BOOK II

THE FOOD IN THE VILLAGE.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

THE COMING OF THE FOOD.

I.

Our theme, which began so compactly in Mr. Bensington's study, has already spread and branched, until it points this way and that, and henceforth our whole story is one of dissemination. To follow the Food of the Gods further is to trace the ramifications of a perpetually branching tree; in a little while, in the quarter of a lifetime, the Food had trickled and increased from its first spring in the little farm near Hickleybrow until it had spread,--it and the report and shadow of its power,--throughout the world. It spread beyond England very speedily. Soon in America, all over the continent of Europe, in Japan, in Australia, at last all over the world, the thing was working towards its appointed end. Always it worked slowly, by indirect courses and against resistance. It was bigness insurgent. In spite of prejudice, in

spite of law and regulation, in spite of all that obstinate conservatism that lies at the base of the formal order of mankind, the Food of the Gods, once it had been set going, pursued its subtle and invincible progress.

The children of the Food grew steadily through all these years; that was the cardinal fact of the time. But it is the leakages make history. The children who had eaten grew, and soon there were other children growing; and all the best intentions in the world could not stop further leakages and still further leakages. The Food insisted on escaping with the pertinacity of a thing alive. Flour treated with the stuff crumbled in dry weather almost as if by intention into an impalpable powder, and would lift and travel before the lightest breeze. Now it would be some fresh insect won its way to a temporary fatal new development, now some fresh outbreak from the sewers of rats and such-like vermin. For some days the village of Pangbourne in Berkshire fought with giant ants. Three men were bitten and died. There would be a panic, there would be a struggle, and the salient evil would be fought down again, leaving always something behind, in the obscurer things of life--changed for ever. Then again another acute and startling outbreak, a swift upgrowth of monstrous weedy thickets, a drifting dissemination about the world of inhumanly growing thistles, of cockroaches men fought with shot guns, or a plague of mighty flies.

There were some strange and desperate struggles in obscure places. The Food begot heroes in the cause of littleness ...

And men took such happenings into their lives, and met them by the expedients of the moment, and told one another there was "no change in the essential order of things." After the first great panic, Caterham, in spite of his power of eloquence, became a secondary figure in the political world, remained in men's minds as the exponent of an extreme view.

Only slowly did he win a way towards a central position in affairs. "There was no change in the essential order of things,"--that eminent leader of modern thought, Doctor Winkles, was very clear upon this,--and the exponents of what was called in those days Progressive Liberalism grew quite sentimental upon the essential insincerity of their progress. Their dreams, it would appear, ran wholly on little nations, little languages, little households, each self-supported on its little farm. A fashion for the small and neat set in. To be big was to be "vulgar," and dainty, neat, mignon, miniature, "minutely perfect," became the key-words of critical approval....

Meanwhile, quietly, taking their time as children must, the children of the Food, growing into a world that changed to receive them, gathered strength and stature and knowledge, became individual and purposeful, rose slowly towards the dimensions of their destiny. Presently they seemed a natural part of the world; all these stirrings of bigness seemed a natural part of the world, and men wondered how things had been before their time. There came to men's ears stories of things the giant

boys could do, and they said "Wonderful!"--without a spark of wonder. The popular papers would tell of the three sons of Cossar, and how these amazing children would lift great cannons, hurl masses of iron for hundreds of yards, and leap two hundred feet. They were said to be digging a well, deeper than any well or mine that man had ever made, seeking, it was said, for treasures hidden in the earth since ever the earth began.

These Children, said the popular magazines, will level mountains, bridge seas, tunnel your earth to a honeycomb. "Wonderful!" said the little folks, "isn't it? What a lot of conveniences we shall have!" and went about their business as though there was no such thing as the Food of the Gods on earth. And indeed these things were no more than the first hints and promises of the powers of the Children of the Food. It was still no more than child's play with them, no more than the first use of a strength in which no purpose had arisen. They did not know themselves for what they were. They were children--slow-growing children of a new race. The giant strength grew day by day--the giant will had still to grow into purpose and an aim.

