CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

THE MINIMIFICENCE OF MR. BENSINGTON.

I.

It was while the Royal Commission on Boomfood was preparing its report that Herakleophorbia really began to demonstrate its capacity for leakage. And the earliness of this second outbreak was the more unfortunate, from the point of view of Cossar at any rate, since the draft report still in existence shows that the Commission had, under the tutelage of that most able member, Doctor Stephen Winkles (F.R.S. M.D. F.R.C.P. D. Sc. J.P. D.L. etc.), already quite made up its mind that accidental leakages were impossible, and was prepared to recommend that to entrust the preparation of Boomfood to a qualified committee (Winkles chiefly), with an entire control over its sale, was quite enough to satisfy all reasonable objections to its free diffusion. This committee was to have an absolute monopoly. And it is, no doubt, to be considered as a part of the irony of life that the first and most alarming of this second series of leakages occurred within fifty yards of a little cottage at Keston occupied during the summer months by Doctor Winkles.

There can be little doubt now that Redwood's refusal to acquaint Winkles with the composition of Herakleophorbia IV. had aroused in that gentleman a novel and intense desire towards analytical chemistry. He

was not a very expert manipulator, and for that reason probably he saw fit to do his work not in the excellently equipped laboratories that were at his disposal in London, but without consulting any one, and almost with an air of secrecy, in a rough little garden laboratory at the Keston establishment. He does not seem to have shown either very great energy or very great ability in this quest; indeed one gathers he dropped the inquiry after working at it intermittently for about a month.

This garden laboratory, in which the work was done, was very roughly equipped, supplied by a standpipe tap with water, and draining into a pipe that ran down into a swampy rush-bordered pool under an alder tree in a secluded corner of the common just outside the garden hedge. The pipe was cracked, and the residuum of the Food of the Gods escaped through the crack into a little puddle amidst clumps of rushes, just in time for the spring awakening.

Everything was astir with life in that scummy little corner. There was frog spawn adrift, tremulous with tadpoles just bursting their gelatinous envelopes; there were little pond snails creeping out into life, and under the green skin of the rush stems the larvae of a big Water Beetle were struggling out of their egg cases. I doubt if the reader knows the larva of the beetle called (I know not why) Dytiscus. It is a jointed, queer-looking thing, very muscular and sudden in its movements, and given to swimming head downward with its tail out of water; the length of a man's top thumb joint it is, and more--two

inches, that is for those who have not eaten the Food--and it has two sharp jaws that meet in front of its head--tubular jaws with sharp points--through which its habit is to suck its victim's blood ...

The first things to get at the drifting grains of the Food were the little tadpoles and the little water snails; the little wriggling tadpoles in particular, once they had the taste of it, took to it with zest. But scarcely did one of them begin to grow into a conspicuous position in that little tadpole world and try a smaller brother or so as an aid to a vegetarian dietary, when nip! one of the Beetle larva had its curved bloodsucking prongs gripping into his heart, and with that red stream went Herakleophorbia IV, in a state of solution, into the being of a new client. The only thing that had a chance with these monsters to get any share of the Food were the rushes and slimy green scum in the water and the seedling weeds in the mud at the bottom. A clean up of the study presently washed a fresh spate of the Food into the puddle, and overflowed it, and carried all this sinister expansion of the struggle for life into the adjacent pool under the roots of the alder...

The first person to discover what was going on was a Mr. Lukey Carrington, a special science teacher under the London Education Board, and, in his leisure, a specialist in fresh-water algae, and he is certainly not to be envied his discovery. He had come down to Keston Common for the day to fill a number of specimen tubes for subsequent examination, and he came, with a dozen or so of corked tubes clanking

faintly in his pocket, over the sandy crest and down towards the pool, spiked walking stick in hand. A garden lad standing on the top of the kitchen steps clipping Doctor Winkles' hedge saw him in this unfrequented corner, and found him and his occupation sufficiently inexplicable and interesting to watch him pretty closely.

He saw Mr. Carrington stoop down by the side of the pool, with his hand against the old alder stem, and peer into the water, but of course he could not appreciate the surprise and pleasure with which Mr. Carrington beheld the big unfamiliar-looking blobs and threads of the algal scum at the bottom. There were no tadpoles visible--they had all been killed by that time--and it would seem Mr. Carrington saw nothing at all unusual except the excessive vegetation. He bared his arm to the elbow, leant forward, and dipped deep in pursuit of a specimen. His seeking hand went down. Instantly there flashed out of the cool shadow under the tree roots something--

Flash! It had buried its fangs deep into his arm--a bizarre shape it was, a foot long and more, brown and jointed like a scorpion.

