

The Porter, Ernest Hemingway

"The Porter" is a scene from the same unfinished and untitled novel as "A Train Trip."

The Porter

WHEN WE WENT TO BED MY FATHER said I might as well sleep in the lower berth because I would want to look out the window early in the morning. He said an upper berth did not make any difference to him and he would come to bed after a while. I undressed and put my clothes in the hammock and put on pajamas and got into bed. I turned off the light and pulled up the window curtain but it was cold if I sat up to look out and lying down in bed I could not see anything. My father took a suitcase out from under my berth, opened it on the bed, took out his pajamas and tossed them up to the upper berth, then he took a book out and the bottle and filled his flask.

"Turn on the light," I said.

"No," he said. "I don't need it. Are you sleepy, Jim?"

"I guess so."

"Get a good sleep," he said and closed the suitcase and put it back under the berth.

"Did you put your shoes out?"

"No," I said. They were in the hammock and I got up to get them but he found them and put them out in the aisle. He shut the curtain.

"Aren't you going to bed, sir?" the porter asked him.

"No," my father said. "I'm going to read a while up in the washroom."

"Yes, sir," the porter said. It was fine lying between the sheets with the thick blanket pulled up and it all dark and the country dark outside. There was a screen across the lower part of the window that was open and the air came in cold. The green curtain was buttoned tight and the car swayed but felt very solid and was going fast and once in a while you would hear the whistle. I went to sleep and when I woke up I looked out and we were going very slowly and crossing a big river. There were lights shining on the water and the iron framework of a bridge going by the window and my father was getting into the upper berth.

"Are you awake, Jimmy?"

"Yes. Where are we?"

"We're crossing into Canada now," he said. "But in the morning we'll be out of it."

I looked out of the window to see Canada but all I could see were railway yards and freight cars. We stopped and two men came by with torches and stopped and hit on the wheels with hammers. I could not see anything but the men crouching over by the wheels and opposite us freight cars and I crawled down in bed again.

"Where are we in Canada?" I asked.

"Windsor," my father said. "Good night, Jim."

When I woke up in the morning and looked out we were going through fine country that looked like Michigan only with higher hills and the trees were all turning. I got dressed in all but my shoes and reached under the curtain for them. They were shined and I put them on and unbuttoned the curtain and went out in the aisle. The curtains were buttoned all down

the aisle and everybody seemed to be still asleep. I went down to the washroom and looked in.

The nigger porter was asleep in one corner of the leather cushioned seat. His cap was down over his eyes and his feet were up on one of the chairs. His mouth was open, his head was tipped back and his hands were together in his lap. I went on to the end of the car and looked out but it was drafty and cindery and there was no place to sit down. I went back to the washroom and went in very carefully so as not to wake the porter and sat down by the window. The washroom smelt like brass spittoons in the early morning. I was hungry and I looked out of the window at the fall country and watched the porter asleep. It looked like good shooting country.

There was lots of brush on the hills and patches of woods and fine looking farms and good roads. It was a different kind of looking country than Michigan. Going through it it all seemed to be connected and in Michigan one part of the country hasn't any connection with another. There weren't any swamps either and none of it looked burnt over. It all looked as though it belonged to somebody but it was nice looking country and the beeches and the maples were turned and there were lots of scrub oaks that had fine colored leaves too and when there was brush there was lots of sumac that was bright red. It looked like good country for rabbits and I tried to see some game but it went by too fast to concentrate looking and the only birds you could see were birds flying. I saw a hawk hunting over a field and his mate too. I saw flickers flying in the edge of the woods and I figured they were going south.

I saw bluejays twice but the train was no good for seeing birds. It slid the country all sideways if you looked straight at anything and you had to just let it go by, looking ahead a little all the time. We passed a farm with a long meadow and I saw a flock of killdeer plover feeding. Three of them flew up when the train went by and circled off over the woods but the rest kept on feeding. We made a big curve so I could see the other cars curved ahead and the engine with the drive wheels going very fast away up ahead and a river valley down below us and then I looked around and the porter was awake and looking at me.

"What do you see?" he said.

"Not much."

"You certainly do look at it."

I did not say anything but I was glad he was awake. He kept his feet up on the chair but reached up and put his cap straight.

"That your father that stayed up here reading?"

"Yes."

"He certainly can drink liquor."

"He's a great drinker."

"He certainly is a great drinker. That's it, a great drinker."

I did not say anything.

"I had a couple with him," the porter said. "And I got plenty of effect but he sat there half the night and never showed a thing."

"He never shows anything," I said.

"No sir. But if he keeps up that way he's going to kill his whole insides."

I did not say anything.

"You hungry, boy?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm very hungry."

"We got a diner on now. Come on back and we'll get a little something."

We went back through two other cars, all with the curtains closed all along the aisles, to the diner and through the tables back to the kitchen.

"Hail fellow well met," the porter said to the chef.

"Uncle George," the chef said. There were four other niggers sitting at a table playing cards.

"How about some food for the young gentleman and myself?"

