THE FOOD OF THE GODS AND HOW IT CAME TO EARTH

By H.G. Wells

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THE FOOD OF THE GODS.

BOOK I. — THE DAWN OF THE FOOD.

CHAPTER THE FIRST — THE DISCOVERY OF THE FOOD.

I.

In the middle years of the nineteenth century there first became abundant in this strange world of ours a class of men, men tending for the most part to become elderly, who are called, and who are very properly called, but who dislike extremely to be called—"Scientists." They dislike that word so much that from the columns of *Nature*, which was from the first their distinctive and characteristic paper, it is as carefully excluded as if it were—that other word which is the basis of all really bad language in this country. But the Great Public and its Press know better, and "Scientists" they are, and when they emerge to any sort of publicity, "distinguished scientists" and "eminent scientists" and "well-known scientists" is the very least we call them.

Certainly both Mr. Bensington and Professor Redwood quite merited any of these terms long before they came upon the marvellous discovery of which this story tells. Mr. Bensington was a Fellow of the Royal Society and a former president of the Chemical Society, and Professor Redwood was Professor of Physiology in the Bond Street College of the London University, and he had been grossly libelled by the anti-

vivisectionists time after time. And they had led lives of academic distinction from their very earliest youth.

They were of course quite undistinguished looking men, as indeed all true Scientists are. There is more personal distinction about the mildest-mannered actor alive than there is about the entire Royal Society. Mr. Bensington was short and very, very bald, and he stooped slightly; he wore gold-rimmed spectacles and cloth boots that were abundantly cut open because of his numerous corns, and Professor Redwood was entirely ordinary in his appearance. Until they happened upon the Food of the Gods (as I must insist upon calling it) they led lives of such eminent and studious obscurity that it is hard to find anything whatever to tell the reader about them.

Mr. Bensington won his spurs (if one may use such an expression of a gentleman in boots of slashed cloth) by his splendid researches upon the More Toxic Alkaloids, and Professor Redwood rose to eminence—I do not clearly remember how he rose to eminence! I know he was very eminent, and that's all. Things of this sort grow. I fancy it was a voluminous work on Reaction Times with numerous plates of sphygmograph tracings (I write subject to correction) and an admirable new terminology, that did the thing for him.

The general public saw little or nothing of either of these gentlemen. Sometimes at places like the Royal Institution and the Society of Arts it did in a sort of way see Mr. Bensington, or at least his blushing baldness and something of his collar and coat, and hear fragments of a lecture or paper that he imagined himself to be reading audibly; and once I remember—one midday in the vanished past—when the British Association was at Dover, coming on Section C or D, or some such letter, which had taken up its quarters in a public-house, and following two, serious-looking ladies with paper parcels, out of mere curiosity, through a door labelled "Billiards" and "Pool" into a scandalous darkness, broken only by a magic-lantern circle of Redwood's tracings.

I watched the lantern slides come and go, and listened to a voice (I forget what it was saying) which I believe was the voice of Professor Redwood, and there was a sizzling from the lantern and another sound that kept me there, still out of curiosity, until the lights were unexpectedly turned up. And then I perceived that this sound was the sound of the munching of buns and sandwiches and things that the assembled British Associates had come there to eat under cover of the magic-lantern darkness.

And Redwood I remember went on talking all the time the lights were up and dabbing at the place where his diagram ought to have been visible on the screen—and so it was again so soon as the darkness was restored. I remember him then as a most ordinary, slightly nervous-looking dark man, with an air of being preoccupied with

something else, and doing what he was doing just then under an unaccountable sense of duty.

I heard Bensington also once—in the old days—at an educational conference in Bloomsbury. Like most eminent chemists and botanists, Mr. Bensington was very authoritative upon teaching—though I am certain he would have been scared out of his wits by an average Board School class in half-an-hour—and so far as I can remember now, he was propounding an improvement of Professor Armstrong's Heuristic method, whereby at the cost of three or four hundred pounds' worth of apparatus, a total neglect of all other studies and the undivided attention of a teacher of exceptional gifts, an average child might with a peculiar sort of thumby thoroughness learn in the course of ten or twelve years almost as much chemistry as one could get in one of those objectionable shilling text-books that were then so common....

Quite ordinary persons you perceive, both of them, outside their science. Or if anything on the unpractical side of ordinary. And that you will find is the case with "scientists" as a class all the world over. What there is great of them is an annoyance to their fellow scientists and a mystery to the general public, and what is not is evident.

There is no doubt about what is not great, no race of men have such obvious littlenesses. They live in a narrow world so far as their human intercourse goes; their researches involve infinite attention and an almost monastic seclusion; and what is left over is not very much. To witness some queer, shy, misshapen, grey-headed, self-important, little discoverer of great discoveries, ridiculously adorned with the wide ribbon of some order of chivalry and holding a reception of his fellow-men, or to read the anguish of *Nature* at the "neglect of science" when the angel of the birthday honours passes the Royal Society by, or to listen to one indefatigable lichenologist commenting on the work of another indefatigable lichenologist, such things force one to realise the unfaltering littleness of men.

And withal the reef of Science that these little "scientists" built and are yet building is so wonderful, so portentous, so full of mysterious half-shapen promises for the mighty future of man! They do not seem to realise the things they are doing! No doubt long ago even Mr. Bensington, when he chose this calling, when he consecrated his life to the alkaloids and their kindred compounds, had some inkling of the vision,—more than an inkling. Without some such inspiration, for such glories and positions only as a "scientist" may expect, what young man would have given his life to such work, as young men do? No, they *must* have seen the glory, they must have had the

vision, but so near that it has blinded them. The splendour has blinded them, mercifully, so that for the rest of their lives they can hold the lights of knowledge in comfort—that we may see!

And perhaps it accounts for Redwood's touch of preoccupation, that—there can be no doubt of it now—he among his fellows was different, he was different inasmuch as something of the vision still lingered in his eyes.

II.

The Food of the Gods I call it, this substance that Mr. Bensington and Professor Redwood made between them; and having regard now to what it has already done and all that it is certainly going to do, there is surely no exaggeration in the name. So I shall continue to call it therefore throughout my story. But Mr. Bensington would no more have called it that in cold blood than he would have gone out from his flat in Sloane Street clad in regal scarlet and a wreath of laurel. The phrase was a mere first cry of astonishment from him. He called it the Food of the Gods, in his enthusiasm and for an hour or so at the most altogether. After that he decided he was being absurd. When he first thought of the thing he saw, as it were, a vista of enormous possibilities—literally enormous possibilities; but upon this dazzling vista, after one stare of amazement, he resolutely shut his eyes, even as a conscientious "scientist" should. After that, the Food of the Gods sounded blatant to the pitch of indecency. He was surprised he had used the expression. Yet for all that something of that clear-eyed moment hung about him and broke out ever and again....

"Really, you know," he said, rubbing his hands together and laughing nervously, "it has more than a theoretical interest.

"For example," he confided, bringing his face close to the Professor's and dropping to an undertone, "it would perhaps, if suitably handled, *sell*....

"Precisely," he said, walking away,—"as a Food. Or at least a food ingredient.

"Assuming of course that it is palatable. A thing we cannot know till we have prepared it."

He turned upon the hearthrug, and studied the carefully designed slits upon his cloth shoes.

"Name?" he said, looking up in response to an inquiry. "For my part I incline to the good old classical allusion. It—it makes Science res—. Gives it a touch of old-fashioned dignity. I have been thinking ... I don't know if you will think it absurd of

me.... A little fancy is surely occasionally permissible.... Herakleophorbia. Eh? The nutrition of a possible Hercules? You know it *might* ...

“Of course if you think *not*—”

Redwood reflected with his eyes on the fire and made no objection.

“You think it would do?”

Redwood moved his head gravely.

“It might be Titanophorbia, you know. Food of Titans.... You prefer the former?

“You’re quite sure you don’t think it a little *too*—”

“No.”

“Ah! I’m glad.”

And so they called it Herakleophorbia throughout their investigations, and in their report,—the report that was never published, because of the unexpected developments that upset all their arrangements,—it is invariably written in that way. There were three kindred substances prepared before they hit on the one their speculations had foretolds and these they spoke of as Herakleophorbia I, Herakleophorbia II, and Herakleophorbia III. It is Herakleophorbia IV. which I—insisting upon Bensington’s original name—call here the Food of the Gods.

III.

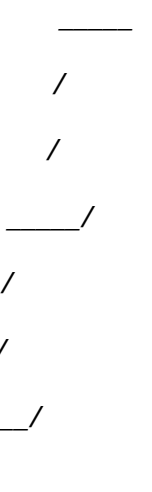
The idea was Mr. Bensington’s. But as it was suggested to him by one of Professor Redwood’s contributions to the Philosophical Transactions, he very properly consulted that gentleman before he carried it further. Besides which it was, as a research, a physiological, quite as much as a chemical inquiry.

Professor Redwood was one of those scientific men who are addicted to tracings and curves. You are familiar—if you are at all the sort of reader I like—with the sort of scientific paper I mean. It is a paper you cannot make head nor tail of, and at the end come five or six long folded diagrams that open out and show peculiar zigzag tracings, flashes of lightning overdone, or sinuous inexplicable things called “smoothed curves” set up on ordinates and rooting in abscissae—and things like that. You puzzle over the thing for a long time and end with the suspicion that not only do you not understand it but that the author does not understand it either. But really you know many of these scientific people understand the meaning of their own papers quite well: it is simply a defect of expression that raises the obstacle between us.

I am inclined to think that Redwood thought in tracings and curves. And after his monumental work upon Reaction Times (the unscientific reader is exhorted to stick to it for a little bit longer and everything will be as clear as daylight) Redwood began to turn out smoothed curves and sphygmographeries upon Growth, and it was one of his papers upon Growth that really gave Mr. Bensington his idea.

Redwood, you know, had been measuring growing things of all sorts, kittens, puppies, sunflowers, mushrooms, bean plants, and (until his wife put a stop to it) his baby, and he showed that growth went out not at a regular pace, or, as he put it, so,

but with bursts and intermissions of this sort,



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and that apparently nothing grew regularly and steadily, and so far as he could make out nothing could grow regularly and steadily: it was as if every living thing had just to accumulate force to grow, grew with vigour only for a time, and then had to wait for a space before it could go on growing again. And in the muffled and highly technical language of the really careful "scientist," Redwood suggested that the process of growth probably demanded the presence of a considerable quantity of some necessary substance in the blood that was only formed very slowly, and that when this substance was used up by growth, it was only very slowly replaced, and that meanwhile the organism had to mark time. He compared his unknown substance to oil in machinery. A growing animal was rather like an engine, he suggested, that can move a certain distance and must then be oiled before it can run again. ("But why shouldn't one oil the engine from without?" said Mr. Bensington, when he read the paper.) And all this, said Redwood, with the delightful nervous inconsecutiveness of his class, might very probably be found to throw a light upon the mystery of certain of the ductless glands. As though they had anything to do with it at all!

In a subsequent communication Redwood went further. He gave a perfect Brock's benefit of diagrams—exactly like rocket trajectories they were; and the gist of it—so far as it had any gist—was that the blood of puppies and kittens and the sap of sunflowers and the juice of mushrooms in what he called the "growing phase" differed in the proportion of certain elements from their blood and sap on the days when they were not particularly growing.

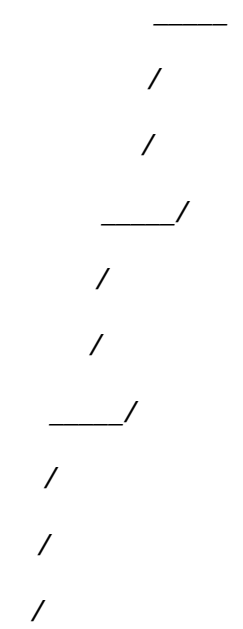
And when Mr. Bensington, after holding the diagrams sideways and upside down, began to see what this difference was, a great amazement came upon him. Because, you see, the difference might probably be due to the presence of just the very substance he had recently been trying to isolate in his researches upon such alkaloids as are most stimulating to the nervous system. He put down Redwood's paper on the patent reading-desk that swung inconveniently from his arm-chair, took off his gold-rimmed spectacles, breathed on them and wiped them very carefully.

"By Jove!" said Mr. Bensington.

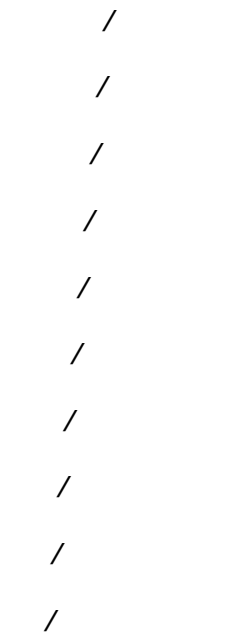
Then replacing his spectacles again he turned to the patent reading-desk, which immediately, as his elbow came against its arm, gave a coquettish squeak and deposited the paper, with all its diagrams in a dispersed and crumpled state, on the floor. "By Jove!" said Mr. Bensington, straining his stomach over the arm-chair with a

patient disregard of the habits of this convenience, and then, finding the pamphlet still out of reach, he went down on all fours in pursuit. It was on the floor that the idea of calling it the Food of the Gods came to him....

For you see, if he was right and Redwood was right, then by injecting or administering this new substance of his in food, he would do away with the "resting phase," and instead of growth going on in this fashion,



it would (if you follow me) go thus—



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IV.

