

Berlin Society Transformed: Heinrich Mann, *Berlin: The Land of Cockaigne* (1900)

Abstract

Heinrich Mann (1871–1950) was the older brother of Thomas Mann (1875–1955). He, too, was a leading German writer. Heinrich Mann’s novel *Im Schlaraffenland* (1900) is set in 1894 but shines a light on Berlin society of the 1870s. (The English translation excerpted here appeared under the title *Berlin: The Land of Cockaigne*.) In the “Founding Era” of 1871–73, the sudden influx of capital from French war reparations and relaxed restrictions on joint stock companies produced a frenzy of modern capitalism—particularly in banking and railroads—and the creation of a new moneyed elite, which was frequently characterized in novels of the day as parvenus. The new elite migrated to Berlin’s western neighborhoods known as “Berlin W.,” including the Tiergarten and the Grunewald. When the downturn came in 1873, Jews and liberals were blamed for having sent the German economy (and German morals) off the rails.

By the 1890s, writers had been diagnosing the effects of rapid economic modernization and social upheaval for two decades. One such author, Fritz Mauthner, published a trilogy entitled *Berlin W.* (1886–1890) that separately addressed three themes found together in *Im Schlaraffenland*: stock market speculation, the new mass press, and the changing art scene. Heinrich Mann in 1894, with his fictional play *Revenge!* [*Rache!*] in the middle of the novel, was able to ridicule the realist drama *Before Daybreak*, by Gerhart Hauptmann, which premiered in 1889 (and is included in this volume). Mann employs the character of Andreas Zumsee to expose Berlin society’s new, ugly rituals of hedonism—rituals to which Zumsee himself falls victim. Zumsee is one of many parasites and hangers-on, constantly on the lookout for any opportunity to rise to the top of the heap. He has found profit in his relationship with the wealthy General Consul James Türkheimer—a stock speculator—and his wife Adelheid. In this excerpt from the novel, Zumsee is on the verge of an affair with Adelheid, and he attends a theater performance of *Revenge!* that convinces him that being a *Literat* is the easiest road to fame and fortune. Berlin’s *nouveau riche* are determined to see and be seen in the right company and to say the right thing. The hollowness that leads to *Revenge!* being proclaimed “Michelangelesque!” is mirrored in Zumsee’s conquest of Adelheid.

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CHAPTER VIII

“What a splendid audience!” Mr. Pimbusch was saying, when Andrew entered the Türkheimer box.

Mrs. Türkheimer and Mrs. Pimbusch were sitting in the front seats, while Asta had to put up with one of the back ones. She pointed with her fan to the luxuriant neck of her mother, and remarked to Liebling, who was standing beside her: “I shan’t see a thing. All the better, if only nobody sees me. What a disagreeable business!”

Liebling countered cautiously. “Let’s wait and see. In itself, I consider it the sign of a return to social health that we of the upper classes should learn to know the place where the common people get their enjoyment and their instruction.”

The young girl answered only by an indignant glance at the broad wall beside her, the paper of which

hung down in great ribbons. The nondescript, bare interior succeeded, with its dim lighting, in saddening even contented, well-fed human beings. There seemed to be something of misery and care hanging grayly in the atmosphere.

“Don’t you think we look as if we were at a funeral?” Andrew asked Mr. Pimbusch.

But the brandy manufacturer was less susceptible to moods.

“Nonsense!” he cried. “We are in the best society here. It’s chic to be here. What do you think? Just watch!”

Unexpectedly, the orchestra broke into barbaric noise. It was so sudden and so sharp that the ladies jumped in their chairs. Mrs. Pimbusch immediately sank back on hers. She laughed nervously.

“Oh! That was only the beginning of the fun! I think it’s charming!”

Simultaneously, the lights were turned higher. Pimbusch nudged Andrew. “Didn’t I tell you? What a splendid audience!”

To his surprise, the young man saw that every box was full of distinguished ladies. Even high under the roof, jewelry glittered, and the satiny sheen of theatre wraps gleamed from the dirty little board boxes. The bare arms of women leaned on the unclean railings. Moved by the fans of the ladies, clouds of fragrance and dust wafted from one box to another.

Mrs. Türkheimer bowed.

“There is Mrs. Mohr,” she remarked.

