

XVI. OF THE ARTIFICIAL IN MAN, AND OF THE ZEITGEIST

You have seen these two young people--Bechamel, by-the-bye, is the man's name, and the girl's is Jessie Milton--from the outside; you have heard them talking; they ride now side by side (but not too close together, and in an uneasy silence) towards Haslemere; and this chapter will concern itself with those curious little council chambers inside their skulls, where their motives are in session and their acts are considered and passed.

But first a word concerning wigs and false teeth. Some jester, enlarging upon the increase of bald heads and purblind people, has deduced a wonderful future for the children of men. Man, he said, was nowadays a hairless creature by forty or fifty, and for hair we gave him a wig; shrivelled, and we padded him; toothless, and lo! false teeth set in gold. Did he lose a limb, and a fine, new, artificial one was at his disposal; get indigestion, and to hand was artificial digestive fluid or bile or pancreatine, as the case might be. Complexions, too, were replaceable, spectacles superseded an inefficient eye-lens, and imperceptible false diaphragms were thrust into the failing ear. So he went over our anatomies, until, at last, he had conjured up a weird thing of shreds and patches, a simulacrum, an artificial body of a man, with but a doubtful germ of living flesh lurking somewhere in his recesses. To that, he held, we were coming.

How far such odd substitution for the body is possible need not concern

us now. But the devil, speaking by the lips of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, hath it that in the case of one Tomlinson, the thing, so far as the soul is concerned, has already been accomplished. Time was when men had simple souls, desires as natural as their eyes, a little reasonable philanthropy, a little reasonable philoprogenitiveness, hunger, and a taste for good living, a decent, personal vanity, a healthy, satisfying pugnacity, and so forth. But now we are taught and disciplined for years and years, and thereafter we read and read for all the time some strenuous, nerve-destroying business permits. Pedagogic hypnotists, pulpit and platform hypnotists, book-writing hypnotists, newspaper-writing hypnotists, are at us all. This sugar you are eating, they tell us, is ink, and forthwith we reject it with infinite disgust. This black draught of unrequited toil is True Happiness, and down it goes with every symptom of pleasure. This Ibsen, they say, is dull past believing, and we yawn and stretch beyond endurance. Pardon! they interrupt, but this Ibsen is deep and delightful, and we vie with one another in an excess of entertainment. And when we open the heads of these two young people, we find, not a straightforward motive on the surface anywhere; we find, indeed, not a soul so much as an oversoul, a zeitgeist, a congestion of acquired ideas, a highway's feast of fine, confused thinking. The girl is resolute to Live Her Own Life, a phrase you may have heard before, and the man has a pretty perverted ambition to be a cynical artistic person of the very calmest description. He is hoping for the awakening of Passion in her, among other things. He knows Passion ought to awaken, from the text-books he has studied. He knows she admires his genius, but he is unaware that she does not admire his

head. He is quite a distinguished art critic in London, and he met her at that celebrated lady novelist's, her stepmother, and here you have them well embarked upon the Adventure. Both are in the first stage of repentance, which consists, as you have probably found for yourself, in setting your teeth hard and saying' "I WILL go on."

Things, you see, have jarred a little, and they ride on their way together with a certain aloofness of manner that promises ill for the orthodox development of the Adventure. He perceives he was too precipitate. But he feels his honour is involved, and meditates the development of a new attack. And the girl? She is unawakened. Her motives are bookish, written by a haphazard syndicate of authors, novelists, and biographers, on her white inexperience. An artificial oversoul she is, that may presently break down and reveal a human being beneath it. She is still in that schoolgirl phase when a talkative old man is more interesting than a tongue-tied young one, and when to be an eminent mathematician, say, or to edit a daily paper, seems as fine an ambition as any girl need aspire to. Bechaniel was to have helped her to attain that in the most expeditious manner, and here he is beside her, talking enigmatical phrases about passion, looking at her with the oddest expression, and once, and that was his gravest offence, offering to kiss her. At any rate he has apologised. She still scarcely realises, you see, the scrape she has got into.