

A Man by the Name of Ziegler

Hermann Hesse

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There was once a young man by the name of Ziegler, who lived on Brauergasse. He was one of those people we see every day on the street, whose faces we can never really remember, because they all have the same face: a collective face.

Ziegler was everything and did everything that such people always are and do. He was not stupid, but neither was he gifted; he loved money and pleasure, liked to dress well, and was as cowardly as most people: his life and activities were governed less by desires and strivings than by prohibitions, by the fear of punishment. Still, he had a number of good qualities and all in all he was a gratifyingly normal young man, whose own person was most interesting and important to him. Like every other man, he regarded himself as an individual, though in reality he was only a specimen, and like other men he regarded himself and his life as the centre of the world. He was far removed from all doubts, and when facts contradicted his opinions, he shut his eyes disapprovingly.

As a modern man, he had unlimited respect for not only money, but also for a second power: science. He could not have said exactly what science was, he had in mind something on the order of statistics and perhaps a bit of bacteriology, and he knew how much money and honour the state accorded to science. He especially admired cancer research, for his father had died of cancer, and Ziegler firmly believed that science, which had developed so remarkably since then, would not let the same thing happen to him.

Outwardly Ziegler distinguished himself by his tendency to dress somewhat beyond his means, always in the fashion of the year. For since he could not afford the fashions of the month or season, it goes without saying that he despised them as foolish affectation. He was a great believer in independence of character and often spoke harshly, among friends and in safe places, of his employers and of the government. I am probably dwelling too long on this portrait. But Ziegler was a charming young fellow, and he has been a great loss to us. For he met with a strange and premature end, which set all his plans and justified hopes at naught.

One Sunday soon after his arrival in our town, he decided on a day's recreation. He had not yet made any real friends and had not yet been able to make up his mind to join a club. Perhaps this was his undoing. It is not good for a man to be alone.

He could think of nothing else to do but go sightseeing. After conscientious inquiry and mature reflection he decided on the historical museum and the zoo. The museum was free of charge on Sunday mornings, and the zoo could be visited in the afternoon for a moderate fee.

Wearing his new suit with cloth buttons he was very fond of it he set out for the historical museum. He was carrying his thin, elegant, red-lacquered walking cane, which lent him dignity and distinction, but which to his profound displeasure he was obliged to part with at the entrance.

There were all sorts of things to be seen in the lofty rooms, and in his heart the pious visitor sang the praises of almighty science, which, here again, as Ziegler observed in reading the meticulous inscriptions on the showcases, proved that it could be counted on. Thanks to these inscriptions, old bric-a-brac, such as rusty keys, broken and

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tarnished necklaces, and so on, became amazingly interesting. It was marvellous how science looked into everything, understood everything and found a name for it oh, yes, it would definitely get rid of cancer very soon, maybe it would even abolish death.

In the second room he found a glass case in which he was reflected so clearly that he was able to stop for a moment and check up, carefully and to his entire satisfaction, on his coat, trousers, and the knot of his tie. Pleasantly reassured, he passed on and devoted his attention to the products of some early wood carvers. Competent men, though shockingly naïve, he reflected benevolently. He also contemplated an old grandfather clock with ivory figures which danced the minuet when it struck the hour, and it too met with his patient approval. Then he began to feel rather bored; he yawned and looked more and more frequently at his watch, which he was not ashamed of showing, for it was solid gold, inherited from his father.

As he saw to his regret, he still had a long way to go till lunchtime, and so he entered another room. Here his curiosity revived. It contained objects of medieval superstition, books of magic, amulets, trappings of witchcraft, and in one corner a whole alchemist's workshop, complete with forge, mortars, pot-bellied flasks dried-out pig's bladders, bellows, and so on. This corner was roped off, and there was a sign forbidding the public to touch the objects. But one never reads such signs very attentively, and Ziegler was alone in the room.

Unthinkingly he stretched out his arm over the rope and touched a few of the weird things. He had heard and read about the Middle Ages and their comical superstitions; it was beyond him how the people of those days could have bothered with such childish nonsense, and he failed to see why such absurdities as witchcraft had not simply been prohibited. Alchemy, on the other hand, was pardonable, since the useful science of chemistry had developed from it. Good Lord, to think that these gold-makers' crucibles and all this magic hocus-pocus may have been necessary, because without them there would be no aspirin or gas bombs today!

