CHAPTER THE SECOND.

THE BRAT GIGANTIC.

I.

The giant child was ugly--the Vicar would insist. "He always had been ugly--as all excessive things must be." The Vicar's views had carried him out of sight of just judgment in this matter. The child was much subjected to snapshots even in that rustic retirement, and their net testimony is against the Vicar, testifying that the young monster was at first almost pretty, with a copious curl of hair reaching to his brow and a great readiness to smile. Usually Caddles, who was slightly built, stands smiling behind the baby, perspective emphasising his relative smallness.

After the second year the good looks of the child became more subtle and more contestable. He began to grow, as his unfortunate grandfather would no doubt have put it, "rank." He lost colour and developed an increasing effect of being somehow, albeit colossal, yet slight. He was vastly delicate. His eyes and something about his face grew finer--grew, as

people say, "interesting." His hair, after one cutting, began to tangle into a mat. "It's the degenerate strain coming out in him," said the parish doctor, marking these things, but just how far he was right in that, and just how far the youngster's lapse from ideal healthfulness was the result of living entirely in a whitewashed barn upon Lady Wondershoot's sense of charity tempered by justice, is open to question.

The photographs of him that present him from three to six show him developing into a round-eyed, flaxen-haired youngster with a truncated nose and a friendly stare. There lurks about his lips that never very remote promise of a smile that all the photographs of the early giant children display. In summer he wears loose garments of ticking tacked together with string; there is usually one of those straw baskets upon his head that workmen use for their tools, and he is barefooted. In one picture he grins broadly and holds a bitten melon in his hand.

The winter pictures are less numerous and satisfactory. He wears huge sabots--no doubt of beechwoods and (as fragments of the inscription "John Stickells, Iping," show) sacks for socks, and his trousers and jacket are unmistakably cut from the remains of a gaily patterned carpet. Underneath that there were rude swathings of flannel; five or six yards of flannel are tied comforter-fashion about his neck. The thing on his head is probably another sack. He stares, sometimes smiling, sometimes a little ruefully, at the camera. Even when he was only five years old, one sees that half whimsical wrinkling over his soft brown eyes that characterised his face.

He was from the first, the Vicar always declared, a terrible nuisance about the village. He seems to have had a proportionate impulse to play, much curiosity and sociability, and in addition there was a certain craving within him--I grieve to say--for more to eat. In spite of what Mrs. Greenfield called an "excessively generous" allowance of food from Lady Wondershoot, he displayed what the doctor perceived at once was the "Criminal Appetite." It carries out only too completely Lady Wondershoot's worst experiences of the lower classes--that in spite of an allowance of nourishment inordinately beyond what is known to be the maximum necessity even of an adult human being, the creature was found to steal. And what he stole he ate with an inelegant voracity. His great hand would come over garden walls; he would covet the very bread in the bakers' carts. Cheeses went from Marlow's store loft, and never a pig trough was safe from him. Some farmer walking over his field of swedes would find the great spoor of his feet and the evidence of his nibbling hunger--a root picked here, a root picked there, and the holes, with childish cunning, heavily erased. He ate a swede as one devours a radish. He would stand and eat apples from a tree, if no one was about, as normal children eat blackberries from a bush. In one way at any rate this shortness of provisions was good for the peace of Cheasing Eyebright--for many years he ate up every grain very nearly of the Food of the Gods that was given him....

Indisputably the child was troublesome and out of place, "He was always about," the Vicar used to say. He could not go to school; he could not

go to church by virtue of the obvious limitations of its cubical content. There was some attempt to satisfy the spirit of that "most foolish and destructive law"--I quote the Vicar--the Elementary Education Act of 1870, by getting him to sit outside the open window while instruction was going on within. But his presence there destroyed the discipline of the other children. They were always popping up and peering at him, and every time he spoke they laughed together. His voice was so odd! So they let him stay away.

Nor did they persist in pressing him to come to church, for his vast proportions were of little help to devotion. Yet there they might have had an easier task; there are good reasons for guessing there were the germs of religious feeling somewhere in that big carcase. The music perhaps drew him. He was often in the churchyard on a Sunday morning, picking his way softly among the graves after the congregation had gone in, and he would sit the whole service out beside the porch, listening as one listens outside a hive of bees.