“Oh, and little Mrs. Blosch is sitting next to her,” said Mrs. Pimbusch. “The poor innocent, in her little white frock! I wonder whether the young ladies’ schools are coming to see *Revenge!* too?”

Mrs. Türkheimer lifted her shoulders.

“Dear Claire, you expect too much. It isn’t going to be so bad.”

“Only half as bad!” said a voice. “They say that the performance was arranged by the Society for the Improvement of Morals.”

Mr. Stiebitz leaned over from the neighboring box. Andrew joyfully recognized the white face with its flabby fat. He had met the banker at the gaming-table under such very friendly circumstances. Mrs. Stiebitz and the wife of Commercial Councilor Bescheerer also greeted the ladies.

“They say the play is a bit strong?”

“Shall we say, slightly vulgar?”

“We mustn’t take that amiss. We’re among the petty bourgeois, here,” remarked Stiebitz.

In spite of the indignant objections of his wife, Pimbusch pushed forward to the rail, and bowed to friends in the orchestra. It must be seen that he was there. Conversation spread from one tier of boxes to another. Everybody in the auditorium seemed to know everybody else. Among the women, Andrew noticed a certain family resemblance, in many cases. Mrs. Pimbusch was by no means a unique phenomenon. A number of the ladies showed a marked tendency to affect the harlot. This might well be an ultimate refinement, or simply a means provided by feminine intuition to beat their rivals.

Lorgnettes clicked, and gowns were criticized. Mrs. Bescheerer was in peach color with ecru. Mrs. Mohr wore a mignonette foulard, and her dress fell over pink satin. Mrs. Türkheimer had on a dark robe of moire, softened at the neck with transparent laces, through which her skin gleamed, a dull white. Andrew approved. When he looked at her neck, he even felt shivers at the pit of his stomach, a foreboding of future passions.

Famous men were pointed out. All the critics were there; among them the great Doctor Abell, of the *Evening Courier*, sitting next to Professor Schwenke, of the University of Berlin. Wennichen, who seemed to have no seat of his own, showed his smiling birdlike head with the flickering fuzz, now here, now there. He was just paying Lizzi Laffe the compliment of a visit. She was enthroned in her box, diagonally opposite Mrs. Türkheimer, next to Werda Bieratz. Diederich Klempner kept modestly in the background.

The diplomatic corps was represented by several of its members from different republics, tanned gentlemen, with highly colored decorations. Türkheimer, as Consul-General of Puerto Vergogna, was with them.

A few members of the best society, who had only been able to get standing room, broke out into sibilant hisses, and finally silenced the unrestrained noisemakers in the orchestra. The curtain went up, and in the solemn stillness of the auditorium the social drama *Revenge!* began.

The scene was set in East Prussia, in a little industrial town, dominated by the manager of a factory and his wife. To the left, on the stage, lay the mansion, to the right, the church. The expository action was simple and energetic. The hungry workmen appeared. It was Sunday. The barkeeper, to whom they had mortgaged their pay for months ahead, would not serve them anything. Accordingly, they hit on the idea of revenging themselves for everything that society had done to them. Daily, they had handled sulfur, quick-silver, or similar poisons. At forty years they were old men, and few of them attained a greater age. Most of them were tubercular. Besides, their morals were terrible; and the example was given from above. No one knew who was worse, the manager or his wife. Young girls appeared, formless and pale, drunk, all of them ruined by the manager. His wife insisted on the services of those few young men who were still fit, and she gave them an unspeakable disease.

The audience was deeply moved by the revelation of these conditions. The hollow-eyed proletarians trudged around in the snow; their sunken breasts fought with fever; they could not get their breaths. Desperate with anger, many of them had red foam at the mouth, and there was more coughing than speaking on the stage. Here and there, one could hear a fan being closed, in a box; and there was a sob.

Two young people bemoaned their fate to their comrades. The girl was to await the manager behind the church. The young man had a rendezvous with the wife in the garden of the mansion. If they refused, they would be discharged; and their incapacitated parents were starving. So they would have to give in. But these shameful conditions had lasted long enough. The avengers soon followed. The time that must elapse till further events occurred was filled by the groans of the sick. Suddenly a shrill scream sounded. Then there was barbarous jeering. The atrocious woman was dragged on to the stage by the men. The women threw themselves on her, disordered her clothing, and began to belabor the uncovered parts of her body. One after another they told her the truth to her face. And the lady, reverting to the state of nature in her anger and her fear, countered with the same obscene eloquence.