The night after his conversation with Redwood Mr. Bensington could scarcely sleep a wink. He did seem once to get into a sort of doze, but it was only for a moment, and then he dreamt he had dug a deep hole into the earth and poured in tons and tons of the Food of the Gods, and the earth was swelling and swelling, and all the boundaries of the countries were bursting, and the Royal Geographical Society was all at work like one great guild of tailors letting out the equator....

That of course was a ridiculous dream, but it shows the state of mental excitement into which Mr. Bensington got and the real value he attached to his idea, much better than any of the things he said or did when he was awake and on his guard. Or I should not have mentioned it, because as a general rule I do not think it is at all interesting for people to tell each other about their dreams.

By a singular coincidence Redwood also had a dream that night, and his dream was this:—

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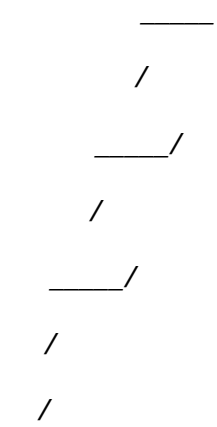
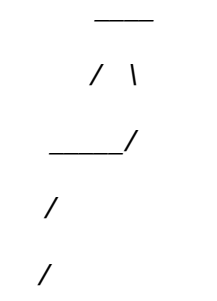
It was a diagram done in fire upon a long scroll of the abyss. And he (Redwood) was standing on a planet before a sort of black platform lecturing about the new sort of growth that was now possible, to the More than Royal Institution of Primordial Forces—forces which had always previously, even in the growth of races, empires, planetary systems, and worlds, gone so:—



And even in some cases so:—



And he was explaining to them quite lucidly and convincingly that these slow, these even retrogressive methods would be very speedily quite put out of fashion by his discovery.

Ridiculous of course! But that too shows—

That either dream is to be regarded as in any way significant or prophetic beyond what I have categorically said, I do not for one moment suggest.

CHAPTER THE SECOND. — THE EXPERIMENTAL FARM.

I.

Mr. Bensington proposed originally to try this stuff, so soon as he was really able to prepare it, upon tadpoles. One always does try this sort of thing upon tadpoles to

begin with; this being what tadpoles are for. And it was agreed that he should conduct the experiments and not Redwood, because Redwood's laboratory was occupied with the ballistic apparatus and animals necessary for an investigation into the Diurnal Variation in the Butting Frequency of the Young Bull Calf, an investigation that was yielding curves of an abnormal and very perplexing sort, and the presence of glass globes of tadpoles was extremely undesirable while this particular research was in progress.

But when Mr. Bensington conveyed to his cousin Jane something of what he had in mind, she put a prompt veto upon the importation of any considerable number of tadpoles, or any such experimental creatures, into their flat. She had no objection whatever to his use of one of the rooms of the flat for the purposes of a non-explosive chemistry that, so far as she was concerned, came to nothing; she let him have a gas furnace and a sink and a dust-tight cupboard of refuge from the weekly storm of cleaning she would not forego. And having known people addicted to drink, she regarded his solicitude for distinction in learned societies as an excellent substitute for the coarser form of depravity. But any sort of living things in quantity, "wriggly" as they were bound to be alive and "smelly" dead, she could not and would not abide. She said these things were certain to be unhealthy, and Bensington was notoriously a delicate man—it was nonsense to say he wasn't. And when Bensington tried to make the enormous importance of this possible discovery clear, she said that it was all very well, but if she consented to his making everything nasty and unwholesome in the place (and that was what it all came to) then she was certain he would be the first to complain.

And Mr. Bensington went up and down the room, regardless of his corns, and spoke to her quite firmly and angrily without the slightest effect. He said that nothing ought to stand in the way of the Advancement of Science, and she said that the Advancement of Science was one thing and having a lot of tadpoles in a flat was another; he said that in Germany it was an ascertained fact that a man with an idea like his would at once have twenty thousand properly-fitted cubic feet of laboratory placed at his disposal, and she said she was glad and always had been glad that she was not a German; he said that it would make him famous for ever, and she said it was much more likely to make him ill to have a lot of tadpoles in a flat like theirs; he said he was master in his own house, and she said that rather than wait on a lot of tadpoles she'd go as matron to a school; and then he asked her to be reasonable, and she asked *him* to be reasonable then and give up all this about tadpoles; and he said she might respect his ideas, and she said not if they were smelly she wouldn't, and then

he gave way completely and said—in spite of the classical remarks of Huxley upon the subject—a bad word. Not a very bad word it was, but bad enough.

And after that she was greatly offended and had to be apologised to, and the prospect of ever trying the Food of the Gods upon tadpoles in their flat at any rate vanished completely in the apology.

So Bensington had to consider some other way of carrying out these experiments in feeding that would be necessary to demonstrate his discovery, so soon as he had his substance isolated and prepared. For some days he meditated upon the possibility of boarding out his tadpoles with some trustworthy person, and then the chance sight of the phrase in a newspaper turned his thoughts to an Experimental Farm.

And chicks. Directly he thought of it, he thought of it as a poultry farm. He was suddenly taken with a vision of wildly growing chicks. He conceived a picture of coops and runs, outsize and still more outsize coops, and runs progressively larger. Chicks are so accessible, so easily fed and observed, so much drier to handle and measure, that for his purpose tadpoles seemed to him now, in comparison with them, quite wild and uncontrollable beasts. He was quite puzzled to understand why he had not thought of chicks instead of tadpoles from the beginning. Among other things it would have saved all this trouble with his cousin Jane. And when he suggested this to Redwood, Redwood quite agreed with him.

Redwood said that in working so much upon needlessly small animals he was convinced experimental physiologists made a great mistake. It is exactly like making experiments in chemistry with an insufficient quantity of material; errors of observation and manipulation become disproportionately large. It was of extreme importance just at present that scientific men should assert their right to have their material *big*. That was why he was doing his present series of experiments at the Bond Street College upon Bull Calves, in spite of a certain amount of inconvenience to the students and professors of other subjects caused by their incidental levity in the corridors. But the curves he was getting were quite exceptionally interesting, and would, when published, amply justify his choice. For his own part, were it not for the inadequate endowment of science in this country, he would never, if he could avoid it, work on anything smaller than a whale. But a Public Vivarium on a sufficient scale to render this possible was, he feared, at present, in this country at any rate, a Utopian demand. In Germany—Etc.

As Redwood's Bull calves needed his daily attention, the selection and equipment of the Experimental Farm fell largely on Bensington. The entire cost also, was, it was understood, to be defrayed by Bensington, at least until a grant could be obtained.

Accordingly he alternated his work in the laboratory of his flat with farm hunting up and down the lines that run southward out of London, and his peering spectacles, his simple baldness, and his lacerated cloth shoes filled the owners of numerous undesirable properties with vain hopes. And he advertised in several daily papers and *Nature* for a responsible couple (married), punctual, active, and used to poultry, to take entire charge of an Experimental Farm of three acres.

He found the place he seemed in need of at Hickleybrow, near Urshot, in Kent. It was a little queer isolated place, in a dell surrounded by old pine woods that were black and forbidding at night. A humped shoulder of down cut it off from the sunset, and a gaunt well with a shattered penthouse dwarfed the dwelling. The little house was creeperless, several windows were broken, and the cart shed had a black shadow at midday. It was a mile and a half from the end house of the village, and its loneliness was very doubtfully relieved by an ambiguous family of echoes.

The place impressed Bensington as being eminently adapted to the requirements of scientific research. He walked over the premises sketching out coops and runs with a sweeping arm, and he found the kitchen capable of accommodating a series of incubators and foster mothers with the very minimum of alteration. He took the place there and then; on his way back to London he stopped at Dunton Green and closed with an eligible couple that had answered his advertisements, and that same evening he succeeded in isolating a sufficient quantity of Herakleophorbia I. to more than justify these engagements.

The eligible couple who were destined under Mr. Bensington to be the first almoners on earth of the Food of the Gods, were not only very perceptibly aged, but also extremely dirty. This latter point Mr. Bensington did not observe, because nothing destroys the powers of general observation quite so much as a life of experimental science. They were named Skinner, Mr. and Mrs. Skinner, and Mr. Bensington interviewed them in a small room with hermetically sealed windows, a spotted overmantel looking-glass, and some ailing calceolarias.

Mrs. Skinner was a very little old woman, capless, with dirty white hair drawn back very very tightly from a face that had begun by being chiefly, and was now, through the loss of teeth and chin, and the wrinkling up of everything else, ending by being almost exclusively—nose. She was dressed in slate colour (so far as her dress had any colour) slashed in one place with red flannel. She let him in and talked to him guardedly and peered at him round and over her nose, while Mr. Skinner she alleged made some alteration in his toilette. She had one tooth that got into her articulations and she held her two long wrinkled hands nervously together. She told Mr. Bensington that she had

managed fowls for years; and knew all about incubators; in fact, they themselves had run a Poultry Farm at one time, and it had only failed at last through the want of pupils. “It’s the pupils as pay,” said Mrs. Skinner.

Mr. Skinner, when he appeared, was a large-faced man, with a lisp and a squint that made him look over the top of your head, slashed slippers that appealed to Mr. Bensington’s sympathies, and a manifest shortness of buttons. He held his coat and shirt together with one hand and traced patterns on the black-and-gold tablecloth with the index finger of the other, while his disengaged eye watched Mr. Bensington’s sword of Damocles, so to speak, with an expression of sad detachment. “You don’t want to run thith Farm for profit. No, Thir. Ith all the thame, Thir. Ekthperimenth! Prethithely.”

He said they could go to the farm at once. He was doing nothing at Dunton Green except a little tailoring. “It ithn’t the thmart plathe I thought it wath, and what I get ithent thkarthely worth having,” he said, “tho that if it ith any convenienth to you for uth to come....”

And in a week Mr. and Mrs. Skinner were installed in the farm, and the jobbing carpenter from Hickleybrow was diversifying the task of erecting runs and henhouses with a systematic discussion of Mr. Bensington.

“I haven’t theen much of ‘im yet,” said Mr. Skinner. “But as far as I can make ‘im out ‘e theems to be a thtewpid o’ fool.”

“*I* thought ‘e seemed a bit Dotty,” said the carpenter from Hickleybrow.

“‘E fanthieth ‘imself about poultry,” said Mr. Skinner. “O my goodneth! You’d think nobody knew nothin’ about poultry thept ‘im.”

“‘E *looks* like a ‘en,” said the carpenter from Hickleybrow; “what with them spectacles of ‘is.”

Mr. Skinner came closer to the carpenter from Hickleybrow, and spoke in a confidential manner, and one sad eye regarded the distant village, and one was bright and wicked. “Got to be meathured every blethed day—every blethed ‘en, ‘e thays. Tho as to thee they grow properly. What oh ... eh? Every blethed ‘en—every blethed day.”

And Mr. Skinner put up his hand to laugh behind it in a refined and contagious manner, and humped his shoulders very much—and only the other eye of him failed to participate in his laughter. Then doubting if the carpenter had quite got the point of it, he repeated in a penetrating whisper; “*Meathured*!”

“‘E’s worse than our old guvnor; I’m dratted if ‘e ain’t,” said the carpenter from Hickleybrow.

II.

Experimental work is the most tedious thing in the world (unless it be the reports of it in the *Philosophical Transactions*), and it seemed a long time to Mr. Bensington before his first dream of enormous possibilities was replaced by a crumb of realisation. He had taken the Experimental Farm in October, and it was May before the first inklings of success began. Herakleophorbia I. and II. and III. had to be tried, and failed; there was trouble with the rats of the Experimental Farm, and there was trouble with the Skinners. The only way to get Skinner to do anything he was told to do was to dismiss him. Then he would nib his unshaven chin—he was always unshaven most miraculously and yet never bearded—with a flattened hand, and look at Mr. Bensington with one eye, and over him with the other, and say, “Oo, of courthe, Thir—if you’re *theriouth*!”

But at last success dawned. And its herald was a letter in the long slender handwriting of Mr. Skinner.

“The new Brood are out,” wrote Mr. Skinner, “and don’t quite like the look of them. Growing very rank—quite unlike what the similar lot was before your last directions was given. The last, before the cat got them, was a very nice, stocky chick, but these are Growing like thistles. I never saw. They peck so hard, striking above boot top, that am unable to give exact Measures as requested. They are regular Giants, and eating as such. We shall want more corn very soon, for you never saw such chicks to eat. Bigger than Bantams. Going on at this rate, they ought to be a bird for show, rank as they are. Plymouth Rocks won’t be in it. Had a scare last night thinking that cat was at them, and when I looked out at the window could have sworn I see her getting in under the wire. The chicks was all awake and pecking about hungry when I went out, but could not see anything of the cat. So gave them a peck of corn, and fastened up safe. Shall be glad to know if the Feeding to be continued as directed. Food you mixed is pretty near all gone, and do not like to mix any more myself on account of the accident with the pudding. With best wishes from us both, and soliciting continuance of esteemed favours,

“Respectfully yours,

“ALFRED NEWTON SKINNER.”

The allusion towards the end referred to a milk pudding with which some Herakleophorbia II. had got itself mixed with painful and very nearly fatal results to the Skinners.

But Mr. Bensington, reading between the lines saw in this rankness of growth the attainment of his long sought goal. The next morning he alighted at Urshot station, and in the bag in his hand he carried, sealed in three tins, a supply of the Food of the Gods sufficient for all the chicks in Kent.

It was a bright and beautiful morning late in May, and his corns were so much better that he resolved to walk through Hickleybrow to his farm. It was three miles and a half altogether, through the park and villages and then along the green glades of the Hickleybrow preserves. The trees were all dusted with the green spangles of high spring, the hedges were full of stitchwort and campion and the woods of blue hyacinths and purple orchid; and everywhere there was a great noise of birds—thrushes, blackbirds, robins, finches, and many more—and in one warm corner of the park some bracken was unrolling, and there was a leaping and rushing of fallow deer.