"No sir," said the chef. "Not until I can get it ready."

"Could you drink?" said George.

"No sir," said the chef.

"Here it is," said George. He took a pint bottle out of his side pocket.

"Courtesy of the young gentleman's father."

"He's courteous," said the chef. He wiped his lips.

"The young gentleman's father is the world's champion."

"At what?"

"At drinking."

"He's mighty courteous," said the chef. "How did you eat last night?"

"With that collection of yellow boys."

"They all together still?"

"Between Chicago and Detroit. We call 'em the White Eskimos now."

"Well," said the chef. "Everything's got its place." He broke two eggs on the side of a frying pan. "Ham and eggs for the son of the champion?"

"Thanks," I said.

"How about some of that courtesy?"

"Yes sir."

"May your father remain undefeated," the chef said to me. He licked his lips. "Does the young gentleman drink too?"

"No sir," said George. "He's in my charge."

The chef put the ham and eggs on two plates.

"Seat yourselves, gentlemen."

George and I sat down and he brought us two cups of coffee and sat down opposite us.

"You willing to part with another example of that courtesy?"

"For the best," said George. "We got to get back to the car. How is the railroad business?"

"Rails are firm," said the chef. "How's Wall Street?"

"The bears are bulling again," said George. "A lady bear ain't safe today."

"Bet on the Cubs," said the chef. "The Giants are too big for the league."

George laughed and the chef laughed.

"You're a very courteous fellow," George said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Run along," said the chef. "Lackawannius is calling you."

"I love that girl," said George. "Who touches a hair—"

"Run along," said the chef. "Or those yellow boys will get you."

"It's a pleasure, sir," said George. "It's a very real pleasure."

"Run along."

"Just one more courteous action."

The chef wiped his lips. "God speed the parting guest," he said.

"I'll be in for breakfast," George said.

"Take your unearned increment," the chef said. George put the bottle in his pocket.

"Good-bye to a noble soul," he said.

"Get the hell out of here," said one of the niggers who was playing cards.

"Good-bye, gentlemen all," George said.

"Good night, sir," said the chef. We went out.

We went back up to our car and George looked at the number board. There was a number twelve and a number five showing. George pulled a little thing down and the numbers disappeared.

"You better sit here and be comfortable," he said.

I sat down in the washroom and waited and he went down the aisle. In a little while he came back.

"They're all happy now," he said. "How do you like the railroad business, Jimmy?"

"How did you know my name?"

"That's what your father calls you, ain't it?"

"Sure."

"Well," he said.

"I like it fine," I said. "Do you and the chef always talk that way?"

"No, James," he said. "We only talk that way when we're enthused."

"Just when you have a drink," I said.

"Not that alone. When we're enthused from any cause. The chef and I are kindred spirits."

"What are kindred spirits?"

"Gentlemen with the same outlook on life."

I did not say anything and the bell buzzed. George went out, pulled the little thing in the box and came back in the room.

"Did you ever see a man cut with a razor?"

"No."

"Would you like to have it explained?"

"Yes."

The bell buzzed again. "I'd better go see," George went out.

He came back and sat down by me. "The use of the razor," he said, "is an art not alone known to the barbering profession." He looked at me. "Don't you make them big eyes," he said. "I'm only lecturing."

"I'm not scared."

"I should say you're not," said George. "You're here with your greatest friend."

"Sure," I said. I figured he was pretty drunk.

"Your father got a lot of this?" He took out the bottle.

"I don't know."

"Your father is a type of noble Christian gentleman." He took a drink. I didn't say anything.

"Returning to the razor," George said. He reached in the inside pocket of his coat and brought out a razor. He laid it closed on the palm of his left hand.

The palm was pink.

"Consider the razor," George said. "It toils not, neither does it spin." He held it out on the palm of his hand. It had a black bone handle. He opened it up and held it in his right hand with the blade out straight.

"You got a hair from your head?"

"How do you mean?"

"Pull one out. My own are very tenacious."

I pulled out a hair and George reached for it. He held it in his left hand looking at it carefully then flicked the razor and cut it in two. "Keeness of edge," he said. Still looking at the little end of hair that was left he turned the razor in his hand and flicked the blade back the other direction. The blade cut the hair off close to his finger and thumb. "Simplicity of action," George said. "Two admirable qualities." The buzzer rang and he folded the razor and handed it to me.

"Guard the razor," he said and went out. I looked at it and opened it and shut it. It was just an ordinary razor. George came back and sat down beside me. He took a drink. There was no more in the bottle. He looked at it and put it back in his pocket.

"The razor, please," he said. I handed it to him. He put it on the palm of his left hand. "You have observed," he said, "keeness of edge and simplicity of action. Now a greater than these two. Security of manipulation."

He picked up the razor in his right hand, gave it a little flip and the blade came open and lay back, edge out across his knuckles. He showed me his hand; the handle of the razor was in his fist, the blade was open across the knuckles, held in place by his forefinger and his thumb. The blade was solidly in place all across his fist, the edge out. "You observe it?" George said. "Now for that great requisite skill in the use of."