It was a scene that no one could resist. The vengeful screams of the exhausted, degraded people rang through the whole auditorium. It stirred the ladies till their jewels tinkled. Mrs. Pimbusch made incomprehensible sounds as she slid around on her chair. Mrs. Türkheimer had to quiet her. The millionaires in the standing room were shrieking for encores. Their white gloves were already split. The applause lasted so long that they had to let the curtain down. A gentleman in a dirty frock coat came out and asked the audience to excuse the actress in the part of the wife of the manager from taking her

curtain calls. She feared that her seriously torn costume might offend the modesty of the honored public. But some of the people in the parterre insisted upon giving her a gigantic laurel wreath. In order to receive it, she stretched out her arm, in its tattered sleeve, from behind the curtain. Only then could the play go on. The lascivious manager had fled from his dangerous rendezvous in time. He took shelter in the house. He appeared at the window in the company of a strong-arm squad. From that distance, he dared to express the most horribly reactionary opinions. With the courage of his degeneracy he fired into the helpless mass of proletarians. They threw stones at him. Finally, one of them succeeded in felling the monster. The mob stormed the house. Furniture and art treasures were shattered and flew to the street pavement. At the same time, the sound of sleigh bells was heard. Most opportunely, the members of the Board of Directors appeared, coming from the capital of the province to have a meeting with their manager. Before the desperate hail of stones cast by the revolters, they, as well as the police that hurried to their aid, were forced to flee. Their sleighs were broken to pieces; and with wood from them the men prepared to fire the mansion. While the half-naked wife of the murdered man, hidden by the circle of dancing women, screamed like a peacock, the curtain slowly fell.

For a few seconds the whole house held its breath; then the applause broke loose. Tears of triumph glistened in the eyes of the ladies who leaned across the railings of their boxes, breathing heavily. Many gentlemen had grown pale. What they had heard and seen had aroused in them the most noble of their ethical impulses. As a literary event, too, *Revenge!* could already be considered a decided success. There was electricity in the air, as there is at all important theatrical performances. No one left the hall, and a continual hum indicated the restrained excitement of everyone present. A remark made by one authority was passed from mouth to mouth. In Türkheimer's box, it was Pimbusch, with his highly developed sense for everything that one must think or say, who got the word mysteriously from somewhere.

He suddenly announced: "Michelangelesque! *Revenge!* is Michelangelesque! Schwenke said so."

Liebling had to admit that the drama had a broad sweep; he tried to indicate how broad it was by a solemn gesture.

Asta contracted her eyebrows. "It strikes me as being in the worst possible taste. A miserable piece of hack-writing," she declared contemptuously. She was attacked on all sides. Pimbusch was so pained by this judgment that he gave a loud groan. He did not understand how one could differ from the opinion of the great Schwenke. He stared at the young girl in perplexity.

But his wife grew loudly indignant: "Asta, I am sorry for you! You have no feeling for the highest art! Oh, the most superb situations are still to come!" Her greenish eyes glittered under the broad, red-rimmed lids. She trembled so violently that the bottle of smelling salts, which she held under her flaring nostrils, fell from her hand.

Mrs. Türkheimer, secretly occupied with sweeter thoughts, was almost untouched by the excitement of the performance. Soothingly she said: "But my dear Claire, what more are you waiting for? The people have avenged themselves."

"Oh, wait till their real revenge begins!" whispered the wife of the brandy manufacturer, hoarse with passion.

Andrew was dissatisfied. He stood leaning against the door. He had only been able to catch one brief glimpse of the stage. And Liebling and Pimbusch interfered with his view of Mrs. Türkheimer's neck. Besides, she had not even looked around at him.

