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My Fatherland, the Pullman.

Mann, Erika

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My parents aren't famous

MY PARENTS aren't famous, thank God! Perhaps that statement is too strong. It represents only one point of view, mine, and one must experience both sides of a question, the sage says, before making up one's mind. Obviously I haven't experienced the other side or I wouldn't be in a position to write this piece. My parents blush unseen in sweet obscurity, performing in their daily deeds nothing more sensational than the making of enough money to send their son to college, and my experience of the child-of-famous-parent matter has been only second hand.

It came about through the person of a youth named Melville, who was my particular friend and boon companion at a certain school I attended for a couple of seasons in my twelfth and thirteenth years. Melville was modest and retiring in spirit, with serene blue eyes and a delicate habit of stroking the lobe of his left ear in a meditative manner. I knew nothing of his family and background, for neither of us was interested in the other's domestic affairs. Melville would not have harmed a fly and disliked the sound of loud noises and rough talk. He was dreamy and somewhat astigmatic and wanted nothing from the world but a quiet life. And this he had until the tragedy which I shall now tell you.

At our school was an elderly virgin whose duties were to sweep the halls and keep the classrooms reasonably spic. She was an ardent subscriber to several colorful journals of love and romance, but it appeared that she also read, though with less devotion, a certain national women's magazine. It was a copy of the latter that, in mischievous spirit, she handed one day to the most hardboiled and pugnacious of our fellow students.

One horrible afternoon, as Melville and I were crossing the yard, we were suddenly surrounded by a mob of howling boys. The ring-leader brandished something in his hand. A page of paper torn, obviously, from a magazine. While Melville, pale and aghast, stood trapped by the others, this brute read aloud.

"My Little Sweetheart," he declaimed, "by Mary Aspinwall Shopes."

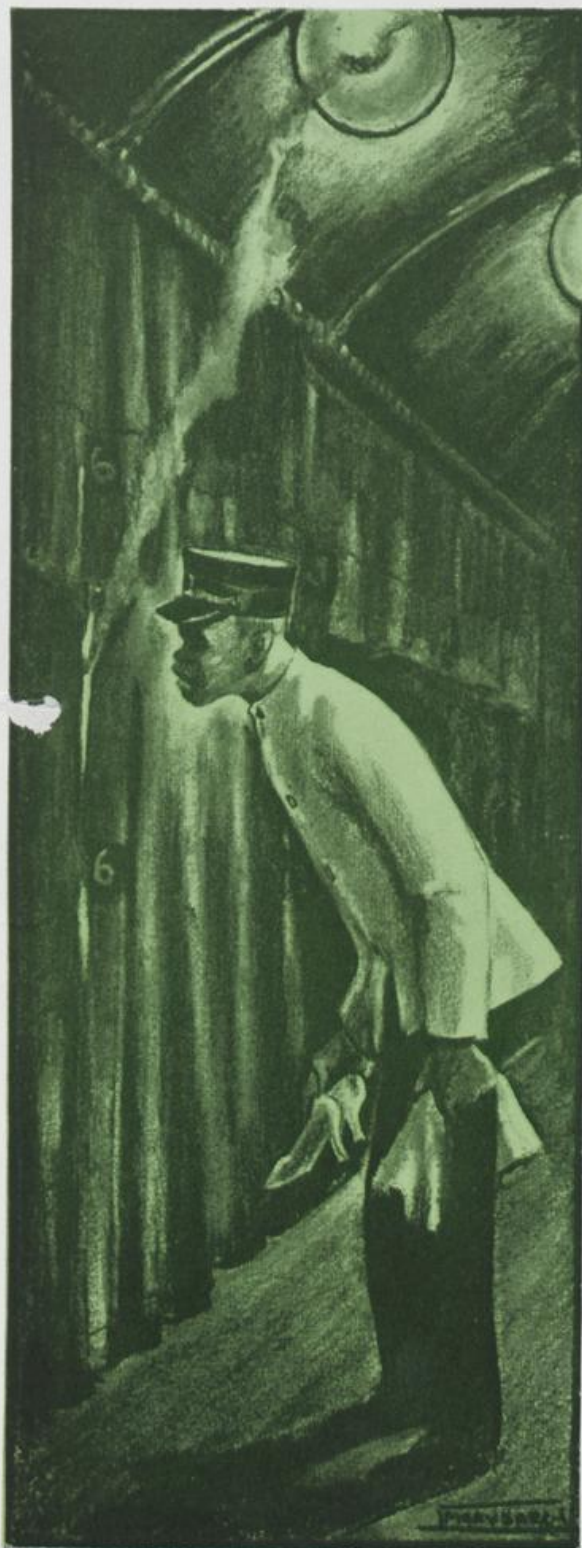
On the page was the picture of a sweetly smiling lady with one hand draped around the shoulder of a boy who was beyond mistake my friend. It seemed that Mary Aspinwall Shopes was Melville's mother. It seemed further that she was one of the most (Continued on page 68)

