

Eugenica

A Novel by
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Prologue

“Eugenics deals with what is more valuable than money or lands, namely the heritage of a high character, capable brains, fine physique, and vigour; in short, with all that is most desirable for a family to possess as a birthright. It aims at the evolution and preservation of high races of men, and it as well deserves to be strictly enforced as a religious duty.”

Sir Francis Galton.

Eugenics: Its Definition, Scope and Aims. 1904.

New Year’s Eve. London. 1931.

Celebrating New Year’s Eve at Windsor House, Belgravia, was a traditional event and a highlight of the local social calendar. Although Dr Clark Hunter was not a vivacious person by nature his wife, Jennifer, made a delightful and engaging hostess. She had nurtured a social life of her own to combat the loneliness caused by her husband’s frequent absences. It went a long way towards filling the void that his work had caused in their marriage over the years. Such were the demands made upon him in his capacity as a highly regarded medical scientist.

Jennifer did not scold him or complain or seek solace elsewhere. She accepted that loneliness was the price she paid for being the wife of a successful man dedicated to science. He had always admired her integrity, loyalty, and independent spirit, qualities that had allowed their marriage to succeed where so many others might have foundered. His generosity towards her in material things went some way towards mitigating his absences. She had this beautiful house, a car, servants, everything that he believed a modern woman could want. Everything that a woman of her class required. It caused him pain, however, when he contemplated how much of the time spent away from his wife had been wasted. It was a realisation made in hindsight, of course, but valid all the same. He had striven to validate an hypothesis that had proven to be false. Many scientists, working in other fields, had done the same but that was not the contentious point. It was finally admitting to himself what he had known several years ago, that eugenics was a false science, but lacking the necessary courage to confront that truth.

The Belgravia New Year’s Eve party had evolved without Dr Hunter ever having been active in its planning or delivery. Nevertheless, he had never missed a single occasion to be stood beside his wife as she greeted their guests on this annual event. It was a very small act undertaken to repay her love for him, an affection that had never wilted.

Dr Hunter stood in the doorway between the lounge and the hall, a fine Cuban cigar in one hand, a glass of red wine in the other. He surveyed the sea of faces that surrounded Jennifer, bubbling surf on the shores of a beautiful island. She was now 54 years old but she looked younger. She had always looked younger than her age. Good health still imbued her cheeks with a rosy complexion. Rouge was unnecessary. Long dark hair, full of natural lustre, was expertly coiffured and displayed her elegant neck, around which draped a silver and emerald necklace. Green eyes sparkled

effervescently as she chatted to the friends that she knew so much more intimately than he, her husband, did. Her smile was ready and warm, again, totally natural.

The house was aglow with good cheer and it felt a warm and friendly place to be. Twelve months previously Dr Hunter would not have had to force a convivial spirit. At his wife's urging, something else that had also become a tradition in this particular season, he would have allowed sufficient alcohol to pass his lips that he would become more relaxed and begin to enjoy the company of her guests. Tonight, however, his heart weighed too heavy. The claret in his glass was for show, he had not yet tasted it, and the cigar only created a smokescreen behind which he hid his face and, he hoped, his fears.

It was something of a relief to him that their son was absent tonight. Jennifer had bemoaned the fact, as was to be expected. It had occurred to Dr Hunter that his son might have proven a powerful ally on such a night as this, but he had spent many years successfully keeping the boy removed from the tentacles of the Verdure. Simply using his son to protect himself now seemed too trite an excuse to break that habit. It was more important that the truth was safeguarded and that 'Doc Hunter', as the boy had popularly become known, be preserved as a possible weapon of retribution at a later date; a date that he did not expect to see himself.

An insistent vibration immediately attracted his attention. Moving swiftly but without alarm Dr Hunter retreated into the hallway where there were only a handful of people passing through from one room to another. He placed his glass on a console table in front of a large mirror. Pushing back the sleeve of his jacket he exposed a device that looked something like a large wristwatch, but one that had a circle of fine wire mesh instead of the usual face of a timepiece.