Someone cried, "Hush!" and Andrew heard the sound of the curtain as it rose. The rebels appeared to be barricading themselves in a church. But he gave up his painful efforts to catch a glimpse of the stage. He wondered why Adelheid had asked him to come. If he made no progress, today, in his conquest of her, it

would look like a defeat. He probably would have to begin over again. Was that what she wanted? Or had she planted him there only in order to prove by his presence that she could still chain new admirers to her? Now, she was paying no attention to him; and he was afraid of making himself ridiculous, which was evidently what she wanted. The poor young man was full of mistrust. Complete dejection rose in him as quickly as did sanguine hopes.

A lively rattling noise awakened him from his meditations. Ah, now the troops had arrived; they were shooting into the church. But the proletarians had guns. They returned the fire from the height of their barricades built with altars, church benches, and confessional stools. The women stood in front. They jeered at the military with obscene motions, until they tumbled head over heels backward, hit by bullets. In the foreground the atrocious wife of the manager, now a captive of war, was being forcibly dressed in a chorister's gown. She was led up into the pulpit and thrown down again, so that the garment fluttered outward around her. At the bottom she was caught by outstretched arms. The men continued their game, playing catch with the half-dead wife of the bourgeois. Then they doused the miserable creature in a great basin of holy water, and finally put her, dripping wet, on the barricade at the place where there was the most shooting. This was a subtle point: not even the soldiers could keep from laughing when they saw the lady in this condition.

This episode very successfully aroused amusement in the audience. The people in the parterre writhed; many of the ladies in the boxes, among them Mrs. Pimbusch, softly sobbed with enjoyment.

The stage effects would have been worthy of a larger theatre. The pale, mortally sick people, springing around with cries half-stifled by hate, their faces curiously distorted in the flickering gleam of the candles on the altars, made a fantastic scene. But the public was not entirely satisfied. An adequate presentation of these things had been made impossible by the police order prohibiting the defilement of the sacramental vessels. Although the proletarians, in the end, drove back the military by a victorious excursion, the act left a rather lukewarm impression.

Pimbusch was worrying about the proper opinion to have about *Revenge!* afterwards. His wife declared: "It really doesn't move one enough."

With severe rejection, Liebling added: "I can't recognize this as art. Where is the ethical idea?"

"Oh, that lies in the plan of the whole. And perhaps it's still coming," said Mrs. Türkheimer gently.

But the Zionist was not easy to quiet. "From the very beginning there has been something brutal about the play."

"That's no opinion!" cried Kaflich, who appeared in the door. "That's exactly the point of the social drama! Our subtle poet is lifting into a higher sphere those powerful popular instincts, lust and cruelty, that are usually satisfied at a peep-show." He sniffed the air. "The play positively smells of the mob! Do you know what *Revenge!* reminds me of?"

"What?" asked Pimbusch.

"Of the kind of serious reading the mob goes in for. For example, the *Memoirs of a Servant Girl. Hate, Revenge, and Desperation Drive Me to Vice.*"

The ladies wrinkled their noses, and the arrival of Baron von Hochstetten robbed the journalist of further successes. Asta's fiancé seemed less tired than usual. He darted timid and excited glances around before he dared to express an opinion.

"I saw the end of the act from downstairs. This piece of hack-work is much more crude than I had

dreamed. If anyone finds out that I advocated the performance – for I kept the police from prohibiting it then . . . One really can't trifle with His Excellency."

The frightened official closed with a dejected gesture.

His mother-in-law and Mrs. Pimbusch looked at him, smiling vaguely. As he did not find the consolation that he desired there, he prepared to go on. His steps were uncertain.

"If the play were only successful!"

With this profound remark he opened the door.

But Asta was embittered by the paltry impression her fiancé was making. She decided to revenge him.

"Give me my wrap!" she cried, so loudly that Stiebitz stuck his head in from the neighboring box.

Hochstetten obeyed, and she rustled out of sight. He followed with bowed head. The remaining gentlemen felt a little embarrassed.

"That's not such a bad idea!" said Kafilisch. "Why shouldn't we follow her example and leave the place as a protest?"

Mrs. Pimbusch shrugged her shoulders.

"By the way, there are all sorts of rumors about the anonymous author."

"Who is it?" cried the ladies.

The journalist assumed an attitude of mystery. "You'd like to know, wouldn't you? Well, you'll have to wait. Look at the critics sticking their heads together down there. Abell, and Bear, Wacheles, and Dolittle – they're all half-crazy with curiosity. Now they're going into the lobby. I'll go down, too, if you will excuse me, ladies. One can find out all sorts of things out there."