Looking at it in a shortened perspective of time, those years of transition have the quality of a single consecutive occurrence; but indeed no one saw the coming of Bigness in the world, as no one in all the world till centuries had passed saw, as one happening, the Decline and Fall of Rome. They who lived in those days were too much among these developments to see them together as a single thing. It seemed even to

wise men that the Food was giving the world nothing but a crop of unmanageable, disconnected irrelevancies, that might shake and trouble indeed, but could do no more to the established order and fabric of mankind.

To one observer at least the most wonderful thing throughout that period of accumulating stress is the invincible inertia of the great mass of people, their quiet persistence in all that ignored the enormous presences, the promise of still more enormous things, that grew among them. Just as many a stream will be at its smoothest, will look most tranquil, running deep and strong, at the very verge of a cataract, so all that is most conservative in man seemed settling quietly into a serene ascendency during these latter days. Reaction became popular: there was talk of the bankruptcy of science, of the dying of Progress, of the advent of the Mandarins,--talk of such things amidst the echoing footsteps of the Children of the Food. The fussy pointless Revolutions of the old time, a vast crowd of silly little people chasing some silly little monarch and the like, had indeed died out and passed away; but Change had not died out. It was only Change that had changed. The New was coming in its own fashion and beyond the common understanding of the world.

To tell fully of its coming would be to write a great history, but everywhere there was a parallel chain of happenings. To tell therefore of the manner of its coming in one place is to tell something of the whole. It chanced one stray seed of Immensity fell into the pretty,

petty village of Cheasing Eyebright in Kent, and from the story of its queer germination there and of the tragic futility that ensued, one may attempt--following one thread, as it were--to show the direction in which the whole great interwoven fabric of the thing rolled off the loom of Time.

II.

Cheasing Eyebright had of course a Vicar. There are vicars and vicars, and of all sorts I love an innovating vicar--a piebald progressive professional reactionary--the least. But the Vicar of Cheasing Eyebright was one of the least innovating of vicars, a most worthy, plump, ripe, and conservative-minded little man. It is becoming to go back a little in our story to tell of him. He matched his village, and one may figure them best together as they used to be, on the sunset evening when Mrs. Skinner--you will remember her flight!--brought the Food with her all unsuspected into these rustic serenities.

The village was looking its very best just then, under that western light. It lay down along the valley beneath the beechwoods of the Hanger, a beading of thatched and red-tiled cottages--cottages with trellised porches and pyracanthus-lined faces, that clustered closer and closer as the road dropped from the yew trees by the church towards the bridge. The vicarage peeped not too ostentatiously between the trees beyond the inn, an early Georgian front ripened by time, and the spire

of the church rose happily in the depression made by the valley in the outline of the hills. A winding stream, a thin intermittency of sky blue and foam, glittered amidst a thick margin of reeds and loosestrife and overhanging willows, along the centre of a sinuous pennant of meadow. The whole prospect had that curiously English quality of ripened cultivation--that look of still completeness--that apes perfection, under the sunset warmth.

And the Vicar too looked mellow. He looked habitually and essentially mellow, as though he had been a mellow baby born into a mellow class, a ripe and juicy little boy. One could see, even before he mentioned it, that he had gone to an ivy-clad public school in its anecdotage, with magnificent traditions, aristocratic associations, and no chemical laboratories, and proceeded thence to a venerable college in the very ripest Gothic. Few books he had younger than a thousand years; of these, Yarrow and Ellis and good pre-Methodist sermons made the bulk. He was a man of moderate height, a little shortened in appearance by his equatorial dimensions, and a face that had been mellow from the first was now climacterically ripe. The beard of a David hid his redundancy of chin; he wore no watch chain out of refinements and his modest clerical garments were made by a West End tailor.... And he sat with a hand on either shin, blinking at his village in beatific approval. He waved a plump palm towards it. His burthen sang out again. What more could any one desire?

"We are fortunately situated," he said, putting the thing tamely.

"We are in a fastness of the hills," he expanded.

He explained himself at length. "We are out of it all."

For they had been talking, he and his friend, of the Horrors of the Age, of Democracy, and Secular Education, and Sky Scrapers, and Motor Cars, and the American Invasion, the Scrappy Reading of the Public, and the disappearance of any Taste at all.

