The Superman

THE IDEAL of the Superman has been brought recently into much notice, some not very fruitful discussion and a good deal of obloquy. It is apt to be resented by average humanity because men are told or have a lurking consciousness that here is a claim of the few to ascend to heights of which the many are not capable, to concentrate moral and spiritual privileges and enjoy a domination, powers and immunities hurtful to a diffused dignity and freedom in mankind. So considered, supermanhood is nothing more important than a deification of the rare or solitary ego that has out-topped others in the force of our common human qualities. But this presentation is narrow and a travesty. The gospel of true supermanhood gives us a generous ideal for the progressive human race and should not be turned into an arrogant claim for a class or individuals. It is a call to man to do what no species has yet done or aspired to do in terrestrial history, evolve itself consciously into the next superior type already half foreseen by the continual cyclic development of the world-idea in Nature’s fruitful musings. And when we so envisage it, this conception ranks surely as one of the most potent seeds that can be cast by thought into the soil of our human growth.

Nietzsche first cast it, the mystic of Will-worship, the troubled, profound, half-luminous Hellenising Slav with his strange clarities, his violent half-ideas, his rare gleaming intuitions that came marked with the stamp of an absolute truth and sovereignty of light. But Nietzsche was an apostle who never entirely understood his own message. His prophetic style was like that of the Delphic oracles which spoke constantly the word of the Truth but turned it into untruth in the mind of the hearer. Not always indeed; for sometimes he rose beyond his personal temperament and individual mind, his European inheritance
and environment, his revolt against the Christ-idea, his war against current moral values and spoke out the Word as he had heard it, the Truth as he had seen it, bare, luminous, impersonal and therefore flawless and imperishable. But for the most part this message that had come to his inner hearing vibrating out of a distant Infinite like a strain caught from the lyre of far-off Gods, did get, in his effort to appropriate and make it nearer to him, mixed up with a somewhat turbulent surge of collateral ideas that drowned much of the pure original note.

Especially, in his concept of the Superman he never cleared his mind of a preliminary confusion. For if a sort of human godhead is the goal to which the race must advance, the first difficulty is that we have to decide to which of two very different types of divinity the idea in us should owe allegiance. For the deity within may confront us either with the clear, joyous and radiant countenance of the God or the stern convulsed visage of the Titan. Nietzsche hymned the Olympian but presented him with the aspect of the Asura. His hostile preoccupation with the Christ-idea of the crucified God and its consequences was perhaps responsible for this distortion, as much as his subjection to the imperfect ideas of the Greeks. He presents to us sometimes a superman who fiercely and arrogantly repels the burden of simple sorrow and service, not one who arises victorious over mortality and suffering, his ascension vibrant with the triumph-song of a liberated humanity. To lose the link of Nature’s moral evolution is a capital fault in the apostle of supermanhood; for only out of the unavoidable line of the evolution can that emerge in the bosom of a humanity long tested, ripened and purified by the fire of egoistic and altruistic suffering.

God and Titan, Deva and Asura, are indeed close kin in their differences; nor could either have been spared in the evolution. Yet do they inhabit opposite poles of a common existence and common nature. The one descends from the light and the infinity, satisfied, to the play; the other ascends from the obscurity and the vagueness, angry, to the struggle. All the acts of the God derive from the universal and tend to the universal. He was born out of a victorious harmony. His qualities join pure and
gracious hands and link themselves together naturally and with delight as in the pastoral round of Brindavan, divine Krishna dominating and holding together its perfect circles. To evolve in the sense of the God is to grow in intuition, in light, in joy, in love, in happy mastery; to serve by rule and to rule by service; to be able to be bold and swift and even violent without hurt or wickedness and mild and kindly and even self-indulgent without laxity or vice or weakness; to make a bright and happy whole in oneself and, by sympathy, with mankind and all creatures. And in the end it is to evolve a large impersonal personality and to heighten sympathy into constant experience of world-oneness. For such are the Gods, conscious always of their universality and therefore divine.

Certainly, power is included. To be the divine man is to be self-ruler and world-ruler; but in another than the external sense. This is a rule that depends upon a secret sympathy and oneness which knows the law of another's being and of the world's being and helps or, if need be, compels it to realise its own greatest possibilities, but by a divine and essentially an inner compulsion. It is to take all qualities, energies, joys, sorrows, thoughts, knowledge, hopes, aims of the world around us into ourselves and return them enriched and transmuted in a sublime commerce and exploitation. Such an empire asks for no vulgar ostentation or golden trappings. The gods work oftenest veiled by light or by the storm-drift; they do not disdain to live among men even in the garb of the herdsman or the artisan; they do not shrink from the cross and the crown of thorns either in their inner evolution or their outward fortunes. For they know that the ego must be crucified and how shall men consent to this if God and the gods have not shown them the way? To take all that is essential in the human being and uplift it to its most absolute term so that it may become an element of light, joy, power for oneself and others, this is divinity. This, too, should be the drift of supermanhood.

But the Titan will have nothing of all this; it is too great and subtle for his comprehension. His instincts call for a visible, tangible mastery and a sensational domination. How shall he
feel sure of his empire unless he can feel something writhing helpless under his heel,—if in agony, so much the better? What is exploitation to him, unless it diminishes the exploited? To be able to coerce, exact, slay, overtly, irresistibly,—it is this that fills him with the sense of glory and dominion. For he is the son of division and the strong flowering of the Ego. To feel the comparative limitation of others is necessary to him that he may imagine himself immeasurable; for he has not the real, self-existent sense of infinity which no outward circumstance can abrogate. Contrast, division, negation of the wills and lives of others are essential to his self-development and self-assertion. The Titan would unify by devouring, not by harmonising; he must conquer and trample what is not himself either out of existence or into subservience so that his own image may stand out stamped upon all things and dominating all his environment.

