



ALFRED NOBEL, BERTHA VON SUTTNER & THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

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Peace Palace
Library

Published as "*The Odd Couple*" in Scanorama 23 no. 11 (November 1993): 52-56. Illustrated.

Source: <http://www.irwinabrams.com>

In 1876 the following want ad appeared in a Viennese newspaper: "A very wealthy, cultured, elderly gentleman, living in Paris, desires to find a lady also of mature years, familiar with languages, as secretary and manager of his household."

The gentleman is Alfred Nobel, the dynamite millionaire, and the woman who answers the advertisement is to become the most renowned peace activist and one of the most famous women of her day. She influences Nobel in establishing his peace prize, which she wins herself in 1905. In 1993, on the 150th anniversary of her birth, among other events in her honor, an important exhibit will be traveling throughout Europe until the end of 1994.

The beginning of this story is like the libretto of a Viennese operetta. In the baronial palace of the von Suttner family in Vienna, the mother sits reading her newspaper but worrying about her youngest son, the handsome and popular Arthur, who should marry wealth and repair the family fortunes, but who has fallen in love with Bertha von Kinsky, the governess of her four daughters.

Such a marriage would be impossible. Bertha is a countess, to be sure, and her father, who died before she was born, was a field marshal, but it is known that her mother gambled away all the family money, and Bertha is not only impoverished but seven years older than Arthur. How can the baroness separate them?

Then her eye falls upon the want ad. A gift from Heaven! Bertha is certainly well qualified: she is talented and intelligent, knows English, French and Italian, has been brought up with all the social graces and is most attractive indeed, too much so, for Arthur. But Paris would be far away.

The baroness shows the advertisement to Bertha, who realizes that marrying Arthur is out of the question and that she can no longer remain with the family. She writes to the "elderly gentleman" in Paris, and after an exchange of letters he offers her the position. She and Arthur, both broken-hearted, have a tearful farewell. He kneels before her and humbly kisses the hem of her gown, saying, "Thy love has taught me to know a happiness which shall consecrate all my life. Farewell."

In Paris Bertha finds her employer not so elderly, only forty-three, and the active head of an international network of dynamite factories. He is a Swede, but a true cosmopolitan, often traveling, but now settling in Paris with a residence and laboratory in the Avenue de Malakoff (now occupied by the Laotian embassy, the avenue renamed Poincaré). Twenty years later Bertha writes Nobel about this first meeting, giving one of the best pen pictures of him that we have: "A thinker, a poet, a man both kindly and bitter, unhappy and light-hearted given to superb flights of mind and to malicious suspicions, passionately in love with the far horizons of human thoughts and profoundly distrustful of the pettiness of human folly, understanding everything and hoping for nothing, so you seemed to me. And twenty years have done nothing to efface that image."

Since Bertha's rooms at the Avenue de Malakoff are not yet ready, Nobel spends the time showing her the city in his newly invented rubber-wheeled coach. He is a brilliant conversationalist, and they have lively talks together. He is charmed by the beautiful countess and may well entertain thoughts of a more exalted position for Bertha that would end his loneliness. Divining her secret sorrow, he asks



her, "Are you free?" She tells him the whole story, and he advises her to break off any correspondence with Arthur and to forget.

But this is not to be. After some days Nobel is called to Sweden on business. Bertha receives two telegrams, one from Stockholm telling her that he has arrived safely, but the other from Vienna, saying, "I cannot live without thee."

"My soul gave a cry, 'Nor I without thee,'" she recalls in her memoirs. Thereupon Bertha sells a valuable diamond, pays her hotel bill, buys a train ticket, writes an apology to Nobel, and is soon with her Arthur in Vienna. They are married in secret and elope to the Caucasus, in present-day Georgia, invited by a princess who is Bertha's friend.

Is it a coincidence that later in the same year Nobel meets a pretty clerk in a flower shop in an Austrian spa and seeks to end his loneliness by taking her as his mistress? For him it is the beginning of a long affair which brings more sorrow than joy.

Our story could have ended with Bertha's departure from Paris, but she keeps up correspondence with Nobel from the Caucasus and sends him copies of her books, as she and her husband become established writers in their nine years of exile. After they return to Vienna, finally forgiven by Arthur's parents, their royalties enable them to take a trip to Paris, where they are both warmly received by Nobel.

The trip has another consequence. During the Caucasus years Bertha and Arthur have read voraciously and become social critics and opponents of war. Now in 1887 in Paris Bertha first hears that there is such a thing as a peace movement, actually working to put an end to war, and she decides to devote her literary talents to this cause.

