

The “Feudalization of the Bourgeoisie?” Part II: Heinrich Mann, *The Loyal Subject* [*Der Untertan*] (1918)

Abstract

Set in Wilhelmine Germany, Heinrich Mann's (1871–1950) novel *The Loyal Subject* follows the life of Diederich Hessling, an ordinary and somewhat hapless German who mimics aristocratic behavior, blindly reveres authority, and knowingly employs his own patriotism and pro-monarchical sentiments to advance his career. Mann's detailed account of Diederich's encounter with the spectacle of *fin-de-siècle* Berlin includes characters drawn from a wide range of social classes – with all their attendant distinctions – from the abject and colorless unemployed to the object of Hessling's uncritical loyalty, Kaiser Wilhelm himself. Mann originally subtitled this novel *History of the Public Psyche under Wilhelm II* [*Geschichte der öffentlichen Seele unter Wilhelm II*].

Source

Chapter 1

[...]

While Diederich maintained a disturbed silence, there was a ring and Herr von Barnim said:

“This is my barber; I must work on him as well.”

He noticed Diederich's look of disappointment and added: “Of course with such a man I talk differently. But each one of us must do his bit against the Social Democrats, and bring the common people into the camp of our Christian Emperor. You must do yours!”

Thereupon Diederich took his leave. He heard the barber say:

“Another old customer, sir, has gone over to Liebling just because Liebling now has marble fittings.”

When Diederich reported to Wiebel the latter said:

“That is all very well, and I have a particular regard for the idealistic viewpoint of my friend, von Barnim, but in the long run it will not get us anywhere. Stöcker, you know, also made his damned experiments with democracy at the Ice Palace. Whether it was Christian or un-Christian democracy, I don't know. Things have got too far for that. Today only one course is still open: to hit out hard so long as we have the power.”

Greatly relieved, Diederich agreed with him. To go around converting Christians had at once struck him as a rather embarrassing task.

“I will attend to the Social Democrats,’ the Emperor has said.” Wiebel's eyes gleamed with a catlike ferocity. “Now what more do you want? The soldiers have been given their orders, and it may happen that they will have to fire on their beloved relatives. What do you think of that? I tell you, my dear fellow, we are on the eve of great events.”

Diederich showed signs of excited curiosity.

“My cousin, von Klappke—”

Wiebel paused and Diederich clicked his heels:

“—has told me things which are not yet ripe for publication. Suffice it to say that His Majesty’s statement yesterday, that the grumblers should kindly shake the dust of Germany from the soles of their feet, was a damned serious warning.”

“Is that a fact? Do you really think so?” said Diederich. “Then it is the devil’s own luck that I have to leave His Majesty’s service just at this moment. I would have done my duty against the enemy inside Germany. One thing I do know, the Emperor can rely upon the army.”

During those cold, damp days of February 1892, he went about the streets expecting great events. Along Unter den Linden something was happening, but what it was could not yet be seen. Mounted police stood guard at the ends of the streets and waited. Pedestrians pointed to this display of force. “The unemployed!” People stood still to watch them approaching. They came from a northerly direction, marching slowly in small sections. When they reached Unter den Linden they hesitated, as if lost, took counsel by an exchange of glances, and turned off toward the Emperor’s palace. There they stood in silence, their hands in their pockets, while the wheels of the carriages splashed them with mud, and they hunched up their shoulders beneath the rain which fell on their faded overcoats. Many of them turned to look at passing officers, at the ladies in their carriages, at the long fur coats of the gentlemen hurrying from Burgstrasse. Their faces were expressionless, neither threatening nor even curious: not as if they wanted to see, but as if they wanted to be seen. Others never moved an eye from the windows of the palace. The rain trickled down from their upturned faces. The horse of a shouting policeman drove them on farther across the street to the next corner—but they stood still again, and the world seemed to sink down between those broad hollow faces, lit by the livid gleam of evening, and the stern walls beyond them which were already enveloped in darkness.

“I do not understand,” said Diederich, “why the police do not take more energetic measures. That is certainly a rebellious crowd.”

“Don’t you worry,” Wiebel replied, “they have received exact instructions. Believe me, the authorities have their own welldeveloped plans. It is not always desirable to suppress at the outset such excrescences on the body politic. When they have been allowed to ripen, then a radical operation can be performed.”