At first he showed a certain want of tact; the people inside would hear his great feet crunch restlessly round their place of worship, or become aware of his dim face peering in through the stained glass, half curious, half envious, and at times some simple hymn would catch him unawares, and he would howl lugubriously in a gigantic attempt at unison. Whereupon little Sloppet, who was organ-blower and verger and beadle and sexton and bell-ringer on Sundays, besides being postman and chimney-sweep all the week, would go out very briskly and valiantly and

send him mournfully away. Sloppet, I am glad to say, felt it--in his more thoughtful moments at any rate. It was like sending a dog home when you start out for a walk, he told me.

But the intellectual and moral training of young Caddles, though fragmentary, was explicit. From the first, Vicar, mother, and all the world, combined to make it clear to him that his giant strength was not for use. It was a misfortune that he had to make the best of. He had to mind what was told him, do what was set him, be careful never to break anything nor hurt anything. Particularly he must not go treading on things or jostling against things or jumping about. He had to salute the gentlefolks respectful and be grateful for the food and clothing they spared him out of their riches. And he learnt all these things submissively, being by nature and habit a teachable creature and only by food and accident gigantic.

For Lady Wondershoot, in these early days, he displayed the profoundest awe. She found she could talk to him best when she was in short skirts and had her dog-whip, and she gesticulated with that and was always a little contemptuous and shrill. But sometimes the Vicar played master--a minute, middle-aged, rather breathless David pelting a childish Goliath with reproof and reproach and dictatorial command. The monster was now so big that it seems it was impossible for any one to remember he was after all only a child of seven, with all a child's desire for notice and amusement and fresh experience, with all a child's craving for response, attention and affection, and all a child's capacity for

dependence and unrestricted dulness and misery.

The Vicar, walking down the village road some sunlit morning, would encounter an ungainly eighteen feet of the Inexplicable, as fantastic and unpleasant to him as some new form of Dissent, as it padded fitfully along with craning neck, seeking, always seeking the two primary needs of childhood--something to eat and something with which to play.

There would come a look of furtive respect into the creature's eyes and an attempt to touch the matted forelock.

In a limited way the Vicar had an imagination--at any rate, the remains of one--and with young Caddles it took the line of developing the huge possibilities of personal injury such vast muscles must possess. Suppose a sudden madness--! Suppose a mere lapse into disrespect--! However, the truly brave man is not the man who does not feel fear but the man who overcomes it. Every time and always the Vicar got his imagination under. And he used always to address young Caddles stoutly in a good clear service tenor.

"Being a good boy, Albert Edward?"

And the young giant, edging closer to the wall and blushing deeply, would answer, "Yessir--trying."

"Mind you do," said the Vicar, and would go past him with at most a

slight acceleration of his breathing. And out of respect for his manhood he made it a rule, whatever he might fancy, never to look back at the danger, when once it was passed.

In a fitful manner the Vicar would give young Caddles private tuition. He never taught the monster to read--it was not needed; but he taught him the more important points of the Catechism--his duty to his neighbour for example, and of that Deity who would punish Caddles with extreme vindictiveness if ever he ventured to disobey the Vicar and Lady Wondershoot. The lessons would go on in the Vicar's yard, and passers-by would hear that great cranky childish voice droning out the essential teachings of the Established Church.

"To onner 'n 'bey the King and allooer put 'nthority under 'im. To s'bmit meself t'all my gov'ners, teachers, spir'shall pastors an' masters. To order myself lowly 'n rev'rently t'all my betters--"

Presently it became evident that the effect of the growing giant on unaccustomed horses was like that of a camel, and he was told to keep off the highroad, not only near the shrubbery (where the oafish smile over the wall had exasperated her ladyship extremely), but altogether. That law he never completely obeyed, because of the vast interest the highroad had for him. But it turned what had been his constant resort into a stolen pleasure. He was limited at last almost entirely to old pasture and the Downs.