The result is the novel *Die Waffen nieder!* ("Ground Arms" or "Lay Down Your Arms"), published in 1889, the story of a woman who suffers tragedy after tragedy through the wars of the mid-19th century. The book becomes a best seller, is translated into more than a dozen languages, and is even compared by Tolstoy to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which helped banish the evil of slavery from the United States.

The book brings Bertha herself into the peace movement, which is organizing internationally in the early 1890s. She writes, lectures, organizes peace societies, takes a leading role at peace congresses and becomes recognized as the movement's general-en-chef, a remarkable achievement for a woman in this period.

The correspondence between Bertha and Nobel, carried on in French, English and German, shows a close personal rapport and testifies to her influence.

He praises her novel and looks forward to shaking her hand, "that hand of an amazon who so valiantly makes war on war." He chides her for crying "down with arms," when she is making such good use of her own weapons, "the charm of your style and the grandeur of your ideas," which would carry so much further than the guns of the armies, which he calls "the implements of Hell." He signs in English, "Yours for ever and more than ever."

Nobel has long been interested in world peace. Dynamite, the basis of his fortune, was developed for civilian uses, such as digging canals, building railroads and mining. Not until the 1880s does he turn his attention to munitions. However, he tells Bertha, "Perhaps my factories will put an end to war even sooner than your Congresses; on the day when two army corps will be able to annihilate each other in a second, all civilized nations will recoil with horror and disband their troops."

He is skeptical about the propaganda methods of the peace societies, but he is willing to be persuaded. "Inform me, convince me," he tells Bertha, "and then I will do something great for the movement." She sends him a stream of information about its progress, and he responds with generous checks in support of her activities. But she keeps imploring him to engage himself actively in



the movement, and she wonders whether his gifts are made out of friendship rather than from conviction.

In September 1895 she writes hoping that her letters are awakening some echo of sympathy " ... not for the author, but for the work which is dear to her: throw all these little papers into the wastebasket, but keep in the depths of your heart a voice which says to you: here is a woman, who in spite of the indifference and opposition her ideas encounter, perseveres in her task, and a woman who has confidence in me."

Then more news of the movement, still another invitation to visit them, and she concludes, "So, quick into the wastebasket!"

Far from throwing her letters away, Nobel carefully preserves them, and her pleading letter is filed with the others at the Royal Library in Stockholm. Bertha is less orderly, and among her papers, preserved at the United Nations Library in Geneva, there is no reply from him. But we can imagine how Nobel smiles as he reads her letter, for he has already made provision for rewarding achievements for peace in the will he drafted in 1893.

Two months after receiving her letter, in November 1895, Nobel revises his testament for the last time. It now provides that the income of most of his estate is to be used to establish the peace prize and four others for scientific and literary attainments that are to be presented by Swedish bodies in Stockholm.

The peace prize is to be awarded in the capital of Norway, in 1895 still in a royal union with Sweden, by a committee of five to be elected by the Norwegian parliament. It is to go to "the person who shall have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses."

In 1896, the last year of Nobel's life, he is ill and his letters to Bertha are fewer. He once told her of his idea for a peace prize, but she has no idea that he has actually written this into his will. In November she says in her last letter: Give a lever to Archimedes and give a million to our International Peace Bureau; it will lift up the world. Also, this is what I beg of you, my hands joined in supplication, never withdraw your support from us -- never, not even from beyond the grave, which awaits us all.

Nobel's final letter to her, written shortly before his death on 10th December, is witty and mocking like so many others: "I, who don't have a heart metaphorically speaking, I do have such an organ, and I feel it." He goes on to say that he is delighted to see the progress which the peace movement is making, and he pays tribute to those like herself, "who chase away prejudices and shadows." He signs in English, "heartily yours."

Nobel clearly expects his friend to receive one of the first of his peace awards. This does not happen when the five prizes are first granted in 1901, and it is not until 1905 that she is finally awarded the prize that Nobel established with her in mind.

Bertha von Suttner dies in 1914, just before the war began which she had predicted would take place if the statesmen did not heed what she and her colleagues were urging. The current traveling exhibit which honors her was put together, appropriately, in Geneva in the buildings of the United Nations, the kind of organization of which she once dreamed and which holds the potential to realize her highest hopes for world peace.

Meanwhile, the Norwegian Nobel Committees, using a liberal interpretation of Nobel's phrase, "fraternity between nations," have expanded the meaning of peace to make of Nobel's prize the most prestigious award in the world for service to humanity, which includes work for human rights. But its origins are still to be found in the friendship of the Swedish inventor for the Austrian countess who answered his want ad.