Absentmindedly he picked up a small dark-coloured pellet, rather like a pill, rolled the dry, weightless little thing between his fingers and was about to put it down again when he heard steps behind him. He turned round. A visitor had entered the room. Ziegler was embarrassed at having the pellet in his hand, for actually he had read the sign. So he closed his hand, put it in his pocket and left.

He did not think of the pellet again until he was on the street. He took it out and decided to throw it away. But first he raised it to his nose and sniffed it. It had a faint resinous smell that he found rather pleasing, so he put it back in his pocket.

Then he went to a restaurant, ordered, leafed through a few newspapers, toyed with his tie, and cast respectful or haughty glances at the guests around him, depending on how they were dressed. But when his meal was rather long in coming, he took out the alchemist's pill that he had involuntarily stolen, and smelled it. Then he scratched it with his fingernail, and finally naïvely giving into a childlike impulse, he put it in his mouth. It did not taste bad and dissolved quickly; he washed it down with a sip of beer. And then his meal arrived.

At two o'clock the young man jumped off the street car, went to the zoo, and bought a Sunday ticket.

Smiling amiably, he went to the primate house and planted himself in front of the big cage where the chimpanzees were kept. A large chimpanzee blinked at him, gave him a good-natured nod, and said in a deep voice: "How goes it, brother?"

Repelled and strangely frightened, Ziegler turned away. As he was hurrying off, he heard the ape scolding: "What's he got to be proud about! The stupid bastard!"

He went to see the long-tailed monkeys. They were dancing merrily. "Give us some sugar, old buddy!" they cried. And when he had no sugar, they grew angry and mimicked him, called him a cheapskate, and bared their

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teeth. That was more than he could stand; he fled in consternation and made for the deer, whom he expected to behave better.

A large stately elk stood close to the bars, looking him over. And suddenly Ziegler was stricken with horror. For since swallowing the magic pill, he understood the language of the animals. And the elk spoke with his eyes, two big brown eyes. His silent gaze expressed dignity, resignation, sadness, and with regard to the visitor a lofty and solemn contempt, a terrible contempt. In the language of these silent, majestic eyes, Ziegler read, he, with hat and cane, his gold watch and his Sunday suit, was no better than vermin, an absurd and repulsive bug.

From the elk he fled to the ibex, from the ibex to the chamois, the llama, and the gnu, to the wild boars and bears. They did not all insult him, but without exception they despised him. He listened to them and learned from their conversations what they thought of people in general. And what they thought was most distressing. Most of all they were surprised that these ugly, stinking, undignified bipeds with their foppish disguises should be allowed to run around loose.

He heard a puma talking to her cub, a conversation full of dignity and practical wisdom, such as one seldom hears among humans. He heard a beautiful panther expressing his opinions of this riffraff, the Sunday visitors, in succinct, well-turned, aristocratic phrases. He looked the blond lion in the eye and learned of the wonderful immensity of the wilderness, where there are no cages and no human beings. He saw a kestrel perched proud and forlorn, congealed in melancholy, on a dead branch and saw the jays bearing their imprisonment with dignity, resignation and humour.

Dejected and wrenched out of all habits of thought, Ziegler turned back to his fellow men in despair. He looked for eyes that would understand his terror and misery; he listened to conversations in the hope of hearing something comforting, something understandable and soothing; he observed the gestures of the visitors in the hope of finding nobility and quiet, natural dignity.

But he was disappointed. He heard voices and words, he saw movements, gestures and glances, but since now saw everything as through the eyes of an animal, he found nothing but a degenerate, dissembling mob of bestial fops, who seemed to be an unbeautiful mixture of all the animal species.

In despair Ziegler wandered about. He felt hopelessly ashamed of himself. He had long since thrown his red-lacquered cane into the bushes and his gloves after it. But when he threw away his hat, took off his shoes and tie, and shaken with sobs pressed against the bars of the elk's cage, a crowd collected and the guards seized him, and he was taken away to an insane asylum.