Its ugly apparition and the sharp amazing painfulness of its bite were too much for Mr. Carrington's equilibrium. He felt himself going, and yelled aloud. Over he toppled, face foremost, splash! into the pool.

The boy saw him vanish, and heard the splashing of his struggle in the water. The unfortunate man emerged again into the boy's field of vision,

hatless and streaming with water, and screaming!

Never before had the boy heard screams from a man.

This astonishing stranger appeared to be tearing at something on the side of his face. There appeared streaks of blood there. He flung out his arms as if in despair, leapt in the air like a frantic creature, ran violently ten or twelve yards, and then fell and rolled on the ground and over and out of sight of the boy. The lad was down the steps and through the hedge in a trice--happily with the garden shears still in hand. As he came crashing through the gorse bushes, he says he was half minded to turn back, fearing he had to deal with a lunatic, but the possession of the shears reassured him. "I could 'ave jabbed his eyes," he explained, "anyhow." Directly Mr. Carrington caught sight of him, his demeanour became at once that of a sane but desperate man. He struggled to his feet, stumbled, stood up, and came to meet the boy.

"Look!" he cried, "I can't get 'em off!"

And with a qualm of horror the boy saw that, attached to Mr. Carrington's cheek, to his bare arm, and to his thigh, and lashing furiously with their lithe brown muscular bodies, were three of these horrible larvae, their great jaws buried deep in his flesh and sucking for dear life. They had the grip of bulldogs, and Mr. Carrington's efforts to detach the monsters from his face had only served to lacerate the flesh to which it had attached itself, and streak face and neck and

coat with living scarlet.

"I'll cut 'im," cried the boy; "'old on, Sir."

And with the zest of his age in such proceedings, he severed one by one the heads from the bodies of Mr. Carrington's assailants. "Yup," said the boy with a wincing face as each one fell before him. Even then, so tough and determined was their grip that the severed heads remained for a space, still fiercely biting home and still sucking, with the blood streaming out of their necks behind. But the boy stopped that with a few more slashes of his scissors--in one of which Mr. Carrington was implicated.

"I couldn't get 'em off!" repeated Carrington, and stood for a space, swaying and bleeding profusely. He dabbed feeble hands at his injuries and examined the result upon his palms. Then he gave way at the knees and fell headlong in a dead faint at the boy's feet, between the still leaping bodies of his defeated foes. Very luckily it didn't occur to the boy to splash water on his face--for there were still more of these horrors under the alder roots--and instead he passed back by the pond and went into the garden with the intention of calling assistance. And there he met the gardener coachman and told him of the whole affair.

When they got back to Mr. Carrington he was sitting up, dazed and weak, but able to warn them against the danger in the pool.

II.

Such were the circumstances by which the world had its first notification that the Food was loose again. In another week Keston Common was in full operation as what naturalists call a centre of distribution. This time there were no wasps or rats, no earwigs and no nettles, but there were at least three water-spiders, several dragon-fly larvae which presently became dragon-flies, dazzling all Kent with their hovering sapphire bodies, and a nasty gelatinous, scummy growth that swelled over the pond margin, and sent its slimy green masses surging halfway up the garden path to Doctor Winkles's house. And there began a growth of rushes and equisetum and potamogeton that ended only with the drying of the pond.

It speedily became evident to the public mind that this time there was not simply one centre of distribution, but quite a number of centres. There was one at Ealing--there can be no doubt now--and from that came the plague of flies and red spider; there was one at Sunbury, productive of ferocious great eels, that could come ashore and kill sheep; and there was one in Bloomsbury that gave the world a new strain of cockroaches of a quite terrible sort--an old house it was in Bloomsbury, and much inhabited by undesirable things. Abruptly the world found itself confronted with the Hickleybrow experiences all over again, with all sorts of queer exaggerations of familiar monsters in the place of the giant hens and rats and wasps. Each centre burst out with its own

characteristic local fauna and flora....