The ripening process to which Wiebel referred increased daily, and on the twenty-sixth it was completed. The demonstrations showed that the unemployed were now more conscious of their objective. When they were driven back into one of the northern streets they overflowed into the next, and before they could be cut off, they surged forward again in increasing numbers. The processions all met at Unter den Linden, and when they were separated they ran together again. They reached the palace, were driven back, and reached it again, silent and irresistible, like a river overflowing its banks. The traffic was blocked, the stream of pedestrians was banked up until it flowed over slowly into the flood which submerged the square; into this turbid, discoloured sea of poverty, rolling up in clammy waves, emitting subdued noises and thrusting up, like the masts of sunken ships, poles bearing banners: “Bread! Work!” Here and there a more distinct rumbling broke out of the depths: “Bread! Work!” Swelling above the crowd it rolled off like a thunder cloud: “Bread! Work!” The mounted police attacked, the sea foamed up and subsided, while women’s voices rose shrilly like signals above the uproar: “Bread! Work!”

They were swept along, carrying with them the curious spectators standing on the Friedrich monument. Their mouths were wide open; dust rose from the minor officials whose way to the office had been blocked, as if their clothes had been beaten. A distorted face, unknown to Diederich, shouted at him:

“Here’s something different! Now we are going for the Jews!”—and the face disappeared before he realized that it was Herr von Barnim. He tried to follow him, but in a big rush was thrown far across the road in front of a café, where he heard the crash of broken windows and a workman shouting: “They pushed me out of here lately with my thirty pfennig, because I didn’t have a silk hat on.” With him Diederich was forced in through the window, between the overturned tables, where they tripped over broken glass, crushing against one another and howling, “No more room in here! We must have air!” But still others poured in. The police pressed forward. In the middle of the street, a free passage was miraculously made, as if for a triumphant procession. Then someone cried: “There goes Emperor Wilhelm!”

Diederich found himself once more on the street. No one knew how it happened that they could suddenly move along in a solid mass the whole width of the street, and on both sides, right up to the flanks of the horse on which the Emperor sat—the Emperor himself. The people looked at him and followed. Shouting masses were dissolved and swept along. Everyone looked at him. A dark pushing mob without form, with plan, without limit, and gleaming above it a young man wearing a helmet: the Emperor. They saw. They had brought him down from his palace. They had shouted: “Bread! Work!” until he had come. Nothing had been changed, except that he was there, and yet they were marching as if to a review of the troops at Tempelhof.

On the outskirts, where the crowds were thinner, respectably dressed people were saying to each other: “Well, thank God, he knows what he wants!”

“What does he want then?”

“To show that mob who is in power! He tried treating them kindly. He even went too far in remitting sentences two years ago; they have become impertinent.”

“He is certainly not afraid, you have to admit that. My word, this is an historical moment!”

Diederich listened and was thrilled. The old gentleman who had spoken turned to him. He had white side-whiskers and wore the Iron Cross.

“Young man,” he said, “what our magnificent young Emperor is now doing will be taught the children one day in their schoolbooks. Wait and see.”

Many people had thrust-out chests and solemn faces. The gentlemen who rode behind the Emperor kept their eyes fixed decisively in front of them, but they guided their horses through the crowd as if all these folk were extras ordered to appear in some royal spectacle. At times they glanced sideways at the public to see how the people were impressed. The Emperor was aware only of himself and his own performance. Profound seriousness turned his features to stone and his eyes glared over the thousands whom he had fascinated. He measured himself against them, he, the master by the grace of God, and they his rebellious slaves. Alone and unprotected he had dared to come among them, strong only in the sense of his mission. They might lay violent hands upon him if that were the will of the Almighty. He offered himself as sacrifice to his own sacred cause. He would show them whether God was on his side. Then they would carry away the impression of his action and the eternal memory of their own impotence!

A young man wearing a wide-brimmed hat passed near Diederich and said: “Old stuff. Napoleon in Moscow fraternizing alone with the people.”

“But this is splendid!” asserted Diederich, and his voice faltered with emotion. The other shrugged his shoulders.