"Speak!" He commanded in a stentorian tone.

"It has been effectuated sir." A tinny voice responded from the device.

"Any complications?"

"She was inchoately aporetic in the primary instance but metamorphosed a more amenable temperament in due course."

"But you followed my instructions."

"With habitual definitude, sir."

"Very good. Thank you for repaying my constant trust in your abilities."

"Your approbation is perpetually venerated, sir. In conclusion, fare thee well." A soft click confirmed that the communication had been ended.

Dr Hunter smiled to himself. He would miss William Harper's extended vocabulary, and his considerable abilities. He was assured, however, that his faithful assistant and friend would soon be safe, pursuing a new life in America. He would have a new identity, and enough money to make of his undoubted talents anything that he so wished.

With the brief but also very important conversation concluded he pushed his jacket sleeve back into place. A considerable weight had been removed from his shoulders. A covert objective achieved. He retrieved his glass of claret and raised it to the level of his eyes, gently spinning the stem between his fingers, and examining the deep red of the wine in the light cast from the crystal chandelier that illuminated the hallway.

Too much value has been placed upon the concept of blood and its presumed qualities of being either good or bad.

For the first time that evening he sipped the wine in his glass and allowed it to wash over his palette, even evincing a little pleasure at the experience. His spirits lifted accordingly. He turned with the intention of going to his wife and giving her a kiss, a

genuine expression of his affection for her. A movement on the broad stairs caught his eye. His instinct warned him of danger. Dr Hunter saw a man in immaculate evening dress, complete with white gloves. The man ceased his descent and smiled genially but his eyes were cold.

“Good evening, Dr Hunter, this is an excellent party that you are hosting. On another occasion I would enjoy myself immensely, as I have in the past, but tonight is not really an evening for such festivities as far as the likes of you and I are concerned, is it?” His voice was cultured, clear, and precise.

“Perhaps my study would be more suitable?” Dr Hunter suggested. His premonition had been realised sooner than he had thought it would be. He remained calm, however.

“Ideal,” the other enthused with yet another cold smile and he immediately turned and began to climb the stairs again.

Dr Hunter paused for a moment and considered whether he should indeed go and kiss Jennifer. He realised, however, that he would find it difficult to excuse himself immediately thereafter, and that would only annoy his unwanted guest further. With that in mind he looked directly at her and consumed the image of his wife, her face, her elegance, her beauty, one last time. In that moment he felt an ache of regret that both pierced his heart and confirmed a truth; he loved Jennifer.

In her youth she had been something of an athlete, at least as far as the society of that day would allow a young woman to be one. Jennifer lacked his academic interests but she had been educated to a good standard. In Clark Hunter she had found a husband who encouraged her independent spirit more than was to be expected. That may have been one of the reasons why she had remained with him for so long. He had never sought to proscribe her freedom or fetter her with the chains of social convention. And he did love her.

It suddenly crossed his mind to make a fight of it. Resistance, he knew, would only put her in danger, however, and that was something that he had always striven to avoid. He chose instead to accept his fate. He was not exactly a martyr but he did not ascend the stairs like a condemned man either. Rather, he moved in an unhurried fashion, drink in one hand, cigar in the other.

His study was on the first floor, towards the back of the house, and overlooking the expansive walled garden. The door was open and he could see that a light was already illuminating the interior as he approached the room. Upon entering he found the man with the white gloves stood appreciating an oil painting that hung above the fireplace. The man turned and smiled at him again.

“A fine example of impressionism, *Falaise* by Claude Monet I believe?” He spoke rhetorically and waved the doctor to one of the two green leather Chesterfield chairs that faced the unlit fireplace. As Dr Hunter took the proffered seat, a little annoyed at the presumption of the other to take command in his own study, his uninvited guest closed the study door.