These things brought back to Mr. Bensington his early and forgotten delight in life; before him the promise of his discovery grew bright and joyful, and it seemed to him that indeed he must have come upon the happiest day in his life. And when in the sunlit run by the sandy bank under the shadow of the pine trees he saw the chicks that had eaten the food he had mixed for them, gigantic and gawky, bigger already than many a hen that is married and settled and still growing, still in their first soft yellow plumage (just faintly marked with brown along the back), he knew indeed that his happiest day had come.

At Mr. Skinner's urgency he went into the runs but after he had been pecked through the cracks in his shoes once or twice he got out again, and watched these monsters through the wire netting. He peered close to the netting, and followed their movements as though he had never seen a chick before in his life.

"Whath they'll be when they're grown up ith impothible to think," said Mr. Skinner.

"Big as a horse," said Mr. Bensington.

"Pretty near," said Mr. Skinner.

"Several people could dine off a wing!" said Mr. Bensington. "They'd cut up into joints like butcher's meat."

"They won't go on growing at thith pathe though," said Mr. Skinner.

“No?” said Mr. Bensington.

“No,” said Mr. Skinner. “I know thith thort. They begin rank, but they don’t go on, bleth you! No.”

There was a pause.

“Itth management,” said Mr. Skinner modestly.

Mr. Bensington turned his glasses on him suddenly.

“We got ‘em almoth ath big at the other plathe,” said Mr. Skinner, with his better eye piously uplifted and letting himself go a little; “me and the mithith.”

Mr. Bensington made his usual general inspection of the premises, but he speedily returned to the new run. It was, you know, in truth ever so much more than he had dared to expect. The course of science is so tortuous and so slow; after the clear promises and before the practical realisation arrives there comes almost always year after year of intricate contrivance, and here—here was the Foods of the Gods arriving after less than a year of testing! It seemed too good—too good. That Hope Deferred which is the daily food of the scientific imagination was to be his no more! So at least it seemed to him then. He came back and stared at these stupendous chicks of his, time after time.

“Let me see,” he said. “They’re ten days old. And by the side of an ordinary chick I should fancy—about six or seven times as big....”

“Itth about time we artht for a rithe in thkrew,” said Mr. Skinner to his wife. “He’th ath pleathed ath Punth about the way we got thothe chickth on in the further run—pleathed ath Punth he ith.”

He bent confidentially towards her. “Thinkth it’th that old food of hith,” he said behind his hands and made a noise of suppressed laughter in his pharyngeal cavity....

Mr. Bensington was indeed a happy man that day. He was in no mood to find fault with details of management. The bright day certainly brought out the accumulating slovenliness of the Skinner couple more vividly than he had ever seen it before. But his comments were of the gentlest. The fencing of many of the runs was out of order, but he seemed to consider it quite satisfactory when Mr. Skinner explained that it was a “fokth or a dog or thomething” did it. He pointed out that the incubator had not been cleaned.

“That it *asn’t*, Sir,” said Mrs. Skinner with her arms folded, smiling coyly behind her nose. “We don’t seem to have had time to clean it not since we been ‘ere....”

He went upstairs to see some rat-holes that Skinner said would justify a trap—they certainly were enormous—and discovered that the room in which the Food of the Gods was mixed with meal and bran was in a quite disgraceful order. The Skinners were the sort of people who find a use for cracked saucers and old cans and pickle jars and mustard boxes, and the place was littered with these. In one corner a great pile of apples that Skinner had saved was decaying, and from a nail in the sloping part of the ceiling hung several rabbit skins, upon which he proposed to test his gift as a furrier. ("There ithn't mutth about furth and thingth that *I* don't know," said Skinner.)

Mr. Bensington certainly sniffed critically at this disorder, but he made no unnecessary fuss, and even when he found a wasp regaling itself in a gallipot half full of Herakleophorbia IV, he simply remarked mildly that his substance was better sealed from the damp than exposed to the air in that manner.

And he turned from these things at once to remark—what had been for some time in his mind—"I *think*, Skinner—you know, I shall kill one of these chicks—as a specimen. I think we will kill it this afternoon, and I will take it back with me to London."

He pretended to peer into another gallipot and then took off his spectacles to wipe them.

"I should like," he said, "I should like very much, to have some relic—some memento—of this particular brood at this particular day."

"By-the-bye," he said, "you don't give those little chicks meat?"

"Oh! *no*, Thir," said Skinner, "I can athure you, Thir, we know far too much about the management of fowlth of all dethcriptionth to do anything of that thort."

"Quite sure you don't throw your dinner refuse—I thought I noticed the bones of a rabbit scattered about the far corner of the run—"

But when they came to look at them they found they were the larger bones of a cat picked very clean and dry.

III.

"*That's* no chick," said Mr. Bensington's cousin Jane.

"Well, I should *think* I knew a chick when I saw it," said Mr. Bensington's cousin Jane hotly.

"It's too big for a chick, for one thing, and besides you can *see* perfectly well it isn't a chick.

“It’s more like a bustard than a chick.”

“For my part,” said Redwood, reluctantly allowing Bensington to drag him into the argument, “I must confess that, considering all the evidence—”

“Oh! if you do *that*,” said Mr. Bensington’s cousin Jane, “instead of using your eyes like a sensible person—”

“Well, but really, Miss Bensington—!”

“Oh! Go *on!*” said Cousin Jane. “You men are all alike.”

“Considering all the evidence, this certainly falls within the definition—no doubt it’s abnormal and hypertrophied, but still—especially since it was hatched from the egg of a normal hen—Yes, I think, Miss Bensington, I must admit—this, so far as one can call it anything, is a sort of chick.”

“You mean it’s a chick?” said cousin Jane.

“I *think* it’s a chick,” said Redwood.

“What NONSENSE!” said Mr. Bensington’s cousin Jane, and “Oh!” directed at Redwood’s head, “I haven’t patience with you,” and then suddenly she turned about and went out of the room with a slam.

“And it’s a very great relief for me to see it too, Bensington,” said Redwood, when the reverberation of the slam had died away. “In spite of its being so big.”

Without any urgency from Mr. Bensington he sat down in the low arm-chair by the fire and confessed to proceedings that even in an unscientific man would have been indiscreet. “You will think it very rash of me, Bensington, I know,” he said, “but the fact is I put a little—not very much of it—but some—into Baby’s bottle, very nearly a week ago!”

“But suppose—!” cried Mr. Bensington.

“I know,” said Redwood, and glanced at the giant chick upon the plate on the table.

“It’s turned out all right, thank goodness,” and he felt in his pocket for his cigarettes.

He gave fragmentary details. “Poor little chap wasn’t putting on weight… desperately anxious.—Winkles, a frightful duffer … former pupil of mine … no good…. Mrs. Redwood—unmitigated confidence in Winkles…. *You* know, man with a manner like a cliff—towering…. No confidence in *me*, of course…. Taught Winkles…. Scarcely

allowed in the nursery.... Something had to be done.... Slipped in while the nurse was at breakfast ... got at the bottle."

"But he'll grow," said Mr. Bensington.

"He's growing. Twenty-seven ounces last week.... You should hear Winkles. It's management, he said."

"Dear me! That's what Skinner says!"

Redwood looked at the chick again. "The bother is to keep it up," he said. "They won't trust me in the nursery alone, because I tried to get a growth curve out of Georgina Phyllis—you know—and how I'm to give him a second dose—"

"Need you?"

"He's been crying two days—can't get on with his ordinary food again, anyhow. He wants some more now."

"Tell Winkles."

"Hang Winkles!" said Redwood.

"You might get at Winkles and give him powders to give the child—"

"That's about what I shall have to do," said Redwood, resting his chin on his fist and staring into the fire.

Bensington stood for a space smoothing the down on the breast of the giant chick. "They will be monstrous fowls," he said.

"They will," said Redwood, still with his eyes on the glow.

"Big as horses," said Bensington.

"Bigger," said Redwood. "That's just it!"

Bensington turned away from the specimen. "Redwood," he said, "these fowls are going to create a sensation."

Redwood nodded his head at the fire.

"And by Jove!" said Bensington, coming round suddenly with a flash in his spectacles, "so will your little boy!"

"That's just what I'm thinking of," said Redwood.

He sat back, sighed, threw his unconsumed cigarette into the fire and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets. “That’s precisely what I’m thinking of. This Herakleophorbia is going to be queer stuff to handle. The pace that chick must have grown at—!”

“A little boy growing at that pace,” said Mr. Bensington slowly, and stared at the chick as he spoke.

“I *Say*!” said Bensington, “he’ll be Big.”

“I shall give him diminishing doses,” said Redwood. “Or at any rate Winkles will.”

“It’s rather too much of an experiment.”

“Much.”

“Yet still, you know, I must confess—... Some baby will sooner or later have to try it.”

“Oh, we’ll try it on *some* baby—certainly.”

“Exactly so,” said Bensington, and came and stood on the hearthrug and took off his spectacles to wipe them.

“Until I saw these chicks, Redwood, I don’t think I *began* to realise—anything—of the possibilities of what we were making. It’s only beginning to dawn upon me ... the possible consequences....”

And even then, you know, Mr. Bensington was far from any conception of the mine that little train would fire.

IV.

That happened early in June. For some weeks Bensington was kept from revisiting the Experimental Farm by a severe imaginary catarrh, and one necessary flying visit was made by Redwood. He returned an even more anxious-looking parent than he had gone. Altogether there were seven weeks of steady, uninterrupted growth....

And then the Wasps began their career.

It was late in July and nearly a week before the hens escaped from Hickleybrow that the first of the big wasps was killed. The report of it appeared in several papers, but I do not know whether the news reached Mr. Bensington, much less whether he connected it with the general laxity of method that prevailed in the Experimental Farm.

There can be but little doubt now, that while Mr. Skinner was plying Mr. Bensington’s chicks with Herakleophorbia IV, a number of wasps were just as industriously—

perhaps more industriously—carrying quantities of the same paste to their early summer broods in the sand-banks beyond the adjacent pine-woods. And there can be no dispute whatever that these early broods found just as much growth and benefit in the substance as Mr. Bensington's hens. It is in the nature of the wasp to attain to effective maturity before the domestic fowl—and in fact of all the creatures that were—through the generous carelessness of the Skinners—partaking of the benefits Mr. Bensington heaped upon his hens, the wasps were the first to make any sort of figure in the world.

It was a keeper named Godfrey, on the estate of Lieutenant-Colonel Rupert Hick, near Maidstone, who encountered and had the luck to kill the first of these monsters of whom history has any record. He was walking knee high in bracken across an open space in the beechwoods that diversify Lieutenant-Colonel Hick's park, and he was carrying his gun—very fortunately for him a double-barrelled gun—over his shoulder, when he first caught sight of the thing. It was, he says, coming down against the light, so that he could not see it very distinctly, and as it came it made a drone "like a motor car." He admits he was frightened. It was evidently as big or bigger than a barn owl, and, to his practised eye, its flight and particularly the misty whirl of its wings must have seemed weirdly unbirdlike. The instinct of self-defence, I fancy, mingled with long habit, when, as he says, he "let fly, right away."

The queerness of the experience probably affected his aim; at any rate most of his shot missed, and the thing merely dropped for a moment with an angry "Wuzzzz" that revealed the wasp at once, and then rose again, with all its stripes shining against the light. He says it turned on him. At any rate, he fired his second barrel at less than twenty yards and threw down his gun, ran a pace or so, and ducked to avoid it.

It flew, he is convinced, within a yard of him, struck the ground, rose again, came down again perhaps thirty yards away, and rolled over with its body wriggling and its sting stabbing out and back in its last agony. He emptied both barrels into it again before he ventured to go near.

When he came to measure the thing, he found it was twenty-seven and a half inches across its open wings, and its sting was three inches long. The abdomen was blown clean off from its body, but he estimated the length of the creature from head to sting as eighteen inches—which is very nearly correct. Its compound eyes were the size of penny pieces.

That is the first authenticated appearance of these giant wasps. The day after, a cyclist riding, feet up, down the hill between Sevenoaks and Tonbridge, very narrowly missed running over a second of these giants that was crawling across the roadway. His

passage seemed to alarm it, and it rose with a noise like a sawmill. His bicycle jumped the footpath in the emotion of the moment, and when he could look back, the wasp was soaring away above the woods towards Westerham.

After riding unsteadily for a little time, he put on his brake, dismounted—he was trembling so violently that he fell over his machine in doing so—and sat down by the roadside to recover. He had intended to ride to Ashford, but he did not get beyond Tonbridge that day....

After that, curiously enough, there is no record of any big wasps being seen for three days. I find on consulting the meteorological record of those days that they were overcast and chilly with local showers, which may perhaps account for this intermission. Then on the fourth day came blue sky and brilliant sunshine and such an outburst of wasps as the world had surely never seen before.

How many big wasps came out that day it is impossible to guess. There are at least fifty accounts of their apparition. There was one victim, a grocer, who discovered one of these monsters in a sugar-cask and very rashly attacked it with a spade as it rose. He struck it to the ground for a moment, and it stung him through the boot as he struck at it again and cut its body in half. He was first dead of the two....

The most dramatic of the fifty appearances was certainly that of the wasp that visited the British Museum about midday, dropping out of the blue serene upon one of the innumerable pigeons that feed in the courtyard of that building, and flying up to the cornice to devour its victim at leisure. After that it crawled for a time over the museum roof, entered the dome of the reading-room by a skylight, buzzed about inside it for some little time—there was a stampede among the readers—and at last found another window and vanished again with a sudden silence from human observation.