I do not know what he would have done if it had not been for the Downs. There there were spaces where he might wander for miles, and over these spaces he wandered. He would pick branches from trees and make insane vast nosegays there until he was forbidden, take up sheep and put them in neat rows, from which they immediately wandered (at this he invariably laughed very heartily), until he was forbidden, dig away the turf, great wanton holes, until he was forbidden....

He would wander over the Downs as far as the hill above Wreckstone, but not farther, because there he came upon cultivated land, and the people, by reason of his depredations upon their root-crops, and inspired moreover by a sort of hostile timidity his big unkempt appearance frequently evoked, always came out against him with yapping dogs to drive him away. They would threaten him and lash at him with cart whips. I have heard that they would sometimes fire at him with shot guns. And in the other direction he ranged within sight of Hickleybrow. From above Thursley Hanger he could get a glimpse of the London, Chatham, and Dover railway, but ploughed fields and a suspicious hamlet prevented his nearer access.

And after a time there came boards--great boards with red letters that barred him in every direction. He could not read what the letters said: "Out of Bounds," but in a little while he understood. He was often to be seen in those days, by the railway passengers, sitting, chin on knees, perched up on the Down hard by the Thursley chalk pits, where afterwards he was set working. The train seemed to inspire a dim emotion of

friendliness in him, and sometimes he would wave an enormous hand at it, and sometimes give it a rustic incoherent hail.

"Big," the peering passenger would say. "One of these Boom children. They say, Sir, quite unable to do anything for itself--little better than an idiot in fact, and a great burden on the locality."

"Parents quite poor, I'm told."

"Lives on the charity of the local gentry."

Every one would stare intelligently at that distant squatting monstrous figure for a space.

"Good thing that was put a stop to," some spacious thinking mind would suggest. "Nice to 'ave a few thousand of them on the rates, eh?"

And usually there was some one wise enough to tell this philosopher: "You're about Right there, Sir," in hearty tones.

II.

He had his bad days.

There was, for example, that trouble with the river.

He made little boats out of whole newspapers, an art he learnt by watching the Spender boy, and he set them sailing down the stream--great paper cocked-hats. When they vanished under the bridge which marks the boundary of the strictly private grounds about Eyebright House, he would give a great shout and run round and across Tormat's new field--Lord! how Tormat's pigs did scamper, to be sure, and turn their good fat into lean muscle!--and so to meet his boats by the ford. Right across the nearer lawns these paper boats of his used to go, right in front of Eyebright House, right under Lady Wondershoot's eyes! Disorganising folded newspapers! A pretty thing!

Gathering enterprise from impunity, he began babyish hydraulic engineering. He delved a huge port for his paper fleets with an old shed door that served him as a spade, and, no one chancing to observe his operations just then, he devised an ingenious canal that incidentally flooded Lady Wondershoot's ice-house, and finally he dammed the river. He dammed it right across with a few vigorous doorfuls of earth--he must have worked like an avalanche--and down came a most amazing spate through the shrubbery and washed away Miss Spinks and her easel and the most promising water-colour sketch she had ever begun, or, at any rate, it washed away her easel and left her wet to the knees and dismally tucked up in flight to the house, and thence the waters rushed through the kitchen garden, and so by the green door into the lane and down into the riverbed again by Short's ditch.

Meanwhile, the Vicar, interrupted in conversation with the blacksmith, was amazed to see distressful stranded fish leaping out of a few residual pools, and heaped green weed in the bed of the stream, where ten minutes before there had been eight feet and more of clear cool water.

After that, horrified at his own consequences, young Caddles fled his home for two days and nights. He returned only at the insistent call of hunger, to bear with stoical calm an amount of violent scolding that was more in proportion to his size than anything else that had ever before fallen to his lot in the Happy Village.

III.

Immediately after that affair Lady Wondershoot, casting about for exemplary additions to the abuse and fastings she had inflicted, issued a Ukase. She issued it first to her butler, and very suddenly, so that she made him jump. He was clearing away the breakfast things, and she was staring out of the tall window on the terrace where the fawns would come to be fed. "Jobbet," she said, in her most imperial voice--"Jobbet, this Thing must work for its living."