The "anonymous" offspring of inconspicuous parents cheerfully renounces the blessings of all illustrious trail-blazing

MY FATHERLAND,

THE PULLMAN

Pæan to an American institution, by Erika Mann,



WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME—whether in New Paltz, Omaha, or in Seattle, Washington—"Well Miss Mann, and where are you at home?"—I always answer: "My fatherland is the Pullman." This answer usually evokes a little mirth for everyone thinks I am joking. As a matter of fact I have spoken the unadorned truth. I am really at home in a lower berth and nowhere else on earth. Scenes, cities, hotels vary; I speak before the City Women's Club in one city, before teachers in another, before anti-fascists in a third. Yesterday I hid in the very depths of my coat to guard against a Middle Western blizzard, today I seek refuge from the sun under palm trees. Every evening, however, snugly tucked away behind green curtains, the old homestead, my lower berth, awaits me. There I find two pillows, arranged by expert hands, two lights at the head and foot of my bed, the most acceptable net destined to hold my night literature and the cross-shelf for my travelling bag. I do not feel at all strange in the lower berth and I know how to appreciate its good as well as its irksome qualities, just as some one who has lived in the same apartment since time immemorial is capable of taking new pleasure daily in the comfortable armchair and resents that annoying spot on the wall (eleven years ago it rained in here).

I know and like the Pullman porters, as the sentimental owner of that apartment knows and likes his butler. Their dark faces above their white coats are as one face to me. I identify them collectively (knowing full well that in so doing I am acting stupidly, primitively and erroneously) and I consider every one of them good-natured, willing to be of help and despotic. They all possess a very noticeable pedagogic strain (just like the butler who has been in your service for fifteen years), but one can manage them by apparent subordination to their wishes. I know I am not allowed to smoke in a "lower." Of course, I do so nevertheless and the conversations with the various porters on this subject are as alike as two peas in a pod. "I told you, you mustn't smoke," the pedagogue says, pulling sternly at the curtains. "Not at all?" I ask, sanctimoniously feigning alarm. "This is the last one," I add in supplicating tones. Touched by my apparent submissiveness, the porter admonishes: "You'll burn yourself and the whole train; I'd better keep watch." Whereupon he stations himself near my berth, a faithful guardian of my slumbers, which are disturbed by jumbled dreams, dense cigarette smoke and rough bumps of the train.

I love my home, the Pullman—and never more so than when I compare it with the corresponding European institutions, the railroads on the continent. (I love America any-

L M A N

world citizen, daughter of Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann

Illustrated by Mary Sarg, portraitist, whose father is Tony, the Marionette Maker

way, unconditionally, but with particular passion whenever I think of Europe.) "Travelling companions" abroad are filled with hatred. Without any obvious reason one hates the other: a natural consequence of the overcrowded and nervous condition of the continent. You board the train and you are hated instantly. The conductor is your chief—even more—your jailer and there is nothing left for you to do but click your heels. As soon as you violate any of the rules of the institution in the slightest degree, you are fined. If the "smoking compartments" are filled, you may not smoke—for of course there are no club cars. Even in the dining car military discipline prevails. There are no towels in the dressing rooms—at best one single roller-towel, very badly soiled and distrustfully fastened. Mutual suspicion prevails.