Most of the other reports were of mere passings or descents. A picnic party was dispersed at Aldington Knoll and all its sweets and jam consumed, and a puppy was killed and torn to pieces near Whitstable under the very eyes of its mistress....

The streets that evening resounded with the cry, the newspaper placards gave themselves up exclusively in the biggest of letters to the “Gigantic Wasps in Kent.” Agitated editors and assistant editors ran up and down tortuous staircases bawling things about “wasps.” And Professor Redwood, emerging from his college in Bond Street at five, flushed from a heated discussion with his committee about the price of bull calves, bought an evening paper, opened it, changed colour, forgot about bull calves and committee forthwith, and took a hansom headlong for Bensington’s flat.

V.

The flat was occupied, it seemed to him—to the exclusion of all other sensible objects—by Mr. Skinner and his voice, if indeed you can call either him or it a sensible object!

The voice was up very high slopping about among the notes of anguish. “Itth impothible for uth to thtop, Thir. We’ve thtopped on hoping thingth would get better and they’ve only got worth, Thir. It ithn’t on’y the waptheth, Thir—thereth big earwigth, Thir—big ath that, Thir.” (He indicated all his hand and about three inches of fat dirty wrist.) “They pretty near give Mithith Thkinner fitth, Thir. And the thtinging nettleth by the runth, Thir, *they’re* growing, Thir, and the canary creeper, Thir, what we thowed near the think, Thir—it put itth tendril through the window in the night, Thir, and very nearly caught Mithith Thkinner by the legth, Thir. Itth that food of yourth, Thir. Wherever we thplathed it about, Thir, a bit, it’th thet everything growing ranker, Thir, than I ever thought anything could grow. Itth impothible to thtop a month, Thir. Itth more than our liveth are worth, Thir. Even if the waptheth don’t thting uth, we thall be thuffocated by the creeper, Thir. You can’t imagine, Thir—unleth you come down to thee, Thir—”

He turned his superior eye to the cornice above Redwood’s head. “‘Ow do we know the ratth ‘aven’t got it, Thir! That ‘th what I think of motht, Thir. I ‘aven’t theen any big ratth, Thir, but ‘ow do I know, Thir. We been frightened for dayth becauth of the earwigth we’ve theen—like lobthters they wath—two of ‘em, Thir—and the frightful way the canary creeper wath growing, and directly I heard the waptheth—directly I eard ‘em, Thir, I underthood. I didn’t wait for nothing exthept to thow on a button I’d lortht, and then I came on up. Even now, Thir, I’m arf wild with angthiety, Thir. ‘Ow do *I* know watth happenin’ to Mithith Thkinner, Thir! Thereth the creeper growing all over the plathe like a thnake, Thir—thwelp me but you ‘ave to watch it, Thir, and jump out of itth way!—and the earwigth gettin’ bigger and bigger, and the waptheth—. She ‘athen’t even got a Blue Bag, Thir—if anything thould happen, Thir!”

“But the hens,” said Mr. Bensington; “how are the hens?”

“We fed ‘em up to yethterday, thwelp me,” said Mr. Skinner, “But thith morning we didn’t *dare*, Thir. The noithe of the waptheth wath—thomething awful, Thir. They wath coming ont—dothenth. Ath big ath ‘enth. I thayth, to ‘er, I thayth you juth thow me on a button or two, I thayth, for I can’t go to London like thith, I thayth, and I’ll go up to Mithter Benthington, I thayth, and ekthplain thingth to ‘im. And you thtop in thith room till I come back to you, I thayth, and keep the windowth thhut jutht ath tight ath ever you can, I thayth.”

“If you hadn’t been so confoundedly untidy—” began Redwood.

“Oh! don’t thay *that*, Thir,” said Skinner. “Not now, Thir. Not with me tho diththrethed, Thir, about Mithith Thkinner, Thir! Oh, *don’t,* Thir! I ‘aven’t the ‘eart to argue with you. Thwelp me, Thir, I ‘aven’t! Itth the ratth I keep a thinking of—‘Ow do I know they ‘aven’t got at Mithith Thkinner while I been up ‘ere?”

“And you haven’t got a solitary measurement of all these beautiful growth curves!” said Redwood.

“I been too upthet, Thir,” said Mr. Skinner. “If you knew what we been through—me and the mithith! All thith latht month. We ‘aven’t known what to make of it, Thir. What with the henth gettin’ tho rank, and the earwigth, and the canary creeper. I dunno if I told you, Thir—the canary creeper …”

“You’ve told us all that,” said Redwood. “The thing is, Bensington, what are we to do?”

“What are *we* to do?” said Mr. Skinner.

“You’ll have to go back to Mrs. Skinner,” said Redwood. “You can’t leave her there alone all night.”

“Not alone, Thir, I don’t. Not if there wath a dothen Mithith Thkinnerth. Itth Mithter Benthington—”

“Nonsense,” said Redwood. “The wasps will be all right at night. And the earwigs will get out of your way—”

“But about the ratth?”

“There aren’t any rats,” said Redwood.

VI.

Mr. Skinner might have foregone his chief anxiety. Mrs. Skinner did not stop out her day.

About eleven the canary creeper, which had been quietly active all the morning, began to clamber over the window and darken it very greatly, and the darker it got the more and more clearly Mrs. Skinner perceived that her position would speedily become untenable. And also that she had lived many ages since Skinner went. She peered out of the darkling window, through the stirring tendrils, for some time, and then went very cautiously and opened the bedroom door and listened….

Everything seemed quiet, and so, tucking her skirts high about her, Mrs. Skinner made a bolt for the bedroom, and having first looked under the bed and locked herself in, proceeded with the methodical rapidity of an experienced woman to pack for

departure. The bed had not been made, and the room was littered with pieces of the creeper that Skinner had hacked off in order to close the window overnight, but these disorders she did not heed. She packed in a decent sheet. She packed all her own wardrobe and a velveteen jacket that Skinner wore in his finer moments, and she packed a jar of pickles that had not been opened, and so far she was justified in her packing. But she also packed two of the hermetically closed tins containing Herakleophorbia IV. that Mr. Bensington had brought on his last visit. (She was honest, good woman—but she was a grandmother, and her heart had burned within her to see such good growth lavished on a lot of dratted chicks.)

And having packed all these things, she put on her bonnet, took off her apron, tied a new boot-lace round her umbrella, and after listening for a long time at door and window, opened the door and sallied out into a perilous world. The umbrella was under her arm and she clutched the bundle with two gnarled and resolute hands. It was her best Sunday bonnet, and the two poppies that reared their heads amidst its splendours of band and bead seemed instinct with the same tremulous courage that possessed her.

The features about the roots of her nose wrinkled with determination. She had had enough of it! All alone there! Skinner might come back there if he liked.

She went out by the front door, going that way not because she wanted to go to Hickleybrow (her goal was Cheasing Eyebright, where her married daughter resided), but because the back door was impassable on account of the canary creeper that had been growing so furiously ever since she upset the can of food near its roots. She listened for a space and closed the front door very carefully behind her.

At the corner of the house she paused and reconnoitred....

An extensive sandy scar upon the hillside beyond the pine-woods marked the nest of the giant Wasps, and this she studied very earnestly. The coming and going of the morning was over, not a wasp chanced to be in sight then, and except for a sound scarcely more perceptible than a steam wood-saw at work amidst the pines would have been, everything was still. As for earwigs, she could see not one. Down among the cabbage indeed something was stirring, but it might just as probably be a cat stalking birds. She watched this for a time.

She went a few paces past the corner, came in sight of the run containing the giant chicks and stopped again. “Ah!” she said, and shook her head slowly at the sight of them. They were at that time about the height of emus, but of course much thicker in the body—a larger thing altogether. They were all hens and five all told, now that the

two cockerels had killed each other. She hesitated at their drooping attitudes. “Poor dears!” she said, and put down her bundle; “they’ve got no water. And they’ve ‘ad no food these twenty-four hours! And such appetites, too, as they ‘ave!” She put a lean finger to her lips and communed with herself.

Then this dirty old woman did what seems to me a quite heroic deed of mercy. She left her bundle and umbrella in the middle of the brick path and went to the well and drew no fewer than three pailfuls of water for the chickens’ empty trough, and then while they were all crowding about that, she undid the door of the run very softly. After which she became extremely active, resumed her package, got over the hedge at the bottom of the garden, crossed the rank meadows (in order to avoid the wasps’ nest) and toiled up the winding path towards Cheasing Eyebright.

She panted up the hill, and as she went she paused ever and again, to rest her bundle and get her breath and stare back at the little cottage beside the pine-wood below. And when at last, when she was near the crest of the hill, she saw afar off three several wasps dropping heavily westward, it helped her greatly on her way.

She soon got out of the open and in the high banked lane beyond (which seemed a safer place to her), and so up by Hickleybrow Coombe to the downs. There at the foot of the downs where a big tree gave an air of shelter she rested for a space on a stile.

Then on again very resolutely....

You figure her, I hope, with her white bundle, a sort of erect black ant, hurrying along the little white path-thread athwart the downland slopes under the hot sun of the summer afternoon. On she struggled after her resolute indefatigable nose, and the poppies in her bonnet quivered perpetually and her spring-side boots grew whiter and whiter with the downland dust. Flip-flap, flip-flap went her footfalls through the still heat of the day, and persistently, incurably, her umbrella sought to slip from under the elbow that retained it. The mouth wrinkle under her nose was pursed to an extreme resolution, and ever and again she told her umbrella to come up or gave her tightly clutched bundle a vindictive jerk. And at times her lips mumbled with fragments of some foreseen argument between herself and Skinner.

And far away, miles and miles away, a steeple and a hanger grew insensibly out of the vague blue to mark more and more distinctly the quiet corner where Cheasing Eyebright sheltered from the tumult of the world, recking little or nothing of the Herakleophorbia concealed in that white bundle that struggled so persistently towards its orderly retirement.

VII.

So far as I can gather, the pullets came into Hickleybrow about three o'clock in the afternoon. Their coming must have been a brisk affair, though nobody was out in the street to see it. The violent bellowing of little Skelmersdale seems to have been the first announcement of anything out of the way. Miss Durgan of the Post Office was at the window as usual, and saw the hen that had caught the unhappy child, in violent flight up the street with its victim, closely pursued by two others. You know that swinging stride of the emancipated athletic latter-day pullet! You know the keen insistence of the hungry hen! There was Plymouth Rock in these birds, I am told, and even without Herakleophorbia that is a gaunt and striding strain.

Probably Miss Durgan was not altogether taken by surprise. In spite of Mr. Bensington's insistence upon secrecy, rumours of the great chicken Mr. Skinner was producing had been about the village for some weeks. "Lor!" she cried, "it's what I expected."

She seems to have behaved with great presence of mind. She snatched up the sealed bag of letters that was waiting to go on to Urshot, and rushed out of the door at once. Almost simultaneously Mr. Skelmersdale himself appeared down the village, gripping a watering-pot by the spout, and very white in the face. And, of course, in a moment or so every one in the village was rushing to the door or window.

The spectacle of Miss Durgan all across the road, with the entire day's correspondence of Hickleybrow in her hand, gave pause to the pullet in possession of Master Skelmersdale. She halted through one instant's indecision and then turned for the open gates of Fulcher's yard. That instant was fatal. The second pullet ran in neatly, got possession of the child by a well-directed peck, and went over the wall into the vicarage garden.

"Charawk, chawk, chawk, chawk, chawk, chawk!" shrieked the hindmost hen, hit smartly by the watering-can Mr. Skelmersdale had thrown, and fluttered wildly over Mrs. Glue's cottage and so into the doctor's field, while the rest of those Gargantuan birds pursued the pullet, in possession of the child across the vicarage lawn.

"Good heavens!" cried the Curate, or (as some say) something much more manly, and ran, whirling his croquet mallet and shouting, to head off the chase.

"Stop, you wretch!" cried the curate, as though giant hens were the commonest facts in life.

And then, finding he could not possibly intercept her, he hurled his mallet with all his might and main, and out it shot in a gracious curve within a foot or so of Master

Skelmersdale's head and through the glass lantern of the conservatory. Smash! The new conservatory! The Vicar's wife's beautiful new conservatory!

It frightened the hen. It might have frightened any one. She dropped her victim into a Portugal laurel (from which he was presently extracted, disordered but, save for his less delicate garments, uninjured), made a flapping leap for the roof of Fulcher's stables, put her foot through a weak place in the tiles, and descended, so to speak, out of the infinite into the contemplative quiet of Mr. Bumps the paralytic—who, it is now proved beyond all cavil, did, on this one occasion in his life, get down the entire length of his garden and indoors without any assistance whatever, bolt the door after him, and immediately relapse again into Christian resignation and helpless dependence upon his wife....

The rest of the pullets were headed off by the other croquet players, and went through the vicar's kitchen garden into the doctor's field, to which rendezvous the fifth also came at last, clucking disconsolately after an unsuccessful attempt to walk on the cucumber frames in Mr. Witherspoon's place.

They seem to have stood about in a hen-like manner for a time, and scratched a little and chirrawked meditatively, and then one pecked at and pecked over a hive of the doctor's bees, and after that they set off in a gawky, jerky, feathery, fitful sort of way across the fields towards Urshot, and Hickleybrow Street saw them no more. Near Urshot they really came upon commensurate food in a field of swedes; and pecked for a space with gusto, until their fame overtook them.