And she made it quite clear not only to Jobbet (which was easy), but to every one else in the village, including young Caddles, that in this matter, as in all things, she meant what she said.

"Keep him employed," said Lady Wondershoot. "That's the tip for Master Caddles."

"It's the Tip, I fancy, for all Humanity," said the Vicar. "The simple duties, the modest round, seed-time and harvest--"

"Exactly," said Lady Wondershoot. "What I always say. Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do. At any rate among the labouring classes. We bring up our under-housemaids on that principle, always. What shall we set him to do?"

That was a little difficult. They thought of many things, and meanwhile they broke him in to labour a bit by using him instead of a horse messenger to carry telegrams and notes when extra speed was needed, and he also carried luggage and packing-cases and things of that sort very conveniently in a big net they found for him. He seemed to like employment, regarding it as a sort of game, and Kinkle, Lady Wondershoot's agent, seeing him shift a rockery for her one day, was struck by the brilliant idea of putting him into her chalk quarry at Thursley Hanger, hard by Hickleybrow. This idea was carried out, and it seemed they had settled his problem.

He worked in the chalk pit, at first with the zest of a playing child, and afterwards with an effect of habit--delving, loading, doing all the haulage of the trucks, running the full ones down the lines towards the

siding, and hauling the empty ones up by the wire of a great windlass--working the entire quarry at last single-handed.

I am told that Kinkle made a very good thing indeed out of him for Lady Wondershoot, consuming as he did scarcely anything but his food, though that never restrained her denunciation of "the Creature" as a gigantic parasite upon her charity....

At that time he used to wear a sort of smock of sacking, trousers of patched leather, and iron-shod sabots. Over his head was sometimes a queer thing--a worn-out beehive straw chair it was, but usually he went bareheaded. He would be moving about the pit with a powerful deliberation, and the Vicar on his constitutional round would get there about midday to find him shamefully eating his vast need of food with his back to all the world.

His food was brought to him every day, a mess of grain in the husk, in a truck--a small railway truck, like one of the trucks he was perpetually filling with chalk, and this load he used to char in an old limekiln and then devour. Sometimes he would mix with it a bag of sugar. Sometimes he would sit licking a lump of such salt as is given to cows, or eating a huge lump of dates, stones and all, such as one sees in London on barrows. For drink he walked to the rivulet beyond the burnt-out site of the Experimental Farm at Hickleybrow and put down his face to the stream. It was from his drinking in that way after eating that the Food of the Gods did at last get loose, spreading first of all in huge weeds

from the river-side, then in big frogs, bigger trout and stranding carp, and at last in a fantastic exuberance of vegetation all over the little valley.

And after a year or so the queer monstrous grub things in the field before the blacksmith's grew so big and developed into such frightful skipjacks and cockchafers--motor cockchafers the boys called them--that they drove Lady Wondershoot abroad.

IV.

But soon the Food was to enter upon a new phase of its work in him. In spite of the simple instructions of the Vicar--instructions intended to round off the modest natural life befitting a giant peasant, in the most complete and final manner--he began to ask questions, to inquire into things, to think. As he grew from boyhood to adolescence it became increasingly evident that his mind had processes of its own--out of the Vicar's control. The Vicar did his best to ignore this distressing phenomenon, but still--he could feel it there.

The young giant's material for thought lay about him. Quite involuntarily, with his spacious views, his constant overlooking of things, he must have seen a good deal of human life, and as it grew clearer to him that he too, save for this clumsy greatness of his, was also human, he must have come to realise more and more just how much was

shut against him by his melancholy distinction. The sociable hum of the school, the mystery of religion that was partaken in such finery, and which exhaled so sweet a strain of melody, the jovial chorusing from the Inn, the warmly glowing rooms, candle-lit and fire-lit, into which he peered out of the darkness, or again the shouting excitement, the vigour of flannelled exercise upon some imperfectly understood issue that centred about the cricket-field--all these things must have cried aloud to his companionable heart. It would seem that as his adolescence crept upon him, he began to take a very considerable interest in the proceedings of lovers, in those preferences and pairings, those close intimacies that are so cardinal in life.