"We are out of it all," he repeated, and even as he spoke the footsteps of some one coming smote upon his ear, and he rolled over and regarded her.

You figure the old woman's steadfastly tremulous advance, the bundle clutched in her gnarled lank hand, her nose (which was her countenance) wrinkled with breathless resolution. You see the poppies nodding fatefully on her bonnet, and the dust-white spring-sided boots beneath her skimpy skirts, pointing with an irrevocable slow alternation east and west. Beneath her arm, a restive captive, waggled and slipped a scarcely valuable umbrella. What was there to tell the Vicar that this grotesque old figure was--so far as his village was concerned at any rate--no less than Fruitful Chance and the Unforeseen, the Hag weak men call Fate. But for us, you understand, no more than Mrs. Skinner.

As she was too much encumbered for a curtsey, she pretended not to see

him and his friend at all, and so passed, flip-flop, within three yards of them, onward down towards the village. The Vicar watched her slow transit in silence, and ripened a remark the while....

The incident seemed to him of no importance whatever. Old womankind, aere perennius, has carried bundles since the world began. What difference has it made?

"We are out of it all," said the Vicar. "We live in an atmosphere of simple and permanent things, Birth and Toil, simple seed-time and simple harvest. The Uproar passes us by." He was always very great upon what he called the permanent things. "Things change," he would say, "but Humanity--aere perennius."

Thus the Vicar. He loved a classical quotation subtly misapplied. Below, Mrs. Skinner, inelegant but resolute, had involved herself curiously with Wilmerding's stile.

III.

No one knows what the Vicar made of the Giant Puff-Balls.

No doubt he was among the first to discover them. They were scattered at intervals up and down the path between the near down and the village end--a path he frequented daily in his constitutional round. Altogether, of these abnormal fungi there were, from first to last, quite thirty. The Vicar seems to have stared at each severally, and to have prodded most of them with his stick once or twice. One he attempted to measure with his arms, but it burst at his Ixion embrace.

He spoke to several people about them, and said they were "marvellous!" and he related to at least seven different persons the well-known story of the flagstone that was lifted from the cellar floor by a growth of fungi beneath. He looked up his Sowerby to see if it was Lycoperdon coelatum or giganteum--like all his kind since Gilbert White became famous, he Gilbert-Whited. He cherished a theory that giganteum is unfairly named.

One does not know if he observed that those white spheres lay in the very track that old woman of yesterday had followed, or if he noted that the last of the series swelled not a score of yards from the gate of the Caddles' cottage. If he observed these things, he made no attempt to place his observation on record. His observation in matters botanical was what the inferior sort of scientific people call a "trained observation"--you look for certain definite things and neglect everything else. And he did nothing to link this phenomenon with the remarkable expansion of the Caddles' baby that had been going on now for some weeks, indeed ever since Caddles walked over one Sunday afternoon a

month or more ago to see his mother-in-law and hear Mr. Skinner (since defunct) brag about his management of hens.

IV.

The growth of the puff-balls following on the expansion of the Caddles' baby really ought to have opened the Vicar's eyes. The latter fact had already come right into his arms at the christening--almost over-poweringly....

The youngster bawled with deafening violence when the cold water that sealed its divine inheritance and its right to the name of "Albert Edward Caddles" fell upon its brow. It was already beyond maternal porterage, and Caddles, staggering indeed, but grinning triumphantly at quantitatively inferior parents, bore it back to the free-sitting occupied by his party.

"I never saw such a child!" said the Vicar. This was the first public intimation that the Caddles' baby, which had begun its earthly career a little under seven pounds, did after all intend to be a credit to its parents. Very soon it was clear it meant to be not only a credit but a glory. And within a month their glory shone so brightly as to be, in connection with people in the Caddles' position, improper.

The butcher weighed the infant eleven times. He was a man of few words,

and he soon got through with them. The first time he said, "E's a good un;" the next time he said, "My word!" the third time he said, "Well, mum," and after that he simply blew enormously each time, scratched his head, and looked at his scales with an unprecedented mistrust. Every one came to see the Big Baby--so it was called by universal consent--and most of them said, "E's a Bouncer," and almost all remarked to him, "Did they?" Miss Fletcher came and said she "never did," which was perfectly true.