The chief immediate reaction of this astonishing irruption of gigantic poultry upon the human mind was to arouse an extraordinary passion to whoop and run and throw things, and in quite a little time almost all the available manhood of Hickleybrows and several ladies, were out with a remarkable assortment of flappish and whangable articles in hand—to commence the scooting of the giant hens. They drove them into Urshot, where there was a Rural Fete, and Urshot took them as the crowning glory of a happy day. They began to be shot at near Findon Beeches, but at first only with a rook rifle. Of course birds of that size could absorb an unlimited quantity of small shot without inconvenience. They scattered somewhere near Sevenoaks, and near Tonbridge one of them fled clucking for a time in excessive agitation, somewhat ahead of and parallel with the afternoon boat express—to the great astonishment of every one therein.

And about half-past five two of them were caught very cleverly by a circus proprietor at Tunbridge Wells, who lured them into a cage, rendered vacant through the death of a widowed dromedary, by scattering cakes and bread....

VIII.

When the unfortunate Skinner got out of the South-Eastern train at Urshot that evening it was already nearly dusk. The train was late, but not inordinately late—and Mr. Skinner remarked as much to the station-master. Perhaps he saw a certain pregnancy in the station-master's eye. After the briefest hesitation and with a confidential movement of his hand to the side of his mouth he asked if "anything" had happened that day.

"How d'yer *mean*?" said the station-master, a man with a hard, emphatic voice.

"Thethe 'ere waptheth and thingth."

"We 'aven't 'ad much time to think of *waptheth*," said the station-master agreeably. "We've been too busy with your brasted 'ens," and he broke the news of the pullets to Mr. Skinner as one might break the window of an adverse politician.

"You ain't 'eard anything of Mithith Thkinner?" asked Skinner, amidst that missile shower of pithy information and comment.

"No fear!" said the station-master—as though even he drew the line somewhere in the matter of knowledge.

"I mutht make inquireth bout thith," said Mr. Skinner, edging out of reach of the station-master's concluding generalisations about the responsibility attaching to the excessive nurture of hens....

Going through Urshot Mr. Skinner was hailed by a lime-burner from the pits over by Hankey and asked if he was looking for his hens.

"You ain't 'eard anything of Mithith Thkinner?" he asked.

The lime-burner—his exact phrases need not concern us—expressed his superior interest in hens....

It was already dark—as dark at least as a clear night in the English June can be—when Skinner—or his head at any rate—came into the bar of the Jolly Drovers and said: "Ello! You 'aven't 'eard anything of thith ere thtory bout my 'enth, 'ave you?"

"Oh, *'aven't* we!" said Mr. Fulcher. "Why, part of the story's been and bust into my stable roof and one chapter smashed a 'ole in Missis Vicar's green 'ouse—I beg 'er pardon—Conservarratory."

Skinner came in. "I'd like thomething a little comforting," he said, "'ot gin and water'th about my figure," and everybody began to tell him things about the pullets.

“*Grathuth* me!” said Skinner.

“You ‘aven’t ‘eard anything about Mithith Thkinner, ‘ave you?” he asked in a pause.

“That we ‘aven’t!” said Mr. Witherspoon. “We ‘aven’t thought of ‘er. We ain’t thought nothing of either of you.”

“Ain’t you been ‘ome to-day?” asked Fulcher over a tankard.

“If one of those brasted birds ‘ave pecked ‘er,” began Mr. Witherspoon and left the full horror to their unaided imaginations….

It appeared to the meeting at the time that it would be an interesting end to an eventful day to go on with Skinner and see if anything *had* happened to Mrs. Skinner. One never knows what luck one may have when accidents are at large. But Skinner, standing at the bar and drinking his hot gin and water, with one eye roving over the things at the back of the bar and the other fixed on the Absolute, missed the psychological moment.

“I thuppothe there ‘athen’t been any trouble with any of thethe big waptheth to-day anywhere?” he asked, with an elaborate detachment of manner.

“Been too busy with your ‘ens,” said Fulcher.

“I thuppothe they’ve all gone in now anyhow,” said Skinner.

“What—the ‘ens?”

“I wath thinking of the waptheth more particularly,” said Skinner.

And then, with, an air of circumspection that would have awakened suspicion in a week-old baby, and laying the accent heavily on most of the words he chose, he asked, “I *thuppothe nobody* ‘athn’t ‘*eard* of any other *big* thingth, about, ‘ave they? Big *dogth* or *catth* or anything of *that* thort? Theemth to me if thereth big henth and big waptheth comin’ on—”

He laughed with a fine pretence of talking idly.

But a brooding expression came upon the faces of the Hickleybrow men. Fulcher was the first to give their condensing thought the concrete shape of words.

“A cat to match them ‘ens—” said Fulcher.

“Ay!” said Witherspoon, “a cat to match they ‘ens.”

“‘Twould be a tiger,” said Fulcher.

“More’n a tiger,” said Witherspoon….

When at last Skinner followed the lonely footpath over the swelling field that separated Hickleybrow from the sombre pine-shaded hollow in whose black shadows the gigantic canary-creeper grappled silently with the Experimental Farm, he followed it alone.

He was distinctly seen to rise against the sky-line, against the warm clear immensity of the northern sky—for so far public interest followed him—and to descend again into the night, into an obscurity from which it would seem he will nevermore emerge. He passed—into a mystery. No one knows to this day what happened to him after he crossed the brow. When later on the two Fulchers and Witherspoon, moved by their own imaginations, came up the hill and stared after him, the flight had swallowed him up altogether.

The three men stood close. There was not a sound out of the wooded blackness that hid the Farm from their eyes.

“It’s all right,” said young Fulcher, ending a silence.

“Don’t see any lights,” said Witherspoon.

“You wouldn’t from here.”

“It’s misty,” said the elder Fulcher.

They meditated for a space.

“‘E’d ‘ave come back if anything was wrong,” said young Fulcher, and this seemed so obvious and conclusive that presently old Fulcher said, “Well,” and the three went home to bed—thoughtfully I will admit….

A shepherd out by Huckster’s Farm heard a squealing in the night that he thought was foxes, and in the morning one of his lambs had been killed, dragged halfway towards Hickleybrow and partially devoured….

The inexplicable part of it all is the absence of any indisputable remains of Skinner!

Many weeks after, amidst the charred ruins of the Experimental Farm, there was found something which may or may not have been a human shoulder-blade and in another part of the ruins a long bone greatly gnawed and equally doubtful. Near the stile going up towards Eyebright there was found a glass eye, and many people discovered thereupon that Skinner owed much of his personal charm to such a possession. It

stared out upon the world with that same inevitable effect of detachment, that same severe melancholy that had been the redemption of his else worldly countenance.

And about the ruins industrious research discovered the metal rings and charred coverings of two linen buttons, three shanked buttons entire, and one of that metallic sort which is used in the less conspicuous sutures of the human Oeconomy. These remains have been accepted by persons in authority as conclusive of a destroyed and scattered Skinner, but for my own entire conviction, and in view of his distinctive idiosyncrasy, I must confess I should prefer fewer buttons and more bones.

The glass eye of course has an air of extreme conviction, but if it really *is* Skinner's—and even Mrs. Skinner did not certainly know if that immobile eye of his was glass—something has changed it from a liquid brown to a serene and confident blue. That shoulder-blade is an extremely doubtful document, and I would like to put it side by side with the gnawed scapulae of a few of the commoner domestic animals before I admitted its humanity.

And where were Skinner's boots, for example? Perverted and strange as a rat's appetite must be, is it conceivable that the same creatures that could leave a lamb only half eaten, would finish up Skinner—hair, bones, teeth, and boots?

I have closely questioned as many as I could of those who knew Skinner at all intimately, and they one and all agree that they cannot imagine *anything* eating him. He was the sort of man, as a retired seafaring person living in one of Mr. W.W. Jacobs' cottages at Dunton Green told me, with a guarded significance of manner not uncommon in those parts, who would "get washed up anyhow," and as regards *the* devouring element was "fit to put a fire out." He considered that Skinner would be as safe on a raft as anywhere. The retired seafaring man added that he wished to say nothing whatever against Skinner; facts were facts. And rather than have his clothes made by Skinner, the retired seafaring man remarked he would take his chance of being locked up. These observations certainly do not present Skinner in the light of an appetising object.

To be perfectly frank with the reader, I do not believe he ever went back to the Experimental Farm. I believe he hovered through long hesitations about the fields of the Hickleybrow glebe, and finally, when that squealing began, took the line of least resistance out of his perplexities into the Incognito.

And in the Incognito, whether of this or of some other world unknown to us, he obstinately and quite indisputably has remained to this day....

CHAPTER THE THIRD. — THE GIANT RATS.

I.

It was two nights after the disappearance of Mr. Skinner that the Podbourne doctor was out late near Hankey, driving in his buggy. He had been up all night assisting another undistinguished citizen into this curious world of ours, and his task accomplished, he was driving homeward in a drowsy mood enough. It was about two o'clock in the morning, and the waning moon was rising. The summer night had gone cold, and there was a low-lying whitish mist that made things indistinct. He was quite alone—for his coachman was ill in bed—and there was nothing to be seen on either hand but a drifting mystery of hedge running athwart the yellow glare of his lamps, and nothing to hear but the clitter-clatter of his horses and the gride and hedge echo of his wheels. His horse was as trustworthy as himself, and one does not wonder that he dozed....

You know that intermittent drowsing as one sits, the drooping of the head, the nodding to the rhythm of the wheels then chin upon the breast, and at once the sudden start up again.

Pitter, litter, patter.

"What was that?"

It seemed to the doctor he had heard a thin shrill squeal close at hand. For a moment he was quite awake. He said a word or two of undeserved rebuke to his horse, and looked about him. He tried to persuade himself that he had heard the distant squeal of a fox—or perhaps a young rabbit gripped by a ferret.

Swish, swish, swish, pitter, patter, swish—...

What was that?

He felt he was getting fanciful. He shook his shoulders and told his horse to get on. He listened, and heard nothing.

Or was it nothing?

He had the queerest impression that something had just peeped over the hedge at him, a queer big head. With round ears! He peered hard, but he could see nothing.

“Nonsense,” said he.

He sat up with an idea that he had dropped into a nightmare, gave his horse the slightest touch of the whip, spoke to it and peered again over the hedge. The glare of his lamp, however, together with the mist, rendered things indistinct, and he could distinguish nothing. It came into his head, he says, that there could be nothing there, because if there was his horse would have shied at it. Yet for all that his senses remained nervously awake.

Then he heard quite distinctly a soft pattering of feet in pursuit along the road.

He would not believe his ears about that. He could not look round, for the road had a sinuous curve just there. He whipped up his horse and glanced sideways again. And then he saw quite distinctly where a ray from his lamp leapt a low stretch of hedge, the curved back of—some big animal, he couldn’t tell what, going along in quick convulsive leaps.

He says he thought of the old tales of witchcraft—the thing was so utterly unlike any animal he knew, and he tightened his hold on the reins for fear of the fear of his horse. Educated man as he was, he admits he asked himself if this could be something that his horse could not see.

Ahead, and drawing near in silhouette against the rising moon, was the outline of the little hamlet of Hankey, comforting, though it showed never a light, and he cracked his whip and spoke again, and then in a flash the rats were at him!

He had passed a gate, and as he did so, the foremost rat came leaping over into the road. The thing sprang upon him out of vagueness into the utmost clearness, the sharp, eager, round-eared face, the long body exaggerated by its movement; and what particularly struck him, the pink, webbed forefeet of the beast. What must have made it more horrible to him at the time was, that he had no idea the thing was any created beast he knew. He did not recognise it as a rat, because of the size. His horse gave a bound as the thing dropped into the road beside it. The little lane woke into tumult at the report of the whip and the doctor’s shout. The whole thing suddenly went fast.

Rattle-clatter, clash, clatter.

The doctor, one gathers, stood up, shouted to his horse, and slashed with all his strength. The rat winced and swerved most reassuringly at his blow—in the glare of his

lamp he could see the fur furrow under the lash—and he slashed again and again, heedless and unaware of the second pursuer that gained upon his off side.

He let the reins go, and glanced back to discover the third rat in pursuit behind....

His horse bounded forward. The buggy leapt high at a rut. For a frantic minute perhaps everything seemed to be going in leaps and bounds....

It was sheer good luck the horse came down in Hankey, and not either before or after the houses had been passed.

No one knows how the horse came down, whether it stumbled or whether the rat on the off side really got home with one of those slashing down strokes of the teeth (given with the full weight of the body); and the doctor never discovered that he himself was bitten until he was inside the brickmaker's house, much less did he discover when the bite occurred, though bitten he was and badly—a long slash like the slash of a double tomahawk that had cut two parallel ribbons of flesh from his left shoulder.

He was standing up in his buggy at one moment, and in the next he had leapt to the ground, with his ankle, though he did not know it, badly sprained, and he was cutting furiously at a third rat that was flying directly at him. He scarcely remembers the leap he must have made over the top of the wheel as the buggy came over, so obliteratingly hot and swift did his impressions rush upon him. I think myself the horse reared up with the rat biting again at its throat, and fell sideways, and carried the whole affair over; and that the doctor sprang, as it were, instinctively. As the buggy came down, the receiver of the lamp smashed, and suddenly poured a flare of blazing oil, a thud of white flame, into the struggle.

That was the first thing the brickmaker saw.

