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Klaus Mann

Princeton N.J.
65 Stockton Street

November 22 , 1939

Dear Mr. Greenslet,

I have an idea for a new book, and I want to tell you about it before discussing it with any other publisher.

The book I have in mind is to be a series of stories, half epic half essayistic in character, dealing with the "distinguished visitors" Europe has sent to this country in the XIX. century. I may include as well some personalities who came during the last decades of the XVIII. century, and some celebrities who have been visiting here in the period from 1900 to 1914^{or even to 1924.} However, the majority of the characters I want to describe, should belong to the XIX. century epoch.

I will exclude all those men who actually have become Americans, such as Carl Schurz. I shall prefer, of course, the varied cases of those who had grotesque or tragic adventures, any kind of odd or funny experiences, while they were travelling in this country.

I may start with some figure of the French Revolution period, probably not with Lafayette whose story is somewhat too well known. I didn't make up my mind as yet which figure I am going to choose. There are several ones, however, whose stories would be interesting enough.

I want to include a chapter dealing with the Napoléon Bonaparte family. There are, as you know, all those quite amusing stories about Joseph of Spain, Napoléon's brother, who used

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to live near Philadelphia for quite a while. There are the stories on Jérôme Bonaparte who fell in love with the daughter of the Mayor of Baltimore, was forbidden to marry her but made her a child. Still today an American society lady is calling herself Madame Jérôme Napoléon Bonaparte, as I am told... And there is the strange visit of Louis Bonaparte, the later Napoléon III, who spent a year or so in this country, after one of his unsuccessful coup d'état. ... I want to recall the famous lecture tour of Dickens; the somehow fantastic trip of young Oscar Wilde; the triumphant and at once depressing appearances of Tschaiakowsky; the sensational starring tours of Sarah Bernhardt, who plaid "L'Aiglon" with a wooden leg, caught a cold on a train, and tried to get a fortune from the railway company. I want to show the composer Dvorčac discovering "the New World", and I want to describe the melodramatic death scene of Eleonora Duse in the city of Pittsburg. Another mysterious and moving death story is that of the Danish author Herman Bang who died in a Pullman car, and was not recognized for some time since he did not have any papers. (The character and the works of Bang seem to me especially fascinating. His own death could be the last chapter of one of his novels ...) I want to present Gustav Mahler, coming from Vienna, hunted by a sort of primitive antisemitism which was pretty strong and dangerous in Austria, already at that faraway time. Maybe I will include Caruso and la Melba, and certainly

Nijinsky, who thought he was a horse and could fly, and perhaps Paganini, in an earlier part of the book. I will tell the story of Maxim Gorki who had to go to Ellis Island as he was travelling with his lady friend, and I want to report about one of the half-serious half-phony "founders of a new religion": perhaps Rudolf Steiner, the founder of anthroposophy, or else Krishnamurti, the Indian Christ. I consider using Leon Trotsky as the last case.

I think there shouldn't be more than 12 or 15 stories altogether, each one between 20 and 25 pages long. I will try to give not only the "American adventures" of the man in question, but also his own background, the function he had in his homeland's culture, and the most significant facts about his work and biography. Besides, I want to include as many details as possible about the conditions he found in this country and about the people he met. (Oscar Wilde's meeting with Walt Whitman - just to give one example.)

...I always have considered this blending of narrative and analytic style as a sort of "literary speciality" of mine. The stories of the "distinguished visitors" should have half the character of amusing novelettes, half of essayistic portraits. Certain chapters of "Escape to Life" - the "Portrait of our Father", for example - may convince you that I possess some experience in this kind of writing. There may be a sort of spiritual connection - although, of course, no actual resemblance - between the theme of "Distinguished Visitors", and the topic of "Escape to Life". - I will try, this time, to write the text in English, perhaps with the collaboration of some American friend.

Please let me know if you are interested.

Yours very sincerely,