Lady Wondershoot, the village tyrant, arrived the day after the third weighing, and inspected the phenomenon narrowly through glasses that filled it with howling terror. "It's an unusually Big child," she told its mother, in a loud instructive voice. "You ought to take unusual care of it, Caddles. Of course it won't go on like this, being bottle fed, but we must do what we can for it. I'll send you down some more flannel."

The doctor came and measured the child with a tape, and put the figures in a notebook, and old Mr. Drift-hassock, who fanned by Up Marden, brought a manure traveller two miles out of their way to look at it. The traveller asked the child's age three times over, and said finally that he was blowed. He left it to be inferred how and why he was blowed; apparently it was the child's size blowed him. He also said it ought to be put into a baby show. And all day long, out of school hours, little children kept coming and saying, "Please, Mrs. Caddles, mum, may we have a look at your baby, please, mum?" until Mrs. Caddles had to put a stop

to it. And amidst all these scenes of amazement came Mrs. Skinner, and stood and smiled, standing somewhat in the background, with each sharp elbow in a lank gnarled hand, and smiling, smiling under and about her nose, with a smile of infinite profundity.

"It makes even that old wretch of a grandmother look quite pleasant," said Lady Wondershoot. "Though I'm sorry she's come back to the village."

Of course, as with almost all cottagers' babies, the eleemosynary element had already come in, but the child soon made it clear by colossal bawling, that so far as the filling of its bottle went, it hadn't come in yet nearly enough.

The baby was entitled to a nine days' wonder, and every one wondered happily over its amazing growth for twice that time and more. And then you know, instead of its dropping into the background and giving place to other marvels, it went on growing more than ever!

Lady Wondershoot heard Mrs. Greenfield, her housekeeper, with infinite amazement.

"Caddles downstairs again. No food for the child! My dear Greenfield, it's impossible. The creature eats like a hippopotamus! I'm sure it can't be true."

"I'm sure I hope you're not being imposed upon, my lady," said Mrs. Greenfield.

"It's so difficult to tell with these people," said Lady Wondershoot. "Now I do wish, my good Greenfield, that you'd just go down there yourself this afternoon and see--see it have its bottle. Big as it is, I cannot imagine that it needs more than six pints a day."

"It hasn't no business to, my lady," said Mrs. Greenfield.

The hand of Lady Wondershoot quivered, with that C.O.S. sort of emotion, that suspicious rage that stirs in all true aristocrats, at the thought that possibly the meaner classes are after all--as mean as their betters, and--where the sting lies--scoring points in the game.

But Mrs. Greenfield could observe no evidence of peculation, and the order for an increasing daily supply to the Caddles' nursery was issued. Scarcely had the first instalment gone, when Caddles was back again at the great house in a state abjectly apologetic.

"We took the greates' care of 'em, Mrs. Greenfield, I do assure you, mum, but he's regular bust 'em! They flew with such vilence, mum, that one button broke a pane of the window, mum, and one hit me a regular stinger jest 'ere, mum."

Lady Wondershoot, when she heard that this amazing child had positively

burst out of its beautiful charity clothes, decided that she must speak to Caddles herself. He appeared in her presence with his hair hastily wetted and smoothed by hand, breathless, and clinging to his hat brim as though it was a life-belt, and he stumbled at the carpet edge out of sheer distress of mind.

Lady Wondershoot liked bullying Caddles. Caddles was her ideal lower-class person, dishonest, faithful, abject, industrious, and inconceivably incapable of responsibility. She told him it was a serious matter, the way his child was going on. "It's 'is appetite, my ladyship," said Caddles, with a rising note.

"Check 'im, my ladyship, you can't," said Caddles. "There 'e lies, my ladyship, and kicks out 'e does, and 'owls, that distressin'. We 'aven't the 'eart, my ladyship. If we 'ad--the neighbours would interfere...."

Lady Wondershoot consulted the parish doctor.

"What I want to know," said Lady Wondershoot, "is it right this child should have such an extraordinary quantity of milk?"

