

20: HOW I FOUND THE SUPERMAN

Readers of Mr. Bernard Shaw and other modern writers may be interested to know that the Superman has been found. I found him; he lives in South Croydon. My success will be a great blow to Mr. Shaw, who has been following quite a false scent, and is now looking for the creature in Blackpool; and as for Mr. Wells's notion of generating him out of gases in a private laboratory, I always thought it doomed to failure. I assure Mr. Wells that the Superman at Croydon was born in the ordinary way, though he himself, of course, is anything but ordinary.

Nor are his parents unworthy of the wonderful being whom they have given to the world. The name of Lady Hypatia Smythe-Browne (now Lady Hypatia Hagg) will never be forgotten in the East End, where she did such splendid social work. Her constant cry of "Save the children!" referred to the cruel neglect of children's eyesight involved in allowing them to play with crudely painted toys. She quoted unanswerable statistics to prove that children allowed to look at violet and vermilion often suffered from failing eyesight in their extreme old age; and it was owing to her ceaseless crusade that the pestilence of the Monkey-on-the-Stick was almost swept from Hoxton. The devoted worker would tramp the streets untiringly, taking away the toys from all the poor children, who were often moved to tears by her kindness. Her good work was interrupted, partly by a new interest in the creed of Zoroaster, and partly by a savage blow from an umbrella. It was inflicted by a dissolute Irish apple-woman, who, on returning from some orgy to her ill-kept apartment, found Lady Hypatia in the bedroom taking down an oleograph, which, to say the least of it, could not really elevate the mind. At this the ignorant and partly intoxicated Celt dealt the social reformer a severe blow, adding to it an absurd accusation of theft. The lady's exquisitely balanced mind received a shock, and it was during a short mental illness that she married Dr. Hagg.

Of Dr. Hagg himself I hope there is no need to speak. Any one even slightly acquainted with those daring experiments in Neo-Individualist Eugenics, which are now the one absorbing interest of the English democracy, must know his name and often commend it to the personal protection of an impersonal power. Early in life he brought to bear that ruthless insight into the history of religions which he had gained in boyhood as an electrical engineer. Later he became one of our greatest geologists; and achieved that bold and bright outlook upon the future of Socialism which only geology can give. At first there seemed something like a rift, a faint, but perceptible, fissure, between his views and those of his aristocratic wife. For she was in favour (to use her own powerful epigram) of protecting the poor against themselves; while he declared pitilessly, in a new and

striking metaphor, that the weakest must go to the wall. Eventually, however, the married pair perceived an essential union in the unmistakably modern character of both their views, and in this enlightening and intelligible formula their souls found peace. The result is that this union of the two highest types of our civilization, the fashionable lady and the all but vulgar medical man, has been blessed by the birth of the Superman, that being whom all the labourers in Battersea are so eagerly expecting night and day.

I found the house of Dr. and Lady Hypatia Hagg without much difficulty; it is situated in one of the last straggling streets of Croydon, and overlooked by a line of poplars. I reached the door towards the twilight, and it was natural that I should fancifully see something dark and monstrous in the dim bulk of that house which contained the creature who was more marvellous than the children of men. When I entered the house I was received with exquisite courtesy by Lady Hypatia and her husband; but I found much greater difficulty in actually seeing the Superman, who is now about fifteen years old, and is kept by himself in a quiet room. Even my conversation with the father and mother did not quite clear up the character of this mysterious being. Lady Hypatia, who has a pale and poignant face, and is clad in those impalpable and pathetic greys and greens with which she has brightened so many homes in Hoxton, did not appear to talk of her offspring with any of the vulgar vanity of an ordinary human mother. I took a bold step and asked if the Superman was nice looking.

"He creates his own standard, you see," she replied, with a slight sigh. "Upon that plane he is more than Apollo. Seen from our lower plane, of course--" And she sighed again.

I had a horrible impulse, and said suddenly, "Has he got any hair?"

There was a long and painful silence, and then Dr. Hagg said smoothly: "Everything upon that plane is different; what he has got is not... well, not, of course, what we call hair... but--"

"Don't you think," said his wife, very softly, "don't you think that really, for the sake of argument, when talking to the mere public, one might call it hair?"

"Perhaps you are right," said the doctor after a few moments' reflection. "In connexion with hair like that one must speak in parables."

"Well, what on earth is it," I asked in some irritation, "if it isn't hair? Is it feathers?"

"Not feathers, as we understand feathers," answered Hagg in an awful voice.

I got up in some irritation. "Can I see him, at any rate?" I asked. "I am a journalist, and have no earthly motives except curiosity and personal vanity. I should like to say that I had shaken hands with the Superman."

The husband and wife had both got heavily to their feet, and stood, embarrassed. "Well, of course, you know," said Lady Hypatia, with the really charming smile of the aristocratic hostess. "You know he can't exactly shake hands... not hands, you know.... The structure, of course--"

I broke out of all social bounds, and rushed at the door of the room which I thought to contain the incredible creature. I burst it open; the room was pitch dark. But from in front of me came a small sad yelp, and from behind me a double shriek.

"You have done it, now!" cried Dr. Hagg, burying his bald brow in his hands. "You have let in a draught on him; and he is dead."

As I walked away from Croydon that night I saw men in black carrying out a coffin that was not of any human shape. The wind wailed above me, whirling the poplars, so that they drooped and nodded like the plumes of some cosmic funeral. "It is, indeed," said Dr. Hagg, "the whole universe weeping over the frustration of its most magnificent birth." But I thought that there was a hoot of laughter in the high wail of the wind.