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 this 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 inclosures 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."

VII.

There were moments during that wonderful night when it seemed to Bensington that he was planned by nature for a life of fantastic adventure. This was particularly the case for an hour or so after he had taken a stiff whisky. "Shan't go back to Sloane Street," he confided to the tall, fair, dirty engineer.

"You won't, eh?"

"No fear," said Bensington, nodding darkly.

The exertion of dragging the seven dead rats to the funeral pyre by the nettle grove left him bathed in perspiration, and Cossar pointed out the obvious physical reaction of whisky to save him from the otherwise inevitable chill. There was a sort of brigand's supper in the old bricked kitchen, with the row of dead rats lying in the moonlight against the hen-runs outside, and after thirty minutes or so of rest, Cossar roused them all to the labours that were still to do. "Obviously," as he said, they had to "wipe the place out. No litter--no scandal. See?" He stirred them up to the idea of making destruction complete. They smashed and splintered every fragment of wood in the house; they built trails of chopped wood wherever big vegetation was springing; they made a pyre for the rat bodies and soaked them in

paraffin.

Bensington worked like a conscientious navvy. He had a sort of climax of exhilaration and energy towards two o'clock. When in the work of destruction he wielded an axe the bravest fled his neighbourhood. Afterwards he was a little sobered by the temporary loss of his spectacles, which were found for him at last in his side coat-pocket.

Men went to and fro about him--grimy, energetic men. Cossar moved amongst them like a god.

Bensington drank that delight of human fellowship that comes to happy armies, to sturdy expeditions--never to those who live the life of the sober citizen in cities. After Cossar had taken his axe away and set him to carry wood he went to and fro, saying they were all "good fellows." He kept on--long after he was aware of fatigue.

At last all was ready, and the broaching of the paraffin began. The moon, robbed now of all its meagre night retinue of stars, shone high above the dawn.

"Burn everything," said Cossar, going to and fro--"burn the ground and make a clean sweep of it. See?"

Bensington became aware of him, looking now very gaunt and horrible in the pale beginnings of the daylight, hurrying past with his lower jaw

projected and a flaring torch of touchwood in his hand.

"Come away!" said some one, pulling Bensington's arm.

The still dawn--no birds were singing there--was suddenly full of a tumultuous crackling; a little dull red flame ran about the base of the pyre, changed to blue upon the ground, and set out to clamber, leaf by leaf, up the stem of a giant nettle. A singing sound mingled with the crackling....

They snatched their guns from the corner of the Skinners' living-room, and then every one was running. Cossar came after them with heavy strides....

Then they were standing looking back at the Experimental Farm. It was boiling up; the smoke and flames poured out like a crowd in a panic, from doors and windows and from a thousand cracks and crevices in the roof. Trust Cossar to build a fire! A great column of smoke, shot with blood-red tongues and darting flashes, rushed up into the sky. It was like some huge giant suddenly standing up, straining upward and abruptly spreading his great arms out across the sky. It cast the night back upon them, utterly hiding and obliterating the incandescence of the sun that rose behind it. All Hickleybrow was soon aware of that stupendous pillar of smoke, and came out upon the crest, in various deshabille, to watch them coming.

Behind, like some fantastic fungus, this smoke pillar swayed and fluctuated, up, up, into the sky--making the Downs seem low and all other objects petty, and in the foreground, led by Cossar, the makers of this mischief followed the path, eight little black figures coming wearily, guns shouldered, across the meadow.

As Bensington looked back there came into his jaded brain, and echoed there, a familiar formula. What was it? "You have lit to-day--? You have lit to-day--?" Then he remembered Latimer's words: "We have lit this day such a candle in England as no man may ever put out again--"

What a man Cossar was, to be sure! He admired his back view for a space, and was proud to have held that hat. Proud! Although he was an eminent investigator and Cossar only engaged in applied science.

Suddenly he fell shivering and yawning enormously and wishing he was warmly tucked away in bed in his little flat that looked out upon Sloane Street. (It didn't do even to think of Cousin Jane.) His legs became cotton strands, his feet lead. He wondered if any one would get them coffee in Hickleybrow. He had never been up all night for three-and-thirty years.

VIII.

And while these eight adventurers fought with rats about the

Experimental Farm, nine miles away, in the village of Cheasing Eyebright, an old lady with an excessive nose struggled with great difficulties by the light of a flickering candle. She gripped a sardine tin opener in one gnarled hand, and in the other she held a tin of Herakleophorbia, which she had resolved to open or die. She struggled indefatigably, grunting at each fresh effort, while through the flimsy partition the voice of the Caddles infant wailed.

"Bless 'is poor 'art," said Mrs. Skinner; and then, with her solitary tooth biting her lip in an ecstasy of determination, "Come up!"

And presently, "Jab!" a fresh supply of the Food of the Gods was let loose to wreak its powers of giantry upon the world.