“Theatrics, and not even good ones at that.”

Diederich looked at him and tried to glare like the Emperor.

“I suppose you are one of them yourself.”

He could not have explained what he meant by “them”. He simply felt that here, for the first time in his life, he had to defend law and order against hostile criticism. In spite of his agitation, he had another look at the man’s shoulders; they were not imposing. The bystanders, too, were expressing disapproval. Then Diederich asserted himself. With his huge stomach he pressed the enemy against the wall and battered in his hat. Others joined in pummelling him, his hat fell to the ground, and soon the man himself lay there. As he moved on, Diederich remarked to his fellow combatants:

“That fellow has certainly not done his military service. He hasn’t even got scars on his face; he has never fought a duel.”

The old gentleman with the side-whiskers and the Iron Cross turned up again and shook Diederich’s hand.

“Bravo, young man, bravo!”

“Isn’t it enough to make you angry,” said Diederich, still panting, “when a fellow tries to spoil our historical moment?”

“You have been in the army?” queried the old gentleman.

“I would have liked nothing better than to stay there,” Diederich replied.

“Ah, yes, the Battle of Sedan doesn’t happen every day.” The old gentleman touched his Iron Cross. “That’s what we did!”

Diederich drew himself up and pointed to the Emperor and the subdued crowd.

“That is as good as Sedan!”

“Hm, hm,” said the old gentleman.

“Allow me, sir,” cried someone, waving a notebook. “We must publish this story. A touch of atmosphere, y’understand? I suppose it was a damned radical you bashed?”

“Oh, a mere trifle”—Diederich was still panting. “As far as I am concerned this would be the time to go straight for the enemy at home. We have our Emperor with us.”

“Fine,” said the reporter as he wrote: “In the wildly agitated throng people of all classes were heard expressing their devoted loyalty and unshakable confidence in His Majesty.”

“Hurrah!” shouted Diederich, for everyone was shouting and, caught in a great surge of shouting people, he was carried along to the Brandenburg Gate. A few steps in front of him the Emperor was riding through. Diederich could see his face, its stony seriousness and glaring eyes, but he was shouting so loudly that his sight was blurred. An intoxication, more intense and nobler than that stimulated by beer, raised his feet off the ground and carried him into the air. He waved his hat high above all heads in enthusiastic madness, in a heaven where our finest feelings move. There on the horse rode Power, through the gateway of triumphal entries, with dazzling features, but graven as in stone. The Power which transcends us and whose hooves we kiss, the Power which is beyond the reach of hunger, spite

and mockery! Against which we are impotent, for we all love it! Which we have in our blood, for in our blood is submission. We are an atom of that Power, a minuscule molecule of something it has spit out. Each one of us is as nothing, but massed in ranks as Neo-Teutons, soldiers, bureaucrats, priests and scientists, as economic organizations and conglomerations of power, we taper up like a pyramid to the point at the top where Power itself stands, with features of stone and glaring eyes! In it we live and have our being, merciless towards those who are remote beneath us, and triumphing even when we ourselves are crushed, for thus does power justify our love for it!

[...] One of the policemen lined up to keep a clear passage through the gateway gave Diederich a blow in the chest that took his breath away, but his eyes were full of the tumult of victory, as if he himself were riding away over all these wretches who had been cowed into swallowing their hunger. Let us follow him! Follow the Emperor! They all felt as Diederich did. A chain of policemen was too weak to restrain so much feeling. The people broke through. Beyond the gate was another chain, so they had to make a detour, find a gap, and reach the Tiergarten by a roundabout way. Only a few succeeded, and Diederich was alone when he stumbled on to the riding path in the direction of the Emperor, who was also alone. Diederich looked like a man in a very dangerous state of fanaticism, dirty and torn, with wild eyes—from his horse the Emperor flashed his eyes in a glance which went straight through him. Diederich snatched his hat off, his mouth was wide open, but not a sound came from it. As he came to a sudden stop he slipped and sat down violently in a puddle, with his legs in the air, splashed with muddy water. Then the Emperor laughed. The fellow was a monarchist, a loyal subject! The Emperor turned to his escorts, slapped his thigh, and laughed. From the depths of his puddle, Diederich stared after him, his mouth still open.

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