

Will Clark Kent Save the World ?

"I'll show 'em," he muttered, clambering into the ramshackle garden-shed to look for his spade. "They think I'm an old fogey, eh? Past it, they say? A sap, huh? Just watch me..."

Through the kitchen-window, Mrs Kent listened to her husband's mutterings. She sighed. Things had just not been the same since he'd become a grandfather. Clark had just sort of - well, gone to pieces, she supposed. It was like the time he'd been exposed to Kryptonite by that horrible Lex Luthor. But without the sweating and staring eyes. No, on reflection, not like the famous Kryptonite episode at all. Then, forty years ago, Clark had been at the peak of physical fitness, an All-American guy. Now, he was just in steady decline. Couldn't get co-ordinated, kind of.

Only last week, Mrs Kent had been down at the shops; emerging from the health-food shop where she bought all those power-foods Clark seemed to like eating as snacks. Over at the bank, there was some kind of rumpus.

And then, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed two schoolgirls pointing at a phone box, shrieking and giggling. Inside, there was a flurry of red and blue, and muffled cursing. Lois had known straight away what it was. Her first instinct was to dodge back into the doorway of the shop. Let's face it, it wouldn't be nice for Clark to know that she had seen him making a fool of himself. So, after a few more moments, the door of the phone-box burst open, and a cloaked figure emerged, a vision of electric blue and startled red. And tripped over a propped up bicycle. And fell on top of it. Superman almost swore, but got up, bit his tongue and limped across the road towards the bank. Even from here, Lois could see a huge rent in his tights. (When Clark got home later that afternoon, he claimed it had been a vicious dog which had attacked him. But Mrs Kent knew from the black oil-stain that he had ripped it on the bicycle.)

To the hoots of young folks, calling out "Go, grandpa, go!", Superman hirpled into the bank looking for the trouble-makers. "Thank goodness you're here, Superman, sir!" cried the bank-manager. "These customers are threatening my staff!" And Superman had spent the next twenty minutes being pushed from pillar to post by angry customers. It has to be said, there was often trouble over at the bank, ever since they'd "re-organised", and the customers had had to wait in longer and longer queues, listening to the dreary background music, watching bank-staff apparently idling in corners. It was just the usual trouble today again: Lois could have told her husband this, but he never got down to the shops much, far less into the Bank.

Eventually Superman was so exasperated by the whole thing, he just turned on his heel and hobbled out the door, leaving them all to it.

Clark had been in a real mean mood that night, and skulked in the spare bedroom, looking through old press cuttings from the fifties and sixties, sighing. He didn't come to bed when his wife called, and the mug of cocoa she left out for him just grew cold and a skin. But he ate the malted biscuit and put the cat out.

The following day, there had been some unpleasantness when Lois found small lumps of Kryptonite pushed through the letter-box, and found "Kent's Bent - Superman or Blooperman?" grafitti-ed on to the fence. She didn't tell her husband. He was upset enough already.

Today, they'd gone down to the garden-centre. Lois wanted a new shrub for their small back garden. She thought a spot of gardening would cheer him up. She was wrong. Half-way round the centre, Clark bumped into a pile of stacked empty flower-pots, knocking them over and ending up sprawled amongst them on the floor. The staff at the garden-centre could not have been more kind and helpful as they picked him up and dusted him down. But the day was spoiled. The more so since an old acquaintance had been witness to this. There had been a cackle of wicked laughter when Clark went down, and Lois saw old Mr Luthor, sitting in a wheel-chair and attended by a couple of pretty nurses, laughing his horrible head off and waving his fingers at Lois. She didn't think Clark had spotted him. They paid for the shrub she wanted, and went home on the bus.

And now there he was in the dusk, rattling around in the shed, looking for the spade he had not used for several years, tripping over old piles of wood, the bags of rags (discarded cloaks and trunks). "Bloody flower-pots!" he shouted, and threw half-a-dozen of them over his shoulder, where they bounced and clattered on the grass. At last he found the spade, grasped it in both hands and stumbled out of the shed, his feet caught up in the flex of the rusty lawnmower. "Dammit!" he yelled, his voice raised half an octave.

"I'll show 'em," he repeated, striding down the garden to the spot that Mrs Kent had chosen for the shrub. "There's life in Superman yet..." He looked furtively round at the neighbouring houses. No one was at the windows. A bored cat eyed him idly from a fence-post. Clark winked at it - "Watch this, cool cat," he whispered. Then, summoning up all his strength, he dug a hole for the shrub.

This wasn't just any hole. This was a hole that was dug by a man whose limbs were just a blur. This was a hole which opened up the earth like water draining out of a basin. This was a hole which yielded up spadefuls of earth faster than the eye could see. The soil spun up into the sky like some Old Faithful in Yellowstone, up, up and away. Within seconds, Clark has gone past the fruitful top layer of earth in the garden, and was now excavating earth that had not seen the light of day for decades, for centuries. He was down, ten, twenty, fifty feet before you could say "Galloping galaxies!". Before you could even think why you would want to say that, he was down to a hundred feet.

Watching from the kitchen window, Lois Lane wondered whether she should intervene. Then quickly decided against it: let him get it out of her system, she thought. She went to phone her eldest daughter instead: her grandson had had a nasty cough.

Within ten minutes, Superman had reached the Earth's core, still muttering "I'll show 'em, I'll show 'em". He had barely broken sweat, had not stopped to consider what he was doing, was driven by a sudden and massive flux of youthfulness. His spade was burning red hot. Far, far above, quite out of sight, was the cool earth of his garden. But now Superman was facing the elemental forces of the Earth, the flowing fires of magma. As he paused for breath, he took stock of where he was and what he was doing. He was pleased with himself. But decided to call it a day. With one bound he launched himself rocketwise upwards, out of the pit he had dug like a flaming arrow, and was soon standing in his garden once more. He took a breath of the cool evening air and turned towards the house, to ask Lois if the hole was deep enough.

Then he heard a great low roar, like a pack of motor-cycles driven by some bad apples. But this was no mean motor-biker; this was the Earth's Molten Core roaring up the hole, threatening to overwhelm the suburbs of Metropolis in a blaze of death, destruction and deviance, which promised to bring about the very end of civilisation within an hour.

For a brief moment, something primal stirred in Clark's mind, a pricking of conscience perhaps, or a call to Do Good, a whisper to Save America From Anarchy. But as fast as it stirred, so fast did it slumber once more. "Sod them all," he muttered, and trudged indoors to watch some trashy game-show on the television.