We know now that every one of these centres corresponded to one of the patients of Doctor Winkles, but that was by no means apparent at the time. Doctor Winkles was the last person to incur any odium in the matter. There was a panic quite naturally, a passionate indignation, but it was indignation not against Doctor Winkles but against the Food, and not so much against the Food as against the unfortunate Bensington, whom from the very first the popular imagination had insisted upon regarding as the sole and only person responsible for this new thing.

The attempt to lynch him that followed is just one of those explosive events that bulk largely in history and are in reality the least significant of occurrences.

The history of the outbreak is a mystery. The nucleus of the crowd certainly came from an Anti-Boomfood meeting in Hyde Park organised by extremists of the Caterham party, but there seems no one in the world who actually first proposed, no one who ever first hinted a suggestion of the outrage at which so many people assisted. It is a problem for M. Gustave le Bon--a mystery in the psychology of crowds. The fact emerges that about three o'clock on Sunday afternoon a remarkably big and ugly London crowd, entirely out of hand, came rolling down Thursday Street intent on Bensington's exemplary death as a warning to all scientific investigators, and that it came nearer accomplishing its object than any London crowd has ever come since the Hyde Park railings came down in

remote middle Victorian times. This crowd came so close to its object indeed, that for the space of an hour or more a word would have settled the unfortunate gentleman's fate.

The first intimation he had of the thing was the noise of the people outside. He went to the window and peered, realising nothing of what impended. For a minute perhaps he watched them seething about the entrance, disposing of an ineffectual dozen of policemen who barred their way, before he fully realised his own importance in the affair. It came upon him in a flash--that that roaring, swaying multitude was after him. He was all alone in the flat--fortunately perhaps--his cousin Jane having gone down to Ealing to have tea with a relation on her mother's side, and he had no more idea of how to behave under such circumstances than he had of the etiquette of the Day of Judgment. He was still dashing about the flat asking his furniture what he should do, turning keys in locks and then unlocking them again, making darts at door and window and bedroom--when the floor clerk came to him.

"There isn't a moment, Sir," he said. "They've got your number from the board in the hall! They're coming straight up!"

He ran Mr. Bensington out into the passage, already echoing with the approaching tumult from the great staircase, locked the door behind them, and led the way into the opposite flat by means of his duplicate key.

"It's our only chance now," he said.

He flung up a window which opened on a ventilating shaft, and showed that the wall was set with iron staples that made the rudest and most perilous of wall ladders to serve as a fire escape from the upper flats. He shoved Mr. Bensington out of the window, showed him how to cling on, and pursued him up the ladder, goading and jabbing his legs with a bunch of keys whenever he desisted from climbing. It seemed to Bensington at times that he must climb that vertical ladder for evermore. Above, the parapet was inaccessibly remote, a mile perhaps, below--He did not care to think of things below.

"Steady on!" cried the clerk, and gripped his ankle. It was quite horrible having his ankle gripped like that, and Mr. Bensington tightened his hold on the iron staple above to a drowning clutch, and gave a faint squeal of terror.

It became evident the clerk had broken a window, and then it seemed he had leapt a vast distance sideways, and there came the noise of a window-frame sliding in its sash. He was bawling things.

Mr. Bensington moved his head round cautiously until he could see the clerk. "Come down six steps," the clerk commanded.

All this moving about seemed very foolish, but very, very cautiously Mr. Bensington lowered a foot.

"Don't pull me!" he cried, as the clerk made to help him from the open window.

It seemed to him that to reach the window from the ladder would be a very respectable feat for a flying fox, and it was rather with the idea of a decent suicide than in any hope of accomplishing it that he made the step at last, and quite ruthlessly the clerk pulled him in. "You'll have to stop here," said the clerk; "my keys are no good here. It's an American lock. I'll get out and slam the door behind me and see if I can find the man of this floor. You'll be locked in. Don't go to the window, that's all. It's the ugliest crowd I've ever seen. If only they think you're out they'll probably content themselves by breaking up your stuff--"

"The indicator said In," said Bensington.

"The devil it did! Well, anyhow, I'd better not be found--"

He vanished with a slam of the door.

Bensington was left to his own initiative again.

It took him under the bed.

There presently he was found by Cossar.

Bensington was almost comatose with terror when he was found, for Cossar had burst the door in with his shoulder by jumping at it across the breadth of the passage.

"Come out of it, Bensington," he said. "It's all right. It's me. We've got to get out of this. They're setting the place on fire. The porters are all clearing out. The servants are gone. It's lucky I caught the man who knew.