But on the American trains the large dressing rooms are replete with the most pleasing comfort. Besides, since I always retire and get up at the most absurd hours, I have the dressing room to myself most of the time and daily delight anew in the fifteen clean small towels, the generous supply of cleansing tissues and the ice-water system which functions so splendidly. But each day anew I am upset by the following calamities: the paper cups which I use in cleaning my teeth are pointed—they are pyramidal and as a result cannot be placed in an upright position by themselves. I have unpacked my toothbrush, filled the cup with water, moistened the brush and now I should like to apply the toothpaste. There I am—in one hand the small cup (which I cannot put aside since it will not stand by itself), in the other the toothbrush. A hopeless situation. There is a way out, of course. Pour out the water, supply the brush with paste, fill the cup once more. But it would all be so easy if the cups were cylindrical. At the railroad stations I can never see what time it is (the wet spot in the apartment where it rained in eleven years ago); there are hardly ever any clocks at the stations. This is all the more vexatious since there is almost never a signboard which might divulge the name of the respective city to the traveller. I step off the train—where—I haven't any idea. What time is it and accordingly where could we be? I am in the dark on both scores. All of a sudden I feel betrayed and lost in the enormous vastness of this country. "When are we due to arrive at Los Angeles?" I ask the porter. "About day after tomorrow," he answers and this information sends shudders up and down my spine. By what immense scales are gauged intervals and time in this land—"about day after tomorrow"! And if suddenly my destination were twice twenty-four hours, no one would think anything about it in this country. I am beginning to treat time and space alike (all

at once Einstein's head with its silver crown of hair appears in my dreams). So and so many days are so and so many miles, nothing more. "Pullman miles are happy miles," the very appropriate sign says that hangs in my home, the Pullman. Therefore, since miles are equal to days, all days are happy ones, and I am happy and at home.

One of the wet spots on the wallpaper in that apartment is represented by the fact that my travelling home does not know the excellent institution of the round-trip *booklet*. Why must my combination ticket look like a long flag; why must I buy it by the yard and why aren't Pullman reservations included? Only for the purpose of confusing me, only to make it possible for conductors to commit irretrievable errors and detach three inches too much, so that I cannot proceed to Fort Worth; or for what other reason? Among the slight merits of the European Railway System may be listed the round-trip ticket bound in a small, readily surveyed, handy booklet. Every reservation (sleeper, chair car) may be found attached to the respective mileage, all leaves are perforated and arranged consecutively. The booklet practically precludes mistakes and you turn over the leaves as if it were a charming picture book. Well and good—the ceiling is wet and spotted at this old familiar place, I know that—and I prefer to cling to the thoroughly comfortable armchair of my apartment, instead of becoming provoked.

As we are about to reach Canada, it is high time to have my travelling flask filled, for there will be no opportunity for a drink for some time. My faithful old butler takes care of this for me and because he has served me loyally for so many years (and, too, in remembrance of nightly cigarettes in the lower) I am pretty close to asking him to join me in a drink from those pointed paper cups. But I realize at once that I must not do anything of the sort. Not only would he not accept, but he would be embarrassed and feel sorry for me. "How silly they are, these foreigners" he would think.

So, after having had my little drink all by myself, I remember that my faithful butler belongs to a Club, whose rules I must respect: it is the Club of the Pullman Porters, a defence weapon against the travellers' bad habit of calling them "George." It never would have occurred to me to call my friend "George." However, since I know that under no circumstances must it be done, it is difficult for me to refrain from doing so. "All right G.....gentlemen. . . ." I say and so to speak salute the entire venerable Club. "That's all for tonight." And with a grasp born of experience, I establish myself behind the olive-green curtains of my beautiful home, the American Pullman.