"The proper allowance for a child of that age," said the parish doctor, "is a pint and a half to two pints in the twenty-four hours. I don't see that you are called upon to provide more. If you do, it is your own generosity. Of course we might try the legitimate quantity for a few days. But the child, I must admit, seems for some reason to be

physiologically different. Possibly what is called a Sport. A case of General Hypertrophy."

"It isn't fair to the other parish children," said Lady Wondershoot. "I am certain we shall have complaints if this goes on."

"I don't see that any one can be expected to give more than the recognised allowance. We might insist on its doing with that, or if it wouldn't, send it as a case into the Infirmary."

"I suppose," said Lady Wondershoot, reflecting, "that apart from the size and the appetite, you don't find anything else abnormal--nothing monstrous?"

"No. No, I don't. But no doubt if this growth goes on, we shall find grave moral and intellectual deficiencies. One might almost prophesy that from Max Nordau's law. A most gifted and celebrated philosopher, Lady Wondershoot. He discovered that the abnormal is--abnormal, a most valuable discovery, and well worth bearing in mind. I find it of the utmost help in practice. When I come upon anything abnormal, I say at once, This is abnormal." His eyes became profound, his voice dropped, his manner verged upon the intimately confidential. He raised one hand stiffly. "And I treat it in that spirit," he said.

V.

"Tut, tut!" said the Vicar to his breakfast things--the day after the coming of Mrs. Skinner. "Tut, tut! what's this?" and poised his glasses at his paper with a general air of remonstrance.

"Giant wasps! What's the world coming to? American journalists, I suppose! Hang these Novelties! Giant gooseberries are good enough for me.

"Nonsense!" said the Vicar, and drank off his coffee at a gulp, eyes steadfast on the paper, and smacked his lips incredulously.

"Bosh!" said the Vicar, rejecting the hint altogether.

But the next day there was more of it, and the light came.

Not all at once, however. When he went for his constitutional that day he was still chuckling at the absurd story his paper would have had him believe. Wasps indeed--killing a dog! Incidentally as he passed by the site of that first crop of puff-balls he remarked that the grass was growing very rank there, but he did not connect that in any way with the matter of his amusement. "We should certainly have heard something of it," he said; "Whitstable can't be twenty miles from here."

Beyond he found another puff-ball, one of the second crop, rising like a roc's egg out of the abnormally coarsened turf.

The thing came upon him in a flash.

He did not take his usual round that morning. Instead he turned aside by the second stile and came round to the Caddles' cottage. "Where's that baby?" he demanded, and at the sight of it, "Goodness me!"

He went up the village blessing his heart, and met the doctor full tilt coming down. He grasped his arm. "What does this mean?" he said. "Have you seen the paper these last few days?"

The doctor said he had.

"Well, what's the matter with that child? What's the matter with everything--wasps, puff-balls, babies, eh? What's making them grow so big? This is most unexpected. In Kent too! If it was America now--"

"It's a little difficult to say just what it is," said the doctor. "So far as I can grasp the symptoms--"

"Yes?"

"It's Hypertrophy--General Hypertrophy."

"Hypertrophy?"

"Yes. General--affecting all the bodily structures--all the organism. I may say that in my own mind, between ourselves, I'm very nearly convinced it's that.... But one has to be careful."

"Ah," said the Vicar, a good deal relieved to find the doctor equal to the situation. "But how is it it's breaking out in this fashion, all over the place?"

"That again," said the doctor, "is difficult to say."

"Urshot. Here. It's a pretty clear case of spreading."

"Yes," said the doctor. "Yes. I think so. It has a strong resemblance at any rate to some sort of epidemic. Probably Epidemic Hypertrophy will meet the case."

"Epidemic!" said the Vicar. "You don't mean it's contagious?"

The doctor smiled gently and rubbed one hand against the other. "That I couldn't say," he said.

"But---!" cried the Vicar, round-eyed. "If it's catching--it--it affects us!"

He made a stride up the road and turned about.

"I've just been there," he cried. "Hadn't I better---? I'll go home at once and have a bath and fumigate my clothes."

The doctor regarded his retreating back for a moment, and then turned about and went towards his own house....

But on the way he reflected that one case had been in the village a month without any one catching the disease, and after a pause of hesitation decided to be as brave as a doctor should be and take the risks like a man.