"Look here!"

Bensington, peering from under the bed, became aware of some unaccountable garments on Cossar's arm, and, of all things, a black bonnet in his hand!

"They're having a clear out," said Cossar, "If they don't set the place on fire they'll come here. Troops may not be here for an hour yet. Fifty per cent. Hooligans in the crowd, and the more furnished flats they go into the better they'll like it. Obviously.... They mean a clear out. You put this skirt and bonnet on, Bensington, and clear out with me."

"D'you mean--?" began Bensington, protruding a head, tortoise fashion.

"I mean, put 'em on and come! Obviously," And with a sudden vehemence he dragged Bensington from under the bed, and began to dress him for his

new impersonation of an elderly woman of the people.

He rolled up his trousers and made him kick off his slippers, took off his collar and tie and coat and vest, slipped a black skirt over his head, and put on a red flannel bodice and a body over the same. He made him take off his all too characteristic spectacles, and clapped the bonnet on his head. "You might have been born an old woman," he said as he tied the strings. Then came the spring-side boots--a terrible wrench for corns--and the shawl, and the disguise was complete. "Up and down," said Cossar, and Bensington obeyed.

"You'll do," said Cossar.

And in this guise it was, stumbling awkwardly over his unaccustomed skirts, shouting womanly imprecations upon his own head in a weird falsetto to sustain his part, and to the roaring note of a crowd bent upon lynching him, that the original discoverer of Herakleophorbia IV. proceeded down the corridor of Chesterfield Mansions, mingled with that inflamed disorderly multitude, and passed out altogether from the thread of events that constitutes our story.

Never once after that escape did he meddle again with the stupendous development of the Food of the Gods he of all men had done most to begin.

III.

This little man who started the whole thing passes out of the story, and after a time he passed altogether out of the world of things, visible and tellable. But because he started the whole thing it is seemly to give his exit an intercalary page of attention. One may picture him in his later days as Tunbridge Wells came to know him. For it was at Tunbridge Wells he reappeared after a temporary obscurity, so soon as he fully realised how transitory, how quite exceptional and unmeaning that fury of rioting was. He reappeared under the wing of Cousin Jane, treating himself for nervous shock to the exclusion of all other interests, and totally indifferent, as it seemed, to the battles that were raging then about those new centres of distribution, and about the baby Children of the Food.

He took up his quarters at the Mount Glory Hydrotherapeutic Hotel, where there are quite extraordinary facilities for baths, Carbonated Baths, Creosote Baths, Galvanic and Faradic Treatment, Massage, Pine Baths, Starch and Hemlock Baths, Radium Baths, Light Baths, Heat Baths, Bran and Needle Baths, Tar and Birdsdown Baths,--all sorts of baths; and he devoted his mind to the development of that system of curative treatment that was still imperfect when he died. And sometimes he would go down in a hired vehicle and a sealskin trimmed coat, and sometimes, when his feet permitted, he would walk to the Pantiles, and there he would sip chalybeate water under the eye of his cousin Jane.

His stooping shoulders, his pink appearance, his beaming glasses, became a "feature" of Tunbridge Wells. No one was the least bit unkind to him, and indeed the place and the Hotel seemed very glad to have the distinction of his presence. Nothing could rob him of that distinction now. And though he preferred not to follow the development of his great invention in the daily papers, yet when he crossed the Lounge of the Hotel or walked down the Pantiles and heard the whisper, "There he is! That's him!" it was not dissatisfaction that softened his mouth and gleamed for a moment in his eye.

This little figure, this minute little figure, launched the Food of the Gods upon the world! One does not know which is the most amazing, the greatness or the littleness of these scientific and philosophical men. You figure him there on the Pantiles, in the overcoat trimmed with fur. He stands under that chinaware window where the spring spouts, and holds and sips the glass of chalybeate water in his hand. One bright eye over the gilt rim is fixed, with an expression of inscrutable severity, on Cousin Jane, "Mm," he says, and sips.

So we make our souvenir, so we focus and photograph this discoverer of ours for the last time, and leave him, a mere dot in our foreground, and pass to the greater picture that, has developed about him, to the story of his Food, how the scattered Giant Children grew up day by day into a world that was all too small for them, and how the net of Boomfood Laws and Boomfood Conventions, which the Boomfood Commission was weaving even then, drew closer and closer upon them with every year of their growth,

Until--