“I suppose that you do not feel like a drink, Boulstridge?” Dr Hunter’s voice remained strong and vibrant.

“No thank you,” the other replied as he took the companion chair in a relaxed manner, crossing his legs. “As I think you have realised, I am not here in a social capacity.”

“Obviously, as you were not invited on this occasion, and your presence suggests that the Verdure are not willing to allow me to retire gracefully?”

“Sadly, no, that will not be allowed to happen. We are at an impasse, as they say. You have within your possession various documents that are of the utmost value to the

Verdure. You request to be allowed to withdraw from public life and service, the price of that egress is the surrender of the said documents, but you refuse to pay the toll. You leave us little choice.”

“You paint the picture as if this were all of my own doing.”

“Each party has their own interpretation of the matter as it lies before them, I am only a servant, given a commission to fulfil.”

“You make murder sound so reasonable.”

“Perhaps that is how I deal with the matter, it is my trade after all.” He smiled and it was almost a good natured expression this time. “Personally, I have nothing but admiration for you. People like Galton and Pearson talk about a brave new world but you, Doctor, you actually made it happen.”

“I now hold the opposite opinion, what I achieved in the field was more by good fortune than good science.”

“Perhaps so, but you cannot deny the existence of your son, or the validation he gives to *Übermensch*?”

“In the first case no, and I never would, in the second case yes, and I vehemently do question the presumed validation of *Übermensch*. That is a failed experiment.”

“My masters disagree with you on that point.”

“Obviously, or else you would not be here in your official capacity.”

“Quite!”

“That the Verdure chose to ignore the conclusions that were to be logically drawn from the *Übermensch* experiment is regrettable, but they remain extant all the same. The experiment cannot be repeated with any significant confidence of achieving the same results, certainly not with any meaningful consistency. Even Pearson, the statistician, would have understood the importance of that fact. Frederick Griffith’s observation that bacteria, he used *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, could be subject to an unidentified transforming factor has been confirmed. It permits the bacteria to change strains, something that should not happen if eugenic thinking was indeed correct. Nikolai Koltsov’s proposition, that such inherited traits are transmitted through a molecule made up of two mirror strands that replicate in a semi-conservative fashion, may well prove to be the transforming factor that Griffith observed in action. This, to my mind, indicates a much more sophisticated system of genetic transmission of hereditary traits than that which either Sir Galton or Professor Pearson, or any other eugenicist for that matter, has so far allowed for.”

“Very interesting,” Boulstridge neither looked nor sounded interested. “The real point is, doctor, that the Prime Minister, Ramsey MacDonald, accepted the support of the British Eugenics Society in his hour of need. Their considerable influence assisted him in winning the General Election back in October. The price is to be the creation of a ministry dedicated to pursuing eugenic principles within Great Britain and throughout the Empire. It is a significant achievement, the Verdure will not tolerate its realisation being threatened.”

“Even if the cornerstone of the philosophy of eugenics proves to be unsound and, perhaps, even unsafe?”

“Eugenics will move from being a philosophical subject to becoming a positive tool in the real world. America is already progressing down this path, as are several Scandinavian countries. I understand that Germany is also very interested in the subject, and they will all become stronger and healthier as a result. You cannot wish for your country to fall behind such competitors?”

“I wish only for Britain to advance upon the correct principles, and I no longer recognise the principles that guide eugenics as being such.”

“You once did, however. I believe that you even attended a lecture given by the esteemed Sir Francis Galton himself?”

“I did indeed. It was the occasion of the second Huxley lecture, at the Royal Anthropological Institute, in 1901. I appreciated the vision that Sir Francis presented to us then, but my mind has always been open to the influence of empirical evidence, precise scientific evidence. What I have discovered since that lecture fails to support the claims of Sir Francis and other eugenicists.”

“And yet you have indulged in practical experiments to attain the eugenic goal, paid for by the Verdure, I might add.”