He had heard the clatter of the doctor's approach and—though the doctor's memory has nothing of this—wild shouting. He had got out of bed hastily, and as he did so came the terrific smash, and up shot the glare outside the rising blind. "It was brighter than day," he says. He stood, blind cord in hand, and stared out of the window at a nightmare transformation of the familiar road before him. The black figure of the doctor with its whirling whip danced out against the flame. The horse kicked indistinctly, half hidden by the blaze, with a rat at its throat. In the obscurity against the churchyard wall, the eyes of a second monster shone wickedly. Another—a mere dreadful blackness with red-lit eyes and flesh-coloured hands—clutched unsteadily on the wall coping to which it had leapt at the flash of the exploding lamp.

You know the keen face of a rat, those two sharp teeth, those pitiless eyes. Seen magnified to near six times its linear dimensions, and still more magnified by darkness and amazement and the leaping fancies of a fitful blaze, it must have been an ill sight for the brickmaker—still more than half asleep.

Then the doctor had grasped the opportunity, that momentary respite the flare afforded, and was out of the brickmaker's sight below battering the door with the butt of his whip....

The brickmaker would not let him in until he had got a light.

There are those who have blamed the man for that, but until I know my own courage better, I hesitate to join their number.

The doctor yelled and hammered....

The brickmaker says he was weeping with terror when at last the door was opened.

"Bolt," said the doctor, "bolt"—he could not say "bolt the door." He tried to help, and was of no service. The brickmaker fastened the door, and the doctor had to sit on the chair beside the clock for a space before he could go upstairs....

"I don't know what they *are*!" he repeated several times. "I don't know what they *are*"—with a high note on the "are."

The brickmaker would have got him whisky, but the doctor would not be left alone with nothing but a flickering light just then.

It was long before the brickmaker could get him to go upstairs....

And when the fire was out the giant rats came back, took the dead horse, dragged it across the churchyard into the brickfield and ate at it until it was dawn, none even then daring to disturb them....

II.

Redwood went round, to Bensington about eleven the next morning with the "second editions" of three evening papers in his hand.

Bensington looked up from a despondent meditation over the forgotten pages of the most distracting novel the Brompton Road librarian had been able to find him.
"Anything fresh?" he asked.

"Two men stung near Chartham."

"They ought to let us smoke out that nest. They really did. It's their own fault."

“It’s their own fault, certainly,” said Redwood.

“Have you heard anything—about buying the farm?”

“The House Agent,” said Redwood, “is a thing with a big mouth and made of dense wood. It pretends someone else is after the house—it always does, you know—and won’t understand there’s a hurry. ‘This is a matter of life and death,’ I said, ‘don’t you understand?’ It drooped its eyes half shut and said, ‘Then why don’t you go the other two hundred pounds?’ I’d rather live in a world of solid wasps than give in to the stonewalling stupidity of that offensive creature. I—”

He paused, feeling that a sentence like that might very easily be spoiled by its context.

“It’s too much to hope,” said Bensington, “that one of the wasps—”

“The wasp has no more idea of public utility than a—than a House Agent,” said Redwood.

He talked for a little while about house agents and solicitors and people of that sort, in the unjust, unreasonable way that so many people do somehow get to talk of these business calculi (“Of all the cranky things in this cranky world, it is the most cranky to my mind of all, that while we expect honour, courage, efficiency, from a doctor or a soldier as a matter of course, a solicitor or a house agent is not only permitted but expected to display nothing but a sort of greedy, greasy, obstructive, over-reaching imbecility—” etc.)—and then, greatly relieved, he went to the window and stared out at the Sloane Street traffic.

Bensington had put the most exciting novel conceivable on the little table that carried his electric standard. He joined the fingers of his opposed hands very carefully and regarded them. “Redwood,” he said. “Do they say much about *Us*?”

“Not so much as I should expect.”

“They don’t denounce us at all?”

“Not a bit. But, on the other hand, they don’t back up what I point out must be done. I’ve written to the *Times*, you know, explaining the whole thing—”

“We take the *Daily Chronicle*,” said Bensington.

“And the *Times* has a long leader on the subject—a very high-class, well-written leader, with three pieces of *Times* Latin—*status quo* is one—and it reads like the voice of Somebody Impersonal of the Greatest Importance suffering from Influenza Headache and talking through sheets and sheets of felt without getting any relief from

it whatever. Reading between the lines, you know, it's pretty clear that the *Times* considers that it is useless to mince matters, and that something (indefinite of course) has to be done at once. Otherwise still more undesirable consequences—*Times* English, you know, for more wasps and stings. Thoroughly statesmanlike article!"

"And meanwhile this Bigness is spreading in all sorts of ugly ways."

"Precisely."

"I wonder if Skinner was right about those big rats—"

"Oh no! That would be too much," said Redwood.

He came and stood by Bensington's chair.

"By-the-bye," he said, with a slightly lowered voice, "how does *she*—?"

He indicated the closed door.

"Cousin Jane? She simply knows nothing about it. Doesn't connect us with it and won't read the articles. 'Gigantic wasps!' she says, 'I haven't patience to read the papers.'"

"That's very fortunate," said Redwood.

"I suppose—Mrs. Redwood—?"

"No," said Redwood, "just at present it happens—she's terribly worried about the child. You know, he keeps on."

"Growing?"

"Yes. Put on forty-one ounces in ten days. Weighs nearly four stone. And only six months old! Naturally rather alarming."

"Healthy?"

"Vigorous. His nurse is leaving because he kicks so forcibly. And everything, of course, shockingly outgrown. Everything, you know, has had to be made fresh, clothes and everything. Perambulator—light affair—broke one wheel, and the youngster had to be brought home on the milkman's hand-truck. Yes. Quite a crowd.... And we've put Georgina Phyllis back into his cot and put him into the bed of Georgina Phyllis. His mother—naturally alarmed. Proud at first and inclined to praise Winkles. Not now. Feels the thing *can't* be wholesome. *You* know."

“I imagined you were going to put him on diminishing doses.”

“I tried it.”

“Didn’t it work?”

“Howls. In the ordinary way the cry of a child is loud and distressing; it is for the good of the species that this should be so—but since he has been on the Herakleophorbia treatment—-”

“Mm,” said Bensington, regarding his fingers with more resignation than he had hitherto displayed.

“Practically the thing *must* come out. People will hear of this child, connect it up with our hens and things, and the whole thing will come round to my wife.... How she will take it I haven’t the remotest idea.”

“It *is* difficult,” said Mr. Bensington, “to form any plan—certainly.”

He removed his glasses and wiped them carefully.

“It is another instance,” he generalised, “of the thing that is continually happening. We—if indeed I may presume to the adjective—*scientific* men—we work of course always for a theoretical result—a purely theoretical result. But, incidentally, we do set forces in operation—*new* forces. We mustn’t control them—and nobody else *can*. Practically, Redwood, the thing is out of our hands. *We* supply the material—”

“And they,” said Redwood, turning to the window, “get the experience.”

“So far as this trouble down in Kent goes I am not disposed to worry further.”

“Unless they worry us.”

“Exactly. And if they like to muddle about with solicitors and pettifoggers and legal obstructions and weighty considerations of the tomfool order, until they have got a number of new gigantic species of vermin well established—Things always *have* been in a muddle, Redwood.”

Redwood traced a twisted, tangled line in the air.

“And our real interest lies at present with your boy.”

Redwood turned about and came and stared at his collaborator.

“What do you think of him, Bensington? You can look at this business with a greater detachment than I can. What am I to do about him?”

“Go on feeding him.”

“On Herakleophorbia?”

“On Herakleophorbia.”

“And then he’ll grow.”

“He’ll grow, as far as I can calculate from the hens and the wasps, to the height of about five-and-thirty feet—with everything in proportion—-”

“And then what’ll he do?”

“That,” said Mr. Bensington, “is just what makes the whole thing so interesting.”

“Confound it, man! Think of his clothes.”

“And when he’s grown up,” said Redwood, “he’ll only be one solitary Gulliver in a pigmy world.”

Mr. Bensington’s eye over his gold rim was pregnant.

“Why solitary?” he said, and repeated still more darkly, “*Why* solitary?”

“But you don’t propose—-?”

“I said,” said Mr. Bensington, with the self-complacency of a man who has produced a good significant saying, “Why solitary?”

“Meaning that one might bring up other children—-?”

“Meaning nothing beyond my inquiry.”

Redwood began to walk about the room. “Of course,” he said, “one might—But still! What are we coming to?”

Bensington evidently enjoyed his line of high intellectual detachment. “The thing that interests me most, Redwood, of all this, is to think that his brain at the top of him will also, so far as my reasoning goes, be five-and-thirty feet or so above our level.... What’s the matter?”

Redwood stood at the window and stared at a news placard on a paper-cart that rattled up the street.

“What’s the matter?” repeated Bensington, rising.

Redwood exclaimed violently.

“What is it?” said Bensington.

“Get a paper,” said Redwood, moving doorward.

“Why?”

“Get a paper. Something—I didn’t quite catch—Gigantic rats—!”

“Rats?”

“Yes, rats. Skinner was right after all!”

“What do you mean?”

“How the Deuce am *I* to know till I see a paper? Great Rats! Good Lord! I wonder if he’s eaten!”

He glanced for his hat, and decided to go hatless.

As he rushed downstairs two steps at a time, he could hear along the street the mighty howlings, to and fro, of the Hooligan paper-sellers making a Boom.

“‘Orrible affair in Kent—‘orrible affair in Kent. Doctor … eaten by rats. ‘Orrible affair—‘orrible affair—rats—eaten by Stchewpendous rats. Full perticulars—‘orrible affair.”

III.

Cossar, the well-known civil engineer, found them in the great doorway of the flat mansions, Redwood holding out the damp pink paper, and Bensington on tiptoe reading over his arm. Cossar was a large-bodied man with gaunt inelegant limbs casually placed at convenient corners of his body, and a face like a carving abandoned at an early stage as altogether too unpromising for completion. His nose had been left square, and his lower jaw projected beyond his upper. He breathed audibly. Few people considered him handsome. His hair was entirely tangential, and his voice, which he used sparingly, was pitched high, and had commonly a quality of bitter protest. He wore a grey cloth jacket suit and a silk hat on all occasions. He plumbed an abysmal trouser pocket with a vast red hand, paid his cabman, and came panting resolutely up the steps, a copy of the pink paper clutched about the middle, like Jove’s thunderbolt, in his hand.

“Skinner?” Bensington was saying, regardless of his approach.

“Nothing about him,” said Redwood. “Bound to be eaten. Both of them. It’s too terrible.... Hullo! Cossar!”

“This your stuff?” asked Cossar, waving the paper.

“Well, why don’t you stop it?” he demanded.

"*Can't* be jiggered!" said Cossar.

"*Buy the place*?" he cried. "What nonsense! Burn it! I knew you chaps would fumble this. *What are you to do*? Why—what I tell you.

"*You*? Do? Why! Go up the street to the gunsmith's, of course. *Why*? For guns. Yes—there's only one shop. Get eight guns! Rifles. Not elephant guns—no! Too big. Not army rifles—too small. Say it's to kill—kill a bull. Say it's to shoot buffalo! See? Eh? Rats? No! How the deuce are they to understand that? Because we *want* eight. Get a lot of ammunition. Don't get guns without ammunition—No! Take the lot in a cab to—where's the place? *Urshot*? Charing Cross, then. There's a train—-Well, the first train that starts after two. Think you can do it? All right. License? Get eight at a post-office, of course. Gun licenses, you know. Not game. Why? It's rats, man.

"You—Bensington. Got a telephone? Yes. I'll ring up five of my chaps from Ealing. *Why* five? Because it's the right number!

"Where you going, Redwood? Get a hat! *Nonsense*. Have mine. You want guns, man—not hats. Got money? Enough? All right. So long.

"Where's the telephone, Bensington?"

Bensington wheeled about obediently and led the way.

Cossar used and replaced the instrument. "Then there's the wasps," he said. "Sulphur and nitre'll do that. Obviously. Plaster of Paris. You're a chemist. Where can I get sulphur by the ton in portable sacks? *What* for? Why, Lord *bless* my heart and soul!—to smoke out the nest, of course! I suppose it must be sulphur, eh? You're a chemist. Sulphur best, eh?"

"Yes, I should *think* sulphur."

"Nothing better?"

"Right. That's your job. That's all right. Get as much sulphur as you can—saltpetre to make it burn. Sent? Charing Cross. Right away. See they do it. Follow it up. Anything?"

He thought a moment.

"Plaster of Paris—any sort of plaster—bung up nest—holes—you know. That *I'd* better get."

"How much?"

"How much what?"

“Sulphur.”

“Ton. See?”

Bensington tightened his glasses with a hand tremulous with determination. “Right,” he said, very curtly.

“Money in your pocket?” asked Cossar.

“Hang cheques. They may not know you. Pay cash. Obviously. Where’s your bank? All right. Stop on the way and get forty pounds—notes and gold.”

Another meditation. “If we leave this job for public officials we shall have all Kent in tatters,” said Cossar. “Now is there—anything? *No! Hi*!”

He stretched a vast hand towards a cab that became convulsively eager to serve him (“Cab, Sir?” said the cabman. “Obviously,” said Cossar); and Bensington, still hatless, paddled down the steps and prepared to mount.

“I *think*,” he said, with his hand on the cab apron, and a sudden glance up at the windows of his flat, “I *ought* to tell my cousin Jane—”

“More time to tell her when you come back,” said Cossar, thrusting him in with a vast hand expanded over his back....

“Clever chaps,” remarked Cossar, “but no initiative whatever. Cousin Jane indeed! I know her. Rot, these Cousin Janes! Country infested with em. I suppose I shall have to spend the whole blessed night, seeing they do what they know perfectly well they ought to do all along. I wonder if it’s Research makes ‘em like that or Cousin Jane or what?”