In Nature, since it started from division and egoism, the Titan had to come first; he is here in us as the elder god, the first ruler of man’s heaven and earth. Then arrives the God and delivers and harmonises. Thus the old legend tells us that the Deva and the Asura laboured together to churn the ocean of life for the supreme draught of immortality, but, once it had been won, Vishnu kept it for the God and defrauded the fiercer and more violent worker. And this seems unjust; for the Asura has the heavier and less grateful portion of the burden. He begins and leads; he goes his way hewing, shaping, planting: the God follows, amends, concludes, reaps. He prepares fiercely and with anguish against a thousand obstacles the force that we shall use: the other enjoys the victory and the delight. And therefore to the great God Shiva the stained and stormy Titan is very dear,—Shiva who took for himself the fierce, dark and bitter poison first churned up from the sea of life and left to others the nectar. But the choice that Shiva made with knowledge and from love, the Titans made from darkness and passion,—desirous really of something very different and deceived by their stormy egoism. Therefore the award of Vishnu stands; to the God shall fall the crown and the immortality and not, unless he divinise himself, to the proud and strenuous Asura.
For what is supermanhood but a certain divine and harmonious absolute of all that is essential in man? He is made in God's image, but there is this difference between the divine Reality and its human representative that everything which in the one is unlimited, spontaneous, absolute, harmonious, self-possessed becomes in the other limited, relative, laboured, discordant, deformed, possessed by struggle, kept by subservience to one's possessions, lost by the transience and insecurity which come from wrong holding. But in this constant imperfection there is always a craving and an aspiration towards perfection. Man, limited, yearns to the Infinite; relative, is attracted in all things towards their absolute; artificial in Nature, drives towards a higher ease, mastery and naturalness that must for ever be denied to her inconscient forces and half-conscient animals; full of discords, he insists upon harmony; possessed by Nature and to her enslaved, is yet convinced of his mission to possess and master her. What he aspires to, is the sign of what he may be. He has to pass by a sort of transmutation of the earthly metal he now is out of flawed manhood into some higher symbol. For Man is Nature's great term of transition in which she grows conscious of her aim; in him she looks up from the animal with open eyes towards her divine ideal.

But God is complex, not simple; and the temptation of the human intellect is to make a short cut to the divine nature by the exclusive worship of one of its principles. Knowledge, Love whose secret word is Delight, Power and Unity are some of the Names of God. But though they are all divine, yet to follow any of them exclusively is to invite, after the first energy is over, His departure from us and denial; for even unity, exclusively pursued, ceases to be a true oneness. Yet this error we perpetually commit. Is it Love in whose temple we adore? Then we shut its gates upon Power as a child of the world and the devil and bid Knowledge carry elsewhere her lack of sweetness and remoteness from the heart's fervour. We erect an idol of Power and would pass all else through the fire of Moloch before its sombre and formidable image, expelling Love with scorn as a nurse of weaklings and degrading Knowledge to the position of
a squire or even a groom of Force. Or we cultivate Knowledge with a severe aloofness and austerity to find at last the lotus of the heart dulled and fading — happy if its more divine faculties are not already atrophied — and ourselves standing impotent with our science while the thunders of Rudra crash through and devastate the world we have organised so well by our victorious and clear-minded efficiency. Or we run after a vague and mechanical zero we call unity and when we have sterilised our secret roots and dried up the wells of Life within us, discover, unwise unifiers, that we have achieved death and not a greater existence. And all this happens because we will not recognise the complexity of the riddle we are set here to solve. It is a great and divine riddle; but it is no knot of Gordius, nor is its all-wise Author a dead king that he should suffer us to mock his intention and cut through to our will with the fierce impatience of the hasty mortal conqueror.

None of these oppositions is more constant than that of Power and Love: yet neither of these deities can be safely neglected. What can be more divine than Love? But followed exclusively it is impotent to solve the world's discords. The worshipped Avatar of love and the tender saint of saints leave behind them a divine but unfollowed example, a luminous and imperishable but ineffective memory. They have added an element to the potentialities of the heart, but the race cannot utilise it effectively for life because it has not been harmonised with the rest of the qualities that are essential to our fullness. Shall we therefore turn round and give ourselves to Power with its iron hands of action and its hard and clear practical intellect? The men of power may say that they have done a more tangible work for their race than the souls of Love, but it is a vain advantage. For they have not even tried to raise us beyond our imperfect humanity. They have erected a temporary form or given a secular impetus. An empire has been created, an age or a century organised, but the level of humanity has not been raised nearer to the secret of a Caesar or a Napoleon. Love fails because it hastily rejects the material of the world's discords or only tramples them underfoot in an unusual ecstasy; Power because it seeks only to
organise an external arrangement. The world’s discords have to be understood, seized, transmuted. Love must call Power and Knowledge into the temple and seat them beside her in a unified equality; Power must bow its neck to the yoke of Light and Love before it can do any real good to the race.

Unity is the secret, a complex, understanding and embracing unity. When the full heart of Love is tranquillised by knowledge into a calm ecstasy and vibrates with strength, when the strong hands of Power labour for the world in a radiant fullness of joy and light, when the luminous brain of knowledge accepts and transforms the heart’s obscure inspirations and lends itself to the workings of the high-seated Will, when all these gods are founded together on a soul of sacrifice that lives in unity with all the world and accepts all things to transmute them, then is the condition of man’s integral self-transcendence. This and not a haughty, strong and brilliant egoistic self-culture enthroning itself upon an enslaved humanity is the divine way of supermanhood.