“I was recruited to test the eugenicists’ claim to improving the species through selective breeding. It is the results of those experiments that led me to question the basic principles of the transmission of hereditary characteristics from one generation to the next. You said that eugenics will move from a philosophical to a practical state and yet you also know that it has already, and failed.”

“Again, my masters disagree with you there. Your son remains a shining example of their thinking.”

“The Verdure sponsored many experiments in the name of eugenics, most of them a waste of time and effort. I told them this when they passed the designs of the experiments over for my consideration. You know there really is no point in using science to validate a theory if you are not willing to accept the evidence that presents itself at the conclusion of the said experiments. Especially when that evidence is contrary to the design.”

“Well, that is a matter that I leave to the more erudite of our brethren. Out of my profound respect for you, however, I will make one more offer that will give you an avenue for redemption; surrender the *Urbemensch* papers?”

“You already have them.”

“We have some of them but they are not complete. Those that you chose to retain are the most valuable, as you clearly understood at the time when you made your decision to force this interview?”

“I find it curiously satisfying that the Verdure will go to such lengths to secure documents that it argues do not contradict the very precepts upon which its eugenics philosophy is built. The desperation that drives your masters to this extreme action also verifies my scepticism. You do see the irony don’t you, Boulstridge?”

“That irony may extend as far as your assistant, William Harper.”

“William has no place in this.” Dr Hunter forced his voice to remain even.

“He has a place by association,” Boulstridge insisted.

“William Harper left my employment some eighteen months ago to pursue alternative avenues of interest to himself.”

“But you did not replace him?”

“Why should I? After all, I was planning on retiring anyway, even then. Mr Harper worked his notice in his usual diligent fashion, he left my papers in an admirable state of organisation, except those pertaining to the Verdure’s experiments. I never involved him in that side of my working life.”

Boulstridge studied the doctor closely. It occurred to him that Hunter might be trying to protect his assistant but then he had to wonder why that might be. Harper was little more than a personal secretary, a clerk fond of using a verbose vocabulary because it was the only real learning that he had. The secretary was neither a social or

intellectual equal to Hunter. Boulstridge had also verified for himself that Harper had left his long-term lodgings with the avowed intent to do a little travelling before he took up a post as a librarian in some provincial town. It was a definite fact that the man was nowhere to be found within the British Isles.

"This conversation is now irrelevant," Boulstridge rose from the chair in an unhurried manner and reached into his jacket. He withdrew a small pistol. "We have crossed the Rubicon, Dr Hunter, and I can see no opportunity for you to return to the other side again."

"Quite rightly." Dr Hunter sounded unperturbed as he watched the other check the chamber of his gun to ensure that it was properly loaded. "My guests?" He enquired in a reasonable tone of voice.

"Will remain ignorant as to what transpires here," Boulstridge assured him. From another internal pocket he produced a long thin cylinder and began to attach it to the muzzle of the pistol. When finished he held the gun up and looked at it appreciatively. "This is a Walther PPK, a German gun that only became available earlier this year. I do consider myself something of a modernist, and the Germans are such splendid engineers, aren't they?"

"Quite, and that other device would be a muffler of some sort?"

"Yes, a silencer, engineered to fit this particular gun. They say that Hiram Percy Maxim invented the silencer in the early part of this century. The Americans are also modernists in their own way. It is a remarkable device don't you think?"

"Not particularly, but then I'm not an assassin."

"True!" Boulstridge shrugged his acceptance of the doctor's rejoinder. "It does make this weapon an assassin's gun I suppose, although I personally prefer to think of myself as more of a protector of my employer's assets. There is some logic to that notion, considering the level of threat that you now represent to the Verdure, and all that they have achieved; all that they are going to achieve."

"A threat that I have never expressed in neither word nor deed."

"Again, true, but you are a man of principle, Dr Hunter, you would move against them eventually, we all know that to be true."