"Wait a minute, I'll come along!" cried Mrs. Pimbusch immediately.

The gentlemen joined them.

"Are you staying here, madame?" asked Andrew.

Mrs. Türkheimer was fanning herself. "Oh, I don't think it will be as warm here as out there. Everyone's wandering around in the corridors."

With her eyes she gave him a hint which he understood. He went out with the others, got lost in the mob, and returned to the box.

"Are you back again already?" asked Adelheid, laughing roguishly. "Look, the light, there on the wall, dazzles me."

The docile young man got the drift of this hint, too. He took Mrs. Türkheimer's fur-lined wrap and so cleverly draped it across from the wall of the box to the railing that no indiscreet glance could penetrate the corner where the lady sat.

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They were silenced by hisses from the audience. The last act had already begun. This time, Andrew took

a good seat, but he was occupied more than ever with his own thoughts. He was disquieted by Adelheid's ambition to make a dramatist of him. In a *Lazy Man's Heaven*, such unpleasant obligations became quite superfluous. Hadn't he impressed her sufficiently by the hobby which his genius had fabricated? Must he emphasize his point still more strongly? He must think that over. But he was by no means attracted by the prospect of entering into rivalry with Diederich Klempner, who let the people whose parasite he was be killed on the stage by a mob. Anyway, he didn't like *Revenge!* The piece was entirely too bestial and hateful. Kafilisch was right; it positively smelled of the mob. Having Mrs. Türkheimer's sweet promise, Andrew almost felt like a property owner. Every attack on the wealthy class seemed, at this moment, directed at him.

He paid no attention to the stage until the liveliest signs of excitement showed that the success of the drama was decisive. A railroad train passed across a lonely winter landscape. The locomotive whistled timidly and proceeded slowly; for the tracks were covered with snow. But under the snow there must have been an obstacle. Suddenly a catastrophe occurred. The locomotive leaped as if it were about to turn a somersault. The cars crumpled; each climbed with its fore-wheels on to the end of the one in front of it, and was then shattered in a violent fall. For a few seconds everything remained quiet. Then the pale, tattered mob of proletarians crept from ditches and bushes, surprised at its own achievement. But as soon as the first unharmed traveler tried to climb out of the window of one of the cars, their anger returned. The women began. They strangled a woman whom they pulled out by force. The passenger who had fallen into the hands of the men was a member of the Board of Directors that had fled in the first act. With their knives they slit him open. When they saw the blood, they stood as if spellbound. The lust of their revenge seemed to make them idiotic. They let their tongues hang out; they rolled their glassy eyes; their hollow chests twitched. Awaking, they threw themselves howling on the bourgeois, on their torturers, their murderers, who had finally fallen into their power. They tore them, already half crushed, from the wreck, attacked them tooth and nail and thrashed them around in the blood-covered snow. They made unspeakable faces at each other in order to communicate their joy. They clicked with their tongues, gnashed their teeth, and cried out hoarse oaths. All this was portrayed with such overwhelming verisimilitude, that the audience trembled in delicious horror. An ill-tempered gentleman dared to maintain, aloud, that the whole scene was stolen. A wit inquired how many hundred gallons of ox blood had been bought for the performance. But both were made to leave the auditorium.

For this was no joke, this time it was in earnest. Several proletarians, in the last stages of tuberculosis, dragged two uninjured women behind the bushes; they howled with bestial desire. The ladies in the boxes started out of their seats in order to look over the bushes, fully persuaded that the play was going on behind the scenery. The illusion was so perfect that a few sensitive souls held their handkerchiefs to their noses. But most of the fleshy brunettes in the boxes bent far forward, pressing their heaving breasts with their hands. They closed their eyes and surrendered themselves to delight. Their passionate nostrils flared black; and there were dull traces of sweat on their cheeks. Half dazed, they sucked in the rancid smell of blood. It almost seemed to swim through the house. When the time for applause came their excited energies were already so spent that they hardly could lift their hands. On their necks and shoulders stood great drops. The sourish odour of their perspiration mingled with the heavy perfumes that steamed from the heated clothes and from the flowers. Here and there, shrill, glassy laughter sounded through the tinkle of jewelry. Young girls licked their lips and peered excitedly over the shoulders of their mothers, uttering little cries. Two or three of them fainted.