And indeed he was well advised by his second thoughts. Growth was the last thing that could ever happen to him again. He could have eaten--and the Vicar could have eaten--Herakleophorbia by the truckful. For growth had done with them. Growth had done with these two gentlemen for evermore.

VI.

It was a day or so after this conversation--a day or so, that is, after the burning of the Experimental Farm--that Winkles came to Redwood and showed him an insulting letter. It was an anonymous letter, and an author should respect his character's secrets. "You are only taking credit for a natural phenomenon," said the letter, "and trying to advertise yourself by your letter to the Times. You and your Boomfood!

Let me tell you, this absurdly named food of yours has only the most accidental connection with those big wasps and rats. The plain fact is there is an epidemic of Hypertrophy--Contagious Hypertrophy--which you have about as much claim to control as you have to control the solar system. The thing is as old as the hills. There was Hypertrophy in the family of Anak. Quite outside your range, at Cheasing Eyebright, at the present time there is a baby--"

"Shaky up and down writing. Old gentleman apparently," said Redwood. "But it's odd a baby--"

He read a few lines further, and had an inspiration.

"By Jove!" said he. "That's my missing Mrs. Skinner!"

He descended upon her suddenly in the afternoon of the following day.

She was engaged in pulling onions in the little garden before her daughter's cottage when she saw him coming through the garden gate. She stood for a moment "consternated," as the country folks say, and then folded her arms, and with the little bunch of onions held defensively under her left elbow, awaited his approach. Her mouth opened and shut several times; she mumbled her remaining tooth, and once quite suddenly she curtsied, like the blink of an arc-light.

"I thought I should find you," said Redwood.

"I thought you might, sir," she said, without joy.

"Where's Skinner?"

"'E ain't never written to me, Sir, not once, nor come nigh of me since I came here. Sir."

"Don't you know what's become of him?"

"Him not having written, no, Sir," and she edged a step towards the left with an imperfect idea of cutting off Redwood from the barn door.

"No one knows what has become of him," said Redwood.

"I dessay 'e knows," said Mrs. Skinner.

"He doesn't tell."

"He was always a great one for looking after 'imself and leaving them that was near and dear to 'im in trouble, was Skinner. Though clever as could be," said Mrs. Skinner....

"Where's this child?" asked Redwood abruptly.

She begged his pardon.

"This child I hear about, the child you've been giving our stuff to--the child that weighs two stone."

Mrs. Skinner's hands worked, and she dropped the onions. "Reely, Sir," she protested, "I don't hardly know, Sir, what you mean. My daughter, Sir, Mrs. Caddles, 'as a baby, Sir." And she made an agitated curtsey and tried to look innocently inquiring by tilting her nose to one side.

"You'd better let me see that baby, Mrs. Skinner," said Redwood.

Mrs. Skinner unmasked an eye at him as she led the way towards the barn. "Of course, Sir, there may 'ave been a little, in a little can of Nicey I give his father to bring over from the farm, or a little perhaps what I happened to bring about with me, so to speak. Me packing in a hurry and all ..."

"Um!" said Redwood, after he had cluckered to the infant for a space. "Oom!"

He told Mrs. Caddles the baby was a very fine child indeed, a thing that was getting well home to her intelligence--and he ignored her altogether after that. Presently she left the barn--through sheer insignificance.

"Now you've started him, you'll have to keep on with him, you know," he

said to Mrs. Skinner.

He turned on her abruptly. "Don't splash it about this time," he said.

"Splash it about, Sir?"

"Oh! you know."

She indicated knowledge by convulsive gestures.

"You haven't told these people here? The parents, the squire and so on at the big house, the doctor, no one?"

Mrs. Skinner shook her head.

"I wouldn't," said Redwood....

He went to the door of the barn and surveyed the world about him. The door of the barn looked between the end of the cottage and some disused piggeries through a five-barred gate upon the highroad. Beyond was a high, red brick-wall rich with ivy and wallflower and pennywort, and set along the top with broken glass. Beyond the corner of the wall, a sunlit notice-board amidst green and yellow branches reared itself above the rich tones of the first fallen leaves and announced that "Trespassers in these Woods will be Prosecuted." The dark shadow of a gap in the hedge threw a stretch of barbed wire into relief.

