his shoulder. In the moonlight they looked at each other, silent, wordlessly happy, as the realization came to them both at once.

Still wrapped in that vivid silence they went back to town. Elisabeth had given them her own bedroom; the walls were lined with books, and panelled in dark rich wood. They stood and looked at the shelves, and touched the leather bindings, and talked for a while, reluctant for some odd reason to retire, suddenly shy of each other in their new-found love.

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Two letters from Elisabeth fill in a great many details. She was the only one of our friends who ever was destined to meet Paul, and — despite everything — I was glad that she liked him. «He is great and tall and dark and quiet,» she wrote, «and has enough peace in himself for both of them. And something of that calm seems to have been absorbed by Alfred. Often he is so pensive that one hardly dares speak to him. He has talked a lot of you and your approaching marriage. And then suddenly from time to time his old self reappears; once he took me in his arms and kissed me madly. Mama was shocked. On the whole, he seems restless.»

The two were lucky again in Vienna; they had the chance to see everything Alfred wanted, operas and plays which he and I had shared in the past, and which he now shared with Paul. And finally at the end of their five days, Elisabeth saw them off at the station. She took some snapshots of them, which are here before me on the desk. In all of them, Alfred is smiling, but Paul looks grave — an extremely handsome young man, dark, almost Italian in the wide-spacing of his features; his yebrows are heavy, and there is a kind of cruelty, almost, round the mouth — or perhaps it is only firmness. His broad shoulders and trim waist are visible even through the ill-fitting uniform; he holds himself unconsciously straight, against Alfred's relaxation.

There are four letters left, two from a small Roumanian town near Bucharest, where they were quartered for a little while, living on an old farm. It would be difficult to prove that these two were written in a time of war, for they have a Theocritan sound of peace and quiet and harvest-home. «The farmyard is nearly square and surrounded by barns and buildings, and we are awakened every morning by the golden trumpets of six red roosters. The wine is marvellous, but quite expensive. We go swimming in a cool green river every day, we take long walks through the forest, and down the country lanes; and we have rested in the dark yellow shade of the immortal corn, the fields of which stretch far away... I don't know what is happening to me; all I know is that it is good. Pray for me, and that our own love will survive...»

I looked down at the last two envelopes. It was hardly necessary to open them, for I knew them by heart, each hurried looping of the letters, the hasty scrawl in pencil. In the next room the clock ticked breathlessly on, and a great weight seemed heavy on my shoulders as in my mind I formed the words of the first one:

«This morning the orders came that Paul and I, and our group, will go by air to Athens in the early afternoon, to join a small unit operating in the Greek mountains. I do not know more. All I can feel is a surging elation that I shall see the Acropolis after all, the crowning gift of fate to me. When late this afternoon I shall look down for the first time upon the city, the temple, and the sea, I shall think of you, and you will know that my greatest dream has come true.»

And the last one. Though I knew its words, I opened it and read:

«It is late at night. A little earlier this evening we had the chance to visit the Acropolis. When we passed the statues at the little temple, on our way to the Parthenon, which I saw rising in the purple dusk against the dark sky, I saw there too the symbol of my whole life, and I knew that I had returned home. I leaned my head in love against a column; it was still warm to my cheek. I touched it with incredible gratitude. All of a sudden *you* were very near to me, dearest, here on that spot of earth which has given its name to our love. We were both very silent, Paul and I. Only once did he say very quietly, 'I wish someone else could share this moment with us,' and though he did not mention your name, his words filled me with happiness.

«We shall be leaving in the morning. I have always been honest with you, so I must tell you that we head for that part of the country where the fighting is the worst. There may be no letters from me for some time.

«But don't worry! Since this afternoon when Greece appeared below my eyes, I have won back all my faith in life. And Paul's remembering you tonight on the Acropolis crowned it all. What can happen to me? *You* live with me, and *he* is at my side. Am I not invulnerable?»

I put the letter down and looked out at the night. Within the black square of the window, a single dead leaf fell soundlessly, catching the light from my lamp in its erratic course, dipping from side to side. And as I have done every year in the past — though it is senseless — I picked up the brass letter box with the peacock winking on its lid, and in the most futile and fruitless of all gestures, turned it upside down, and shook it gently. In the first two years, some tiny fragments of tobacco fell out, and later a grain or two of dust.

But this year, as for many past, there is nothing at all upon the dark green writing pad.

—Philip Young