One Sunday, just about that hour when the stars and the bats and the passions of rural life come out, there chanced to be a young couple "kissing each other a bit" in Love Lane, the deep hedged lane that runs out back towards the Upper Lodge. They were giving their little emotions play, as secure in the warm still twilight as any lovers could be. The only conceivable interruption they thought possible must come pacing visibly up the lane; the twelve-foot hedge towards the silent Downs seemed to them an absolute guarantee.

Then suddenly--incredibly--they were lifted and drawn apart.

They discovered themselves held up, each with a finger and thumb under the armpits, and with the perplexed brown eyes of young Caddles scanning their warm flushed faces. They were naturally dumb with the emotions of

their situation.

"Why do you like doing that?" asked young Caddles.

I gather the embarrassment continued until the swain remembering his manhood, vehemently, with loud shouts, threats, and virile blasphemies, such as became the occasion, bade young Caddles under penalties put them down. Whereupon young Caddles, remembering his manners, did put them down politely and very carefully, and conveniently near for a resumption of their embraces, and having hesitated above them for a while, vanished again into the twilight ...

"But I felt precious silly," the swain confided to me. "We couldn't 'ardly look at one another--bein' caught like that.

"Kissing we was--you know.

"And the cur'ous thing is, she blamed it all on to me," said the swain.

"Flew out something outrageous, and wouldn't 'ardly speak to me all the way 'ome...."

The giant was embarking upon investigations, there could be no doubt. His mind, it became manifest, was throwing up questions. He put them to few people as yet, but they troubled him. His mother, one gathers, sometimes came in for cross-examination.

He used to come into the yard behind his mother's cottage, and, after a careful inspection of the ground for hens and chicks, he would sit down slowly with his back against the barn. In a minute the chicks, who liked him, would be pecking all over him at the mossy chalk-mud in the seams of his clothing, and if it was blowing up for wet, Mrs. Caddles' kitten, who never lost her confidence in him, would assume a sinuous form and start scampering into the cottage, up to the kitchen fender, round, out, up his leg, up his body, right up to his shoulder, meditative moment, and then scat! back again, and so on. Sometimes she would stick her claws in his face out of sheer gaiety of heart, but he never dared to touch her because of the uncertain weight of his hand upon a creature so frail. Besides, he rather liked to be tickled. And after a time he would put some clumsy questions to his mother.

"Mother," he would say, "if it's good to work, why doesn't every one work?"

His mother would look up at him and answer, "It's good for the likes of us."

He would meditate, "Why?"

And going unanswered, "What's work for, mother? Why do I cut chalk and you wash clothes, day after day, while Lady Wondershoot goes about in her carriage, mother, and travels off to those beautiful foreign

countries you and I mustn't see, mother?"

"She's a lady," said Mrs. Caddles.

"Oh," said young Caddles, and meditated profoundly.

"If there wasn't gentlefolks to make work for us to do," said Mrs. Caddles, "how should we poor people get a living?"

This had to be digested.

"Mother," he tried again; "if there wasn't any gentlefolks, wouldn't things belong to people like me and you, and if they did--"

"Lord sakes and drat the Boy!" Mrs. Caddles would say--she had with the help of a good memory become quite a florid and vigorous individuality since Mrs. Skinner died. "Since your poor dear grandma was took, there's no abiding you. Don't you arst no questions and you won't be told no lies. If once I was to start out answerin' you serious, y'r father 'd 'ave to go' and arst some one else for 'is supper--let alone finishing the washin'."

"All right, mother," he would say, after a wondering stare at her. "I didn't mean to worry."

And he would go on thinking.

V.

He was thinking too four years after, when the Vicar, now no longer ripe but over-ripe, saw him for the last time of all. You figure the old gentleman visibly a little older now, slacker in his girth, a little coarsened and a little weakened in his thought and speech, with a quivering shakiness in his hand and a quivering shakiness in his convictions, but his eye still bright and merry for all the trouble the Food had caused his village and himself. He had been frightened at times and disturbed, but was he not alive still and the same still? and fifteen long years--a fair sample of eternity--had turned the trouble into use and wont.