Only very great art could achieve such effects. In the whole house there were, at the most, two persons, who escaped them. Young Mrs. Blosch, still the shy stranger, whom Türkheimer's notorious scout had driven in from her quiet provincial nest, understood nothing of what she was seeing. She smiled, turned up her nose, and behaved herself quietly and decently, leaning back in a corner, in her little white frock. She still lacked internal contact with the enjoyments of the world to which she belonged. Wennichen, the grand old man, showed little more understanding than she did. He, too, smiled continually as he looked

around in the audience, with little surprised movements of his birdlike head. Perhaps he was asking why the hard-working merchants and their ladies, the representatives of education and property, who had enough to do merely in warding off arrogant Junkers and obscurantist priests, had condescended to come and applaud the vulgar excesses of the mob.

Most of the audience had sprung to its feet, completely overwhelmed by the apotheosis of the proletariat which concluded the piece. Against a somber wintry sky a red glow of Bengal fire appeared, the reflection of conflagrations destroying the cities of bourgeois tyranny. Behind the wrecked railroad train and the mutilated corpses of the enemy, the people passed in pairs, their arms spread out ecstatically, going toward the dawn of brotherhood and humanity. Loving couples found one another in freedom and natural purity. The girl and the young fellow, the rescued victims of the despicable manager and his wife, sank into each other's arms and announced that they were to be married. At bottom, the people were moral. Even Liebling had to be content, assured of the presence of the required ethical idea.

When the actors, considerably weakened by all they had undergone, had appeared before the curtain eleven times, and when the house was growing empty, the gentlemen in the parterre, whose white gloves were in tatters, passionately demanded the Internationale. Those members of the orchestra who still remained finally surrendered, and the public devoutly joined in. In the box where sat the foreign diplomats, Türkheimer could be seen, beating time and smiling good naturedly.

On the stairs, Andrew was separated from his friends. He succeeded in catching Mrs. Türkheimer's attention as she entered her carriage. He received a wave of the hand, which promised him once more: "Day after to-morrow!"

In the vestibule, there appeared to have been an accident. A lady was being carried out by her coachman and her lackeys and was lifted into her carriage. Andrew recognized Mrs. Pimbusch. In consequence of her all too passionate artistic enjoyment she had had an attack of hysterics. Her husband fluttered around her, perplexed and terribly afraid they might appear ridiculous.

As the young man tried to go on, he noticed a group of women who aroused his curiosity. They were very excited. Diederich Klempner, the author, stood among his admirers. He no longer denied that he was the author of the now famous drama. He shrugged his shoulders mysteriously, and benevolently allowed the young girls to grasp his puffy hands. Some tried to kiss them; but Klempner would not permit it. In order to keep his poise, he fumbled with his black-rimmed eyeglasses and his eyelids fluttered. The skeptical smile that appeared in his bright round face concealed the pleasure which this ovation gave him.

Andrew took home with him this picture of an author fragrantly surrounded by women in adoring attitudes. The irritation in him which was so obviously caused by the success of someone else, was soon dissipated by his vivid fancy. Almost without his noticing it, he had substituted himself for Klempner. As Adelheid wished, he had written a play over which all Berlin was jubilant. All eyes rested on the box where he sat by her side. It was the decisive public of Berlin first-nighters, which he had just got to know; it was communicating its taste to the spiritually less advanced classes among the German people and it was decreeing the success of his work for all Germany. Andrew's name resounded in triumph through all the provinces.

When he had been occupied for some time with this dream, he was not far from believing that he himself had written *Revenge!* The enthusiasm it produced was first teaching him to understand the play itself. In him, too, the most savage instincts gradually began to boil. He did not know exactly whether he should think of himself as a proletarian, thirsting for the blood of the bourgeois. Perhaps age-old peasant passions were inflaming him against the detested, over-refined inhabitants of the cities. That he was to possess Mrs. Türkheimer struck him as a tragic revenge. He was revenging himself on a whole people, on her and on her kind. Beyond this, there was no pleasure to be sought with this ageing banker's wife. As

soon as she belonged to him, he must be cold and inaccessible. She would find him a hard master.

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