He dismissed this obscure problem, meditated for a space upon his watch, and decided there would be just time to drop into a restaurant and get some lunch before he hunted up the plaster of Paris and took it to Charing Cross.

The train started at five minutes past three, and he arrived at Charing Cross at a quarter to three, to find Bensington in heated argument between two policemen and his van-driver outside, and Redwood in the luggage office involved in some technical obscurity about his ammunition. Everybody was pretending not to know anything or to have any authority, in the way dear to South-Eastern officials when they catch you in a hurry.

“Pity they can’t shoot all these officials and get a new lot,” remarked Cossar with a sigh. But the time was too limited for anything fundamental, and so he swept through

these minor controversies, disinterred what may or may not have been the station-master from some obscure hiding-place, walked about the premises holding him and giving orders in his name, and was out of the station with everybody and everything aboard before that official was fully awake to the breaches in the most sacred routines and regulations that were being committed.

"Who *was* he?" said the high official, caressing the arm Cossar had gripped, and smiling with knit brows.

"'E was a gentleman, Sir," said a porter, "anyhow. 'Im and all 'is party travelled first class."

"Well, we got him and his stuff off pretty sharp—whoever he was," said the high official, rubbing his arm with something approaching satisfaction.

And as he walked slowly back, blinking in the unaccustomed daylight, towards that dignified retirement in which the higher officials at Charing Cross shelter from the importunity of the vulgar, he smiled still at his unaccustomed energy. It was a very gratifying revelation of his own possibilities, in spite of the stiffness of his arm. He wished some of those confounded arm-chair critics of railway management could have seen it.

IV.

By five o'clock that evening this amazing Cossar, with no appearance of hurry at all, had got all the stuff for his fight with insurgent Bigness out of Urshot and on the road to Hickleybrow. Two barrels of paraffin and a load of dry brushwood he had bought in Urshot; plentiful sacks of sulphur, eight big game guns and ammunition, three light breechloaders, with small-shot ammunition for the wasps, a hatchet, two billhooks, a pick and three spades, two coils of rope, some bottled beer, soda and whisky, one gross of packets of rat poison, and cold provisions for three days, had come down from London. All these things he had sent on in a coal trolley and a hay waggon in the most business-like way, except the guns and ammunition, which were stuck under the seat of the Red Lion waggonette appointed to bring on Redwood and the five picked men who had come up from Ealing at Cossar's summons.

Cossar conducted all these transactions with an invincible air of commonplace, in spite of the fact that Urshot was in a panic about the rats, and all the drivers had to be specially paid. All the shops were shut in the place, and scarcely a soul abroad in the street, and when he banged at a door a window was apt to open. He seemed to consider that the conduct of business from open windows was an entirely legitimate and obvious method. Finally he and Bensington got the Red Lion dog-cart and set off

with the waggonette, to overtake the baggage. They did this a little beyond the cross-roads, and so reached Hickleybrow first.

Bensington, with a gun between his knees, sitting beside Cossar in the dog-cart, developed a long germinated amazement. All they were doing was, no doubt, as Cossar insisted, quite the obvious thing to do, only—! In England one so rarely does the obvious thing. He glanced from his neighbour's feet to the boldly sketched hands upon the reins. Cossar had apparently never driven before, and he was keeping the line of least resistance down the middle of the road by some no doubt quite obvious but certainly unusual light of his own.

"Why don't we all do the obvious?" thought Bensington. "How the world would travel if one did! I wonder for instance why I don't do such a lot of things I know would be all right to do—things I *want* to do. Is everybody like that, or is it peculiar to me!" He plunged into obscure speculation about the Will. He thought of the complex organised futilities of the daily life, and in contrast with them the plain and manifest things to do, the sweet and splendid things to do, that some incredible influences will never permit us to do. Cousin Jane? Cousin Jane he perceived was important in the question, in some subtle and difficult way. Why should we after all eat, drink, and sleep, remain unmarried, go here, abstain from going there, all out of deference to Cousin Jane? She became symbolical without ceasing to be incomprehensible!

A stile and a path across the fields caught his eye and reminded him of that other bright day, so recent in time, so remote in its emotions, when he had walked from Urshot to the Experimental Farm to see the giant chicks.

Fate plays with us.

"Tcheck, tcheck," said Cossar. "Get up."

It was a hot midday afternoon, not a breath of wind, and the dust was thick in the roads. Few people were about, but the deer beyond the park palings browsed in profound tranquillity. They saw a couple of big wasps stripping a gooseberry bush just outside Hickleybrow, and another was crawling up and down the front of the little grocer's shop in the village street trying to find an entry. The grocer was dimly visible within, with an ancient fowling-piece in hand, watching its endeavours. The driver of the waggonette pulled up outside the Jolly Drovers and informed Redwood that his part of the bargain was done. In this contention he was presently joined by the drivers of the waggon and the trolley. Not only did they maintain this, but they refused to let the horses be taken further.

"Them big rats is nuts on 'orses," the trolley driver kept on repeating.

Cossar surveyed the controversy for a moment.

“Get the things out of that waggonette,” he said, and one of his men, a tall, fair, dirty engineer, obeyed.

“Gimme that shot gun,” said Cossar.

He placed himself between the drivers. “We don’t want *you* to drive,” he said.

“You can say what you like,” he conceded, “but we want these horses.”

They began to argue, but he continued speaking.

“If you try and assault us I shall, in self-defence, let fly at your legs. The horses are going on.”

He treated the incident as closed. “Get up on that waggon, Flack,” he said to a thickset, wiry little man. “Boon, take the trolley.”

The two drivers blustered to Redwood.

“You’ve done your duty to your employers,” said Redwood. “You stop in this village until we come back. No one will blame you, seeing we’ve got guns. We’ve no wish to do anything unjust or violent, but this occasion is pressing. I’ll pay if anything happens to the horses, never fear.”

“*That’s* all right,” said Cossar, who rarely promised.

They left the waggonette behind, and the men who were not driving went afoot. Over each shoulder sloped a gun. It was the oddest little expedition for an English country road, more like a Yankee party, trekking west in the good old Indian days.

They went up the road, until at the crest by the stile they came into sight of the Experimental Farm. They found a little group of men there with a gun or so—the two Fulchers were among them—and one man, a stranger from Maidstone, stood out before the others and watched the place through an opera-glass.

These men turned about and stared at Redwood’s party.

“Anything fresh?” said Cossar.

“The waspses keeps a comin’ and a goin’,” said old Fulcher. “Can’t see as they bring anything.”

“The canary creeper’s got in among the pine trees now,” said the man with the lorgnette. “It wasn’t there this morning. You can see it grow while you watch it.”

He took out a handkerchief and wiped his object-glasses with careful deliberation.

“I reckon you’re going down there,” ventured Skelmersdale.

“Will you come?” said Cossar.

Skelmersdale seemed to hesitate.

“It’s an all-night job.”

Skelmersdale decided that he wouldn’t.

“Rats about?” asked Cossar.

“One was up in the pines this morning—rabbiting, we reckon.”

Cossar slouched on to overtake his party.

Bensington, regarding the Experimental Farm under his hand, was able to gauge now the vigour of the Food. His first impression was that the house was smaller than he had thought—very much smaller; his second was to perceive that all the vegetation between the house and the pine-wood had become extremely large. The roof over the well peeped amidst tussocks of grass a good eight feet high, and the canary creeper wrapped about the chimney stack and gesticulated with stiff tendrils towards the heavens. Its flowers were vivid yellow splashes, distinctly visible as separate specks this mile away. A great green cable had writhed across the big wire enclosures of the giant hens’ run, and flung twining leaf stems about two outstanding pines. Fully half as tall as these was the grove of nettles running round behind the cart-shed. The whole prospect, as they drew nearer, became more and more suggestive of a raid of pigmies upon a dolls’ house that has been left in a neglected corner of some great garden.

There was a busy coming and going from the wasps’ nest, they saw. A swarm of black shapes interlaced in the air, above the rusty hill-front beyond the pine cluster, and ever and again one of these would dart up into the sky with incredible swiftness and soar off upon some distant quest. Their humming became audible at more than half a mile’s distance from the Experimental Farm. Once a yellow-striped monster dropped towards them and hung for a space watching them with its great compound eyes, but at an ineffectual shot from Cossar it darted off again. Down in a corner of the field, away to the right, several were crawling about over some ragged bones that were probably the remains of the lamb the rats had brought from Huxter’s Farm. The horses became very restless as they drew near these creatures. None of the party was an expert driver, and they had to put a man to lead each horse and encourage it with the voice.

They could see nothing of the rats as they came up to the house, and everything seemed perfectly still except for the rising and falling "whoozzzzzzZZZ, whoooo-zoo-oo" of the wasps' nest.

They led the horses into the yard, and one of Cossar's men, seeing the door open—the whole of the middle portion of the door had been gnawed out—walked into the house. Nobody missed him for the time, the rest being occupied with the barrels of paraffin, and the first intimation they had of his separation from them was the report of his gun and the whizz of his bullet. "Bang, bang," both barrels, and his first bullet it seems went through the cask of sulphur, smashed out a stave from the further side, and filled the air with yellow dust. Redwood had kept his gun in hand and let fly at something grey that leapt past him. He had a vision of the broad hind-quarters, the long scaly tail and long soles of the hind-feet of a rat, and fired his second barrel. He saw Bensington drop as the beast vanished round the corner.

Then for a time everybody was busy with a gun. For three minutes lives were cheap at the Experimental Farm, and the banging of guns filled the air. Redwood, careless of Bensington in his excitement, rushed in pursuit, and was knocked headlong by a mass of brick fragments, mortar, plaster, and rotten lath splinters that came flying out at him as a bullet whacked through the wall.

He found himself sitting on the ground with blood on his hands and lips, and a great stillness brooded over all about him.

Then a flattish voice from within the house remarked: "Gee-whizz!"

"Hullo!" said Redwood.

"Hullo there!" answered the voice.

And then: "Did you chaps get 'im?"

A sense of the duties of friendship returned to Redwood. "Is Mr. Bensington hurt?" he said.

The man inside heard imperfectly. "No one ain't to blame if I ain't," said the voice inside.

It became clearer to Redwood that he must have shot Bensington. He forgot the cuts upon his face, arose and came back to find Bensington seated on the ground and rubbing his shoulder. Bensington looked over his glasses. "We peppered him, Redwood," he said, and then: "He tried to jump over me, and knocked me down. But I let him have it with both barrels, and my! how it has hurt my shoulder, to be sure."

A man appeared in the doorway. “I got him once in the chest and once in the side,” he said.

“Where’s the waggons?” said Cossar, appearing amidst a thicket of gigantic canary-creeper leaves.

It became evident, to Redwood’s amazement, first, that no one had been shot, and, secondly, that the trolley and waggon had shifted fifty yards, and were now standing with interlocked wheels amidst the tangled distortions of Skinner’s kitchen garden. The horses had stopped their plunging. Half-way towards them, the burst barrel of sulphur lay in the path with a cloud of sulphur dust above it. He indicated this to Cossar and walked towards it. “Has any one seen that rat?” shouted Cossar, following. “I got him in between the ribs once, and once in the face as he turned on me.”

They were joined by two men, as they worried at the locked wheels.

“I killed that rat,” said one of the men.

“Have they got him?” asked Cossar.

“Jim Bates has found him, beyond the hedge. I got him jest as he came round the corner.... Whack behind the shoulder....”

When things were a little ship-shape again Redwood went and stared at the huge misshapen corpse. The brute lay on its side, with its body slightly bent. Its rodent teeth overhanging its receding lower jaw gave its face a look of colossal feebleness, of weak avidity. It seemed not in the least ferocious or terrible. Its fore-paws reminded him of lank emaciated hands. Except for one neat round hole with a scorched rim on either side of its neck, the creature was absolutely intact. He meditated over this fact for some time. “There must have been two rats,” he said at last, turning away.

“Yes. And the one that everybody hit—got away.”

“I am certain that my own shot—”

A canary-creeper leaf tendril, engaged in that mysterious search for a holdfast which constitutes a tendril’s career, bent itself engagingly towards his neck and made him step aside hastily.

“Whoo-z-z z-z-z-z-Z-Z-Z,” from the distant wasps’ nest, “whoo oo zoo-oo.”

V.

This incident left the party alert but not unstrung.

They got their stores into the house, which had evidently been ransacked by the rats after the flight of Mrs. Skinner, and four of the men took the two horses back to Hickleybrow. They dragged the dead rat through the hedge and into a position commanded by the windows of the house, and incidentally came upon a cluster of giant earwigs in the ditch. These creatures dispersed hastily, but Cossar reached out incalculable limbs and managed to kill several with his boots and gun-butt. Then two of the men hacked through several of the main stems of the canary creeper—huge cylinders they were, a couple of feet in diameter, that came out by the sink at the back; and while Cossar set the house in order for the night, Bensington, Redwood, and one of the assistant electricians went cautiously round by the fowl runs in search of the rat-holes.

They skirted the giant nettles widely, for these huge weeds threatened them with poison-thorns a good inch long. Then round beyond the gnawed, dismantled stile they came abruptly on the huge cavernous throat of the most westerly of the giant rat-holes, an evil-smelling profundity, that drew them up into a line together.

"I *hope* they'll come out," said Redwood, with a glance at the pent-house of the well.

"If they don't—" reflected Bensington.

"They will," said Redwood.

They meditated.

"We shall have to rig up some sort of flare if we *do* go in," said Redwood.

They went up a little path of white sand through the pine-wood and halted presently within sight of the wasp-holes.