"It was a disturbance, I admit," he would say, "and things are different--different in many ways. There was a time when a boy could weed, but now a man must go out with axe and crowbar--in some places down by the thickets at least. And it's a little strange still to us old-fashioned people for all this valley, even what used to be the river bed before they irrigated, to be under wheat--as it is this year--twenty-five feet high. They used the old-fashioned scythe here twenty years ago, and they would bring home the harvest on a wain--rejoicing--in a simple honest fashion. A little simple drunkenness, a little frank love-making, to conclude ... poor dear Lady Wondershoot--she didn't like these Innovations. Very conservative, poor

dear lady! A touch of the eighteenth century about her, I always Said. Her language for example ... Bluff vigour ...

"She died comparatively poor. These big weeds got into her garden. She was not one of these gardening women, but she liked her garden in order--things growing where they were planted and as they were planted--under control ... The way things grew was unexpected--upset her ideas ... She didn't like the perpetual invasion of this young monster--at last she began to fancy he was always gaping at her over her wall ... She didn't like his being nearly as high as her house ... Jarred with her sense of proportion. Poor dear lady! I had hoped she would last my time. It was the big cockchafers we had for a year or so that decided her. They came from the giant larvae--nasty things as big as rats--in the valley turf ...

"And the ants no doubt weighed with her also.

"Since everything was upset and there was no peace and quietness anywhere now, she said she thought she might just as well be at Monte Carlo as anywhere else. And she went.

"She played pretty boldly, I'm told. Died in a hotel there. Very sad end... Exile... Not--not what one considers meet... A natural leader of our English people... Uprooted. So I...

"Yet after all," harped the Vicar, "it comes to very little. A nuisance

of course. Children cannot run about so freely as they used to do, what with ant bites and so forth. Perhaps it's as well ... There used to be talk--as though this stuff would revolutionise everything ... But there is something that defies all these forces of the New ... I don't know of course. I'm not one of your modern philosophers--explain everything with ether and atoms. Evolution. Rubbish like that. What I mean is something the 'Ologies don't include. Matter of reason--not understanding. Ripe wisdom. Human nature. Aere perennius. ... Call it what you will."

And so at last it came to the last time.

The Vicar had no intimation of what lay so close upon him. He did his customary walk, over by Farthing Down, as he had done it for more than a score of years, and so to the place whence he would watch young Caddles. He did the rise over by the chalk-pit crest a little puffily--he had long since lost the Muscular Christian stride of early days; but Caddles was not at his work, and then, as he skirted the thicket of giant bracken that was beginning to obscure and overshadow the Hanger, he came upon the monster's huge form seated on the hill--brooding as it were upon the world. Caddles' knees were drawn up, his cheek was on his hand, his head a little aslant. He sat with his shoulder towards the Vicar, so that those perplexed eyes could not be seen. He must have been thinking very intently--at any rate he was sitting very still ...

He never turned round. He never knew that the Vicar, who had played so

large a part in shaping his life, looked then at him for the very last of innumerable times--did not know even that he was there. (So it is so many partings happen.) The Vicar was struck at the time by the fact that, after all, no one on earth had the slightest idea of what this great monster thought about when he saw fit to rest from his labours. But he was too indolent to follow up that new theme that day; he fell back from its suggestion into his older grooves of thought.

"Aere-perennius," he whispered, walking slowly homeward by a path that no longer ran straight athwart the turf after its former fashion, but wound circuitously to avoid new sprung tussocks of giant grass. "No! nothing is changed. Dimensions are nothing. The simple round, the common way--"

And that night, quite painlessly, and all unknowing, he himself went the common way--out of this Mystery of Change he had spent his life in denying.

They buried him in the churchyard of Cheasing Eyebright, near to the largest yew, and the modest tombstone bearing his epitaph--it ended with: Ut in Principio, nunc est et semper--was almost immediately hidden from the eye of man by a spread of giant, grey tasselled grass too stout for scythe or sheep, that came sweeping like a fog over the village out of the germinating moisture of the valley meadows in which the Food of the Gods had been working.