"Um," said Redwood, then in a deeper note, "Oom!"

There came a clatter of horses and the sound of wheels, and Lady Wondershoot's greys came into view. He marked the faces of coachman and footman as the equipage approached. The coachman was a very fine specimen, full and fruity, and he drove with a sort of sacramental dignity. Others might doubt their calling and position in the world, he at any rate was sure--he drove her ladyship. The footman sat beside him with folded arms and a face of inflexible certainties. Then the great lady herself became visible, in a hat and mantle disdainfully inelegant, peering through her glasses. Two young ladies protruded necks and peered also.

The Vicar passing on the other side swept off the hat from his David's brow unheeded....

Redwood remained standing in the doorway for a long time after the carriage had passed, his hands folded behind him. His eyes went to the green, grey upland of down, and into the cloud-curdled sky, and came back to the glass-set wall. He turned upon the cool shadows within, and amidst spots and blurs of colour regarded the giant child amidst that Rembrandtesque gloom, naked except for a swathing of flannel, seated upon a huge truss of straw and playing with its toes.

"I begin to see what we have done," he said.

He mused, and young Caddles and his own child and Cossar's brood mingled in his musing.

He laughed abruptly. "Good Lord!" he said at some passing thought.

He roused himself presently and addressed Mrs. Skinner. "Anyhow he mustn't be tortured by a break in his food. That at least we can prevent. I shall send you a can every six months. That ought to do for him all right."

Mrs. Skinner mumbled something about "if you think so, Sir," and "probably got packed by mistake.... Thought no harm in giving him a little," and so by the aid of various aspen gestures indicated that she understood.

So the child went on growing.

And growing.

"Practically," said Lady Wondershoot, "he's eaten up every calf in the place. If I have any more of this sort of thing from that man Caddles--"

VII.

But even so secluded a place as Cheasing Eyebright could not rest for long in the theory of Hypertrophy--Contagious or not--in view of the growing hubbub about the Food. In a little while there were painful explanations for Mrs. Skinner--explanations that reduced her to speechless mumblings of her remaining tooth--explanations that probed her and ransacked her and exposed her--until at last she was driven to take refuge from a universal convergence of blame in the dignity of inconsolable widowhood. She turned her eye--which she constrained to be watery--upon the angry Lady of the Manor, and wiped suds from her hands.

"You forget, my lady, what I'm bearing up under."

And she followed up this warning note with a slightly defiant:

"It's 'IM I think of, my lady, night and day."

She compressed her lips, and her voice flattened and faltered: "Bein' et, my lady."

And having established herself on these grounds, she repeated the affirmation her ladyship had refused before. "I 'ad no more idea what I was giving the child, my lady, than any one could 'ave...."

Her ladyship turned her mind in more hopeful directions, wigging Caddles of course tremendously by the way. Emissaries, full of diplomatic threatenings, entered the whirling lives of Bensington and Redwood.

They presented themselves as Parish Councillors, stolid and clinging phonographically to prearranged statements. "We hold you responsible, Mister Bensington, for the injury inflicted upon our parish, Sir. We hold you responsible."

A firm of solicitors, with a snake of a style--Banghurst, Brown, Flapp, Codlin, Brown, Tedder, and Snoxton, they called themselves, and appeared invariably in the form of a small rufous cunning-looking gentleman with a pointed nose--said vague things about damages, and there was a polished personage, her ladyship's agent, who came in suddenly upon Redwood one day and asked, "Well, Sir, and what do you propose to do?"

To which Redwood answered that he proposed to discontinue supplying the food for the child, if he or Bensington were bothered any further about the matter. "I give it for nothing as it is," he said, "and the child will yell your village to ruins before it dies if you don't let it have the stuff. The child's on your hands, and you have to keep it. Lady Wondershoot can't always be Lady Bountiful and Earthly Providence of her parish without sometimes meeting a responsibility, you know."

"The mischief's done," Lady Wondershoot decided when they told her--with expurgations--what Redwood had said.

"The mischief's done," echoed the Vicar.

Though indeed as a matter of fact the mischief was only beginning.