"I am sixty-five years old, all but retired from public life already, it would only take one more step for me to fade into the shadows, and live out the rest of my life here with my wife and family."

"An admirable notion but one that belies both your prodigious physical and mental capacities, even at the age you have attained. You may remain silent doctor, but I doubt very much that you would remain inactive. The Indivisibles would make of you a fine recruit."

"I wish to escape the clutches of one secret brotherhood, why should I then seek out the embrace of another?"

"For revenge? Oh, you scowl at so base a motive, I know, but I also understand how seductive revenge can be. Perhaps tomorrow you would continue in your retirement, and perhaps all through next year as well. The Indivisibles, however, would come calling sooner rather than later, and you will be swayed by their arguments eventually, simply because they would offer you revenge in one form or another. Given time to ponder upon what occurred when you were more amenable to the Verdure you would come to believe that they were the cause of many of your regrets in life, and vengeance would quickly come to seem like the balm of choice for such sores. I am sorry, Doctor, truly sorry, but your fate is now to die this night."

"Apparently, but would you grant me one last favour, Boulstridge?"

“If it is within the bounds of both reason and my capacity to do so.”

“It is only this, I notice that it wants a little of a minute to midnight, I would like to die in 1932, and upon my feet, if that is acceptable to you? Just a vanity really, but there you are.”

Boulstridge glanced at the carriage clock on the mantelpiece to verify the time.

“Well now, I have been so carried away with our conversation that I clearly lost all track of the time. It is indeed almost the dawn of a new year. Please, Doctor, rise and greet 1932 with me.” Boulstridge levelled the gun as the other rose to his feet.

Dr Hunter placed his glass on the occasional table that stood next to his chair and put the cigar in his mouth. He glanced around his study fondly. It was a room he had come to consider as his favourite within the whole house. It held many reminders of his glittering career in science, as well as some more personal accomplishments.

Neither man spoke as the clock ticked down. All three hands eventually coincided on the numeral twelve. From below they heard a chorus of cheers followed by the singing of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ by excited voices.

“I never placed much value on marking the New Year as such,” Boulstridge told him, “I find it all just goes on as it did before. Of course, you realise that we have searched through all of your extant documents, in all of your properties?”

“I expected as much.” Dr Hunter removed the cigar and favoured it with an appreciative look. “I presume you were responsible for breaking into the safe here in my study.”

“Indeed, a skill I learnt in the service of my country. Now, how would you like to do this, facing that delightful Monet painting hanging over the fireplace perhaps?”

“Right here, like this, is acceptable.”

“Face to face, like men, eh?”

“One moment!” Dr Hunter held up the cigar in explanation and then indicated a heavy, cut crystal, ashtray placed on the table next to his chair. “We wouldn’t want to start a fire would we?” He half turned and bent down towards the table. His hand reached out with the cigar to stub out the burning tobacco. Once satisfied that it was extinguished he returned his attention back to his assassin.

“I am very sorry that it has come to this, Dr Hunter, I have always been an admirer of yours.” Boulstridge raised the gun and sighted down its extended barrel.

“Perhaps you can express your regret to my son when he comes for you!” Dr Hunter returned with a tone that contained a significant amount of disdain.

Boulstridge’s index finger clenched and there was a soft sound followed by the falling of the doctor to the carpeted floor. From below came the tinkling of a piano and several voices poorly united in song. The assassin stepped forward and put two fingers to the side of the doctor’s neck, searching for a pulse. Satisfied that he had fulfilled his commission with a single bullet to the heart he rose and disassembled his weapon, stowing away the several pieces within different pockets of his jacket. He then exited the study, making sure that the door was closed, and headed down the stairs with a slight smile on his face.

At the bottom of the staircase several people filled the hallway as they tried to don their coats and find their heads to place most carefully into their hats. Boulstridge glided through the press of bodies, returned a ‘good evening’ or a ‘happy new year’ to anyone who noticed him, and then passed through the front door and out into the night.