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 com 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 I 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. Witherspoons 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....