The sun was setting now, and the wasps were coming home for good; their wings in the golden light made twirling haloes about them. The three men peered out from under the trees—they did not care to go right to the edge of the wood—and watched these tremendous insects drop and crawl for a little and enter and disappear. "They will be still in a couple of hours from now," said Redwood.... "This is like being a boy again."

"We can't miss those holes," said Bensington, "even if the night is dark. By-the-bye—about the light—"

"Full moon," said the electrician. "I looked it up."

They went back and consulted with Cossar.

He said that “obviously” they must get the sulphur, nitre, and plaster of Paris through the wood before twilight, and for that they broke bulk and carried the sacks. After the necessary shouting of the preliminary directions, never a word was spoken, and as the buzzing of the wasps’ nest died away there was scarcely a sound in the world but the noise of footsteps, the heavy breathing of burthened men, and the thud of the sacks. They all took turns at that labour except Mr. Bensington, who was manifestly unfit. He took post in the Skinners’ bedroom with a rifle, to watch the carcase of the dead rat, and of the others, they took turns to rest from sack-carrying and to keep watch two at a time upon the rat-holes behind the nettle grove. The pollen sacs of the nettles were ripe, and every now and then the vigil would be enlivened by the dehiscence of these, the bursting of the sacs sounding exactly like the crack of a pistol, and the pollen grains as big as buckshot pattered all about them.

Mr. Bensington sat at his window on a hard horse-hair-stuffed arm-chair, covered by a grubby antimacassar that had given a touch of social distinction to the Skinners’ sitting-room for many years. His unaccustomed rifle rested on the sill, and his spectacles anon watched the dark bulk of the dead rat in the thickening twilight, anon wandered about him in curious meditation. There was a faint smell of paraffin without, for one of the casks leaked, and it mingled with a less unpleasant odour arising from the hacked and crushed creeper.

Within, when he turned his head, a blend of faint domestic scents, beer, cheese, rotten apples, and old boots as the leading *motifs*, was full of reminiscences of the vanished Skinners. He regarded the dim room for a space. The furniture had been greatly disordered—perhaps by some inquisitive rat—but a coat upon a clothes-peg on the door, a razor and some dirty scraps of paper, and a piece of soap that had hardened through years of disuse into a horny cube, were redolent of Skinner’s distinctive personality. It came to Bensington’s mind with a complete novelty of realisation that in all probability the man had been killed and eaten, at least in part, by the monster that now lay dead there in the darkling.

To think of all that a harmless-looking discovery in chemistry may lead to!

Here he was in homely England and yet in infinite danger, sitting out alone with a gun in a twilit, ruined house, remote from every comfort, his shoulder dreadfully bruised from a gun-kick, and—by Jove!

He grasped now how profoundly the order of the universe had changed for him. He had come right away to this amazing experience, *without even saying a word to his cousin Jane*!

What must she be thinking of him?

He tried to imagine it and he could not. He had an extraordinary feeling that she and he were parted for ever and would never meet again. He felt he had taken a step and come into a world of new immensities. What other monsters might not those deepening shadows hide? The tips of the giant nettles came out sharp and black against the pale green and amber of the western sky. Everything was very still—very still indeed. He wondered why he could not hear the others away there round the corner of the house. The shadow in the cart-shed was now an abysmal black.

Bang ... *Bang* ... *Bang*.

A sequence of echoes and a shout.

A long silence.

Bang and a *diminuendo* of echoes.

Stillness.

Then, thank goodness! Redwood and Cossar were coming out of the inaudible darknesses, and Redwood was calling "Bensington!"

"Bensington! We've bagged another of the rats!"

"Cossar's bagged another of the rats!"

VI.

When the Expedition had finished refreshment, the night had fully come. The stars were at their brightest, and a growing pallor towards Hankey heralded the moon. The watch on the rat-holes had been maintained, but the watchers had shifted to the hill slope above the holes, feeling this a safer firing-point. They squatted there in a rather abundant dew, fighting the damp with whisky. The others rested in the house, and the three leaders discussed the night's work with the men. The moon rose towards midnight, and as soon as it was clear of the downs, every one except the rat-hole sentinels started off in single file, led by Cossar, towards the wasps' nest.

So far as the wasps' nest went, they found their task exceptionally easy—astonishingly easy. Except that it was a longer labour, it was no graver affair than any common wasps' nest might have been. Danger there was, no doubt, danger to life, but it never so much as thrust its head out of that portentous hillside. They stuffed in the sulphur and nitre, they bunged the holes soundly, and fired their trains. Then with a

common impulse all the party but Cossar turned and ran athwart the long shadows of the pines, and, finding Cossar had stayed behind, came to a halt together in a knot, a hundred yards away, convenient to a ditch that offered cover. Just for a minute or two the moonlit night, all black and white, was heavy with a suffocated buzz, that rose and mingled to a roar, a deep abundant note, and culminated and died, and then almost incredibly the night was still.

"By Jove!" said Bensington, almost in a whisper, "*it's done!*"

All stood intent. The hillside above the black point-lace of the pine shadows seemed as bright as day and as colourless as snow. The setting plaster in the holes positively shone. Cossar's loose framework moved towards them.

"So far—" said Cossar.

Crack—*bang*!

A shot from near the house and then—stillness.

"What's *that*?" said Bensington.

"One of the rats put its head out," suggested one of the men.

"By-the-bye, we left our guns up there," said Redwood.

"By the sacks."

Every one began to walk towards the hill again.

"That must be the rats," said Bensington.

"Obviously," said Cossar, gnawing his finger nails.

Bang!

"Hullo?" said one of the men.

Then abruptly came a shout, two shots, a loud shout that was almost a scream, three shots in rapid succession and a splintering of wood. All these sounds were very clear and very small in the immense stillness of the night. Then for some moments nothing but a minute muffled confusion from the direction of the rat-holes, and then again a wild yell ... Each man found himself running hard for the guns.

Two shots.

Bensington found himself, gun in hand, going hard through the pine trees after a number of receding backs. It is curious that the thought uppermost in his mind at that

moment was the wish that his cousin Jane could see him. His bulbous slashed boots flew out in wild strides, and his face was distorted into a permanent grin, because that wrinkled his nose and kept his glasses in place. Also he held the muzzle of his gun projecting straight before him as he flew through the chequered moonlight. The man who had run away met them full tilt—he had dropped his gun.

“Hullo,” said Cossar, and caught him in his arms. “What’s this?”

“They came out together,” said the man.

“The rats?”

“Yes, six of them.”

“Where’s Flack?”

“Down.”

“What’s he say?” panted Bensington, coming up, unheeded.

“Flack’s down?”

“He fell down.”

“They came out one after the other.”

“What?”

“Made a rush. I fired both barrels first.”

“You left Flack?”

“They were on to us.”

“Come on,” said Cossar. “You come with us. Where’s Flack? Show us.”

The whole party moved forward. Further details of the engagement dropped from the man who had run away. The others clustered about him, except Cossar, who led.

“Where are they?”

“Back in their holes, perhaps. I cleared. They made a rush for their holes.”

“What do you mean? Did you get behind them?”

“We got down by their holes. Saw ‘em come out, you know, and tried to cut ‘em off. They lolloped out—like rabbits. We ran down and let fly. They ran about wild after our first shot and suddenly came at us. *Went* for us.”

“How many?”

“Six or seven.”

Cossar led the way to the edge of the pine-wood and halted.

“D’yer mean they *got* Flack?” asked some one.

“One of ‘em was on to him.”

“Didn’t you shoot?”

“How *could* I?”

“Every one loaded?” said Cossar over his shoulder.

There was a confirmatory movement.

“But Flack—” said one.

“D’yer mean—Flack—” said another.

“There’s no time to lose,” said Cossar, and shouted “Flack!” as he led the way. The whole force advanced towards the rat-holes, the man who had run away a little to the rear. They went forward through the rank exaggerated weeds and skirted the body of the second dead rat. They were extended in a bunchy line, each man with his gun pointing forward, and they peered about them in the clear moonlight for some crumpled, ominous shape, some crouching form. They found the gun of the man who had run away very speedily.

“Flack!” cried Cossar. “Flack!”

“He ran past the nettles and fell down,” volunteered the man who ran away.

“Where?”

“Round about there.”

“Where did he fall?”

He hesitated and led them athwart the long black shadows for a space and turned judicially. “About here, I think.”

“Well, he’s not here now.”

“But his gun—-?”

“Confound it!” swore Cossar, “where’s everything got to?” He strode a step towards the black shadows on the hillside that masked the holes and stood staring. Then he swore again. “If they *have* dragged him in—-!”

So they hung for a space tossing each other the fragments of thoughts. Bensington’s glasses flashed like diamonds as he looked from one to the other. The men’s faces changed from cold clearness to mysterious obscurity as they turned them to or from the moon. Every one spoke, no one completed a sentence. Then abruptly Cossar chose his line. He flapped limbs this way and that and expelled orders in pellets. It was obvious he wanted lamps. Every one except Cossar was moving towards the house.

“You’re going into the holes?” asked Redwood.

“Obviously,” said Cossar.

He made it clear once more that the lamps of the cart and trolley were to be got and brought to him.

Bensington, grasping this, started off along the path by the well. He glanced over his shoulder, and saw Cossar’s gigantic figure standing out as if he were regarding the holes pensively. At the sight Bensington halted for a moment and half turned. They were all leaving Cossar—-!

Cossar was able to take care of himself, of course!

Suddenly Bensington saw something that made him shout a windless “Hi!” In a second three rats had projected themselves from the dark tangle of the creeper towards Cossar. For three seconds Cossar stood unaware of them, and then he had become the most active thing in the world. He didn’t fire his gun. Apparently he had no time to aim, or to think of aiming; he ducked a leaping rat, Bensington saw, and then smashed at the back of its head with the butt of his gun. The monster gave one leap and fell over itself.

Cossar’s form went right down out of sight among the reedy grass, and then he rose again, running towards another of the rats and whirling his gun overhead. A faint shout came to Bensington’s ears, and then he perceived the remaining two rats bolting divergently, and Cossar in pursuit towards the holes.

The whole thing was an affair of misty shadows; all three fighting monsters were exaggerated and made unreal by the delusive clearness of the light. At moments Cossar was colossal, at moments invisible. The rats flashed athwart the eye in sudden unexpected leaps, or ran with a movement of the feet so swift, they seemed to run on

wheels. It was all over in half a minute. No one saw it but Bensington. He could hear the others behind him still receding towards the house. He shouted something inarticulate and then ran back towards Cossar, while the rats vanished. He came up to him outside the holes. In the moonlight the distribution of shadows that constituted Cossar's visage intimated calm. "Hullo," said Cossar, "back already? Where's the lamps? They're all back now in their holes. One I broke the neck of as it ran past me ... See? There!" And he pointed a gaunt finger.

Bensington was too astonished for conversation ...

The lamps seemed an interminable time in coming. At last they appeared, first one unwinking luminous eye, preceded by a swaying yellow glare, and then, winking now and then, and then shining out again, two others. About them came little figures with little voices, and then enormous shadows. This group made as it were a spot of inflammation upon the gigantic dreamland of moonshine.

"Flack," said the voices. "Flack."

An illuminating sentence floated up. "Locked himself in the attic."

Cossar was continually more wonderful. He produced great handfuls of cotton wool and stuffed them in his ears—Bensington wondered why. Then he loaded his gun with a quarter charge of powder. Who else could have thought of that? Wonderland culminated with the disappearance of Cossar's twin realms of boot sole up the central hole.

Cossar was on all fours with two guns, one trailing on each side from a string under his chin, and his most trusted assistant, a little dark man with a grave face, was to go in stooping behind him, holding a lantern over his head. Everything had been made as sane and obvious and proper as a lunatic's dream. The wool, it seems, was on account of the concussion of the rifle; the man had some too. Obviously! So long as the rats turned tail on Cossar no harm could come to him, and directly they headed for him he would see their eyes and fire between them. Since they would have to come down the cylinder of the hole, Cossar could hardly fail to hit them. It was, Cossar insisted, the obvious method, a little tedious perhaps, but absolutely certain. As the assistant stooped to enter, Bensington saw that the end of a ball of twine had been tied to the tail of his coat. By this he was to draw in the rope if it should be needed to drag out the bodies of the rats.

Bensington perceived that the object he held in his hand was Cossar's silk hat.

How had it got there?

It would be something to remember him by, anyhow.

At each of the adjacent holes stood a little group with a lantern on the ground shining up the hole, and with one man kneeling and aiming at the round void before him, waiting for anything that might emerge.

There was an interminable suspense.

Then they heard Cossar's first shot, like an explosion in a mine....

Every one's nerves and muscles tightened at that, and bang! bang! bang! the rats had tried a bolt, and two more were dead. Then the man who held the ball of twine reported a twitching. "He's killed one in there," said Bensington, "and he wants the rope."

He watched the rope creep into the hole, and it seemed as though it had become animated by a serpentine intelligence—for the darkness made the twine invisible. At last it stopped crawling, and there was a long pause. Then what seemed to Bensington the queerest monster of all crept slowly from the hole, and resolved itself into the little engineer emerging backwards. After him, and ploughing deep furrows, Cossar's boots thrust out, and then came his lantern-illuminated back....

Only one rat was left alive now, and this poor, doomed wretch cowered in the inmost recesses until Cossar and the lantern went in again and slew it, and finally Cossar, that human ferret, went through all the runs to make sure.

"We got 'em," he said to his nearly awe-stricken company at last. "And if I hadn't been a mud-headed mucker I should have stripped to the waist. Obviously. Feel my sleeves, Bensington! I'm wet through with perspiration. Jolly hard to think of everything. Only a halfway-up of whisky can save me from a cold."