He stood up and patted out with his right hand, his fist closed, the blade open across the knuckles. The razor blade shone in the sun coming through the window. George ducked and jabbed three times with the blade. He stepped back and flicked it twice in the air. Then holding his head down and his left arm around his neck he whipped his fist and the blade back and forth, back and forth, ducking and dodging. He slashed one, two, three, four, five, six. He straightened up. His face was sweaty and he folded the razor and put it in his pocket.

"Skill in the use of," he said. "And in the left hand preferably a pillow."

He sat down and wiped his face. He took off his cap and wiped the leather band inside. He went over and took a drink of water.

"The razor's a delusion," he said. "The razor's no defense. Anybody can cut you with a razor. If you're close enough to cut them they're bound to cut you. If you could have a pillow in your left hand you'd be all right. But where you going to get a pillow when you need a razor? Who you going to cut in bed? The razor's a delusion, Jimmy. It's a nigger weapon. A regular nigger weapon. But now you know how they use it. Bending a razor back over the hand is the only progress the nigger ever made.

Only nigger ever knew how to defend himself was Jack Johnson and they put him in Leavenworth. And what would I do to Jack Johnson with a razor. It none of it makes any difference, Jimmy. All you get in this life is a point of view. Fellows like me and the chef got a point of view. Even if he's got a wrong point of view he's better off. A nigger gets delusions like old Jack or Marcus Garvey and they put him in the pen. Look where my delusion about the razor would take me. Nothing's got any value, Jimmy. Liquor makes you feel like I'll feel in an hour. You and me aren't even friends."

"Yes we are."

"Good old Jimmy," he said. "Look at the deal they gave this poor old Tiger Flowers. If he was white he'd have made a million dollars."

"Who was he?"

"He was a fighter. A damn good fighter."

"What did they do to him?"

"They just took him down the road in one way or another all the time."

"It's a shame," I said.

"Jimmy, there's nothing to the whole business. You get syphed up from women or if you're married your wife'll run around. In the railroad business you're away from home nights. The kind of a girl you want is the kind of a girl that'll jig you because she can't help it. You want her because she can't help it and you lose her because she can't help it and a man's only got so many orgasms to his whole life and what difference does it make when you feel worse after liquor."

"Don't you feel all right?"

"No I don't. I feel bad. If I didn't feel bad I wouldn't talk that way."

"My father feels bad sometimes too in the morning."

"He does?"

"Sure."

"What does he do for it?"

"He exercises."

"Well, I got twenty-four berths to make up. Maybe that's the solution."

It was a long day on the train after the rain started. The rain made the windows of the train wet so you could not see outside clearly and then it made everything outside look the same anyway. We went through many towns and cities but it was raining in all of them and when we crossed the Hudson River at Albany it was raining hard.

I stood out in the vestibule and George opened the door so I could see out but there was only the wet iron of the bridge and the rain coming down into the river and the train with water dripping. It smelled good outside though. It was a fall rain and the air coming in through the open door smelled fresh and like wet wood and iron and it felt like fall up at the lake.

There were plenty of other people in the car but none of them looked very interesting. A nice looking woman asked me to sit down next to her and I did but she turned out to have a boy of her own just my age and was going to a place in New York to be superintendent of schools. I wished I could have gone back with George to the kitchen of the dining car and heard him talk with the chef. But during the regular daytime George talked just like anyone else, except even less, and very polite, but I noticed him drinking lots of ice water.

It had stopped raining outside but there were big clouds over the mountains. We were going along the river and the country was very beautiful and I had never seen anything like it before except in the illustrations of a book at Mrs. Kenwood's where we used to go for Sunday dinner up at the lake. It was a big book and it was always on the parlor table and I would look at it while waiting for dinner.

The engravings were like this country now after the rain with the river and the mountains going up from it and the grey stone. Sometimes there would be a train across on the other side of the river. The leaves on the

trees were turned by the fall and sometimes you saw the river through the branches of the trees and it did not seem old and like the illustrations but instead it seemed like a place to live in and where you could fish and eat your lunch and watch the train go by. But mostly it was dark and unreal and sad and strange and classical like the engravings.

That may have been because it was just after a rain and the sun had not come out. When the wind blows the leaves off the trees they are cheerful and good to walk through and the trees are the same, only they are without leaves. But when the leaves fall from the rain they are dead and wet and flat to the ground and the trees are changed and wet and unfriendly. It was very beautiful coming along the Hudson but it was the son of thing I did not know about and it made me wish we were back at the lake.

It gave me the same feeling that the engravings in the book did and the feeling was confused with the room where I always looked at the book and it being someone else's house and before dinner and wet trees after the rain and the time in the north when the fall is over and it is wet and cold and the birds are gone and the woods are no more fun to walk in and it rains and you want to stay inside with a fire. I do not suppose I thought of all those things because I have never thought much and never in words but it was the feeling of all those things that the country along the Hudson River gave me. The rain can make all places strange, even places where you live.

The End