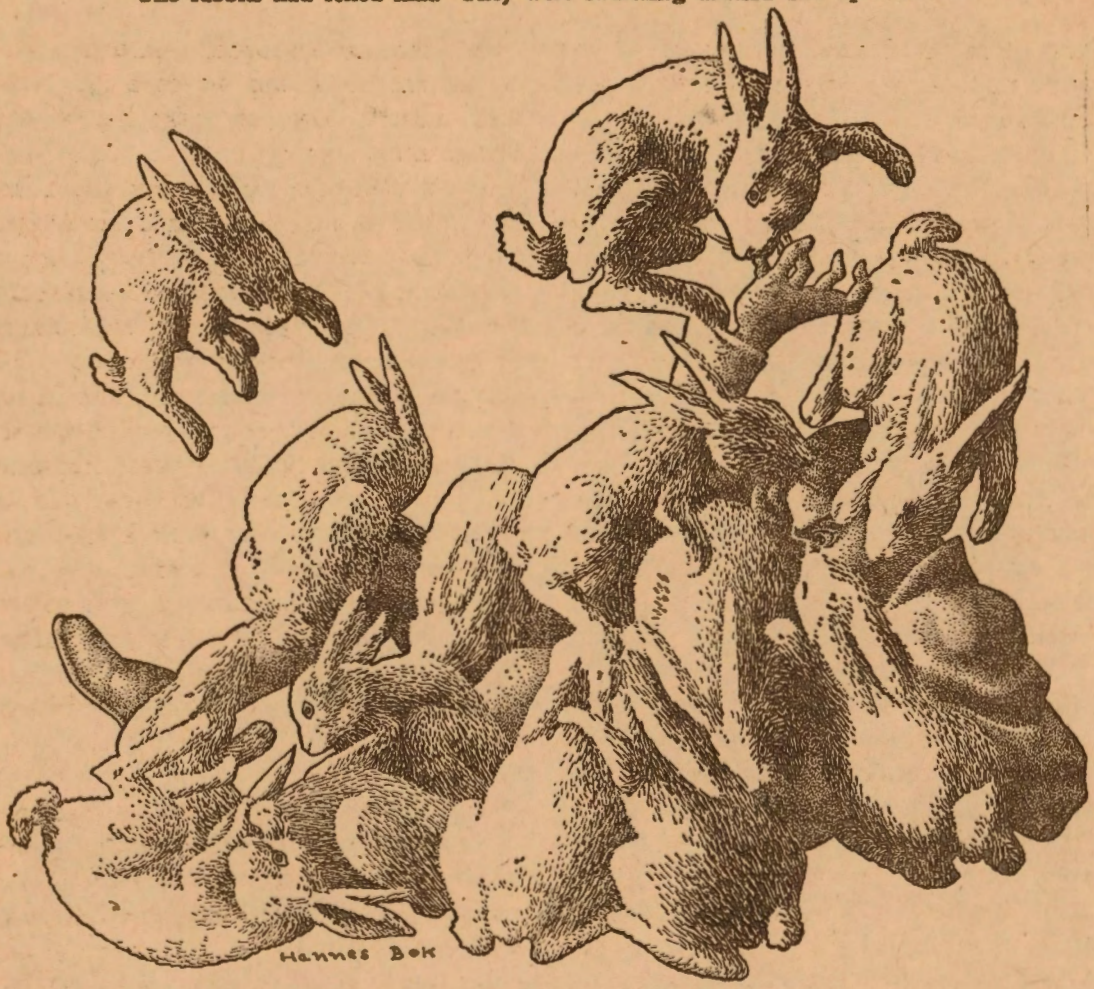
"The rabbits had felled him. They were swarming around and upon him."



The Dreadful Rabbits

By GANS T. FIELD

One hardly thinks of rabbits as murderous wild beasts, and yet— The author of "The Witch's Cat" and "Fearful Rock" has a theory.

". . . there are a hundred things one has to know, which we understand and you don't, as yet. I mean passwords, and signs, and sayings which have power and effect, and plants you carry in your pocket, and verses you repeat, and dodges and tricks you practise; all simple enough when you know them, but they've got to be known. . . ."

—Kenneth Grahame,
The Wind in the Willows

AT A POINT about four miles out of Crispinville, a lean-looking rabbit, with black-and-white smudgings on the gray of his ears and long hind legs, came flopping out on the pavement and paused in full way of the car. Morgan Pitts put on the brakes, drew out a handkerchief and mopped the summer

heat from his flushed, seamed brow. He said, with casual courtesy: "Howdy, Mister Rabbit!"

The animal immediately finished its crossing of the road, and sat up in a tussock of grass, gazing while Pitts started the car again. Judge Keith Hilary Pursuivant, big and blond and bespectacled, returned the gaze of those bulging black eyes. They seemed to have a green flash in them. He made no remark, but appeared deeply interested, and he was. He had come all the way to Crispinville for the very purpose of learning about the custom of rabbit-greeting.

After they rounded a curve and left the little town well out of sight, Judge Pursuivant ventured his query:

"How old is that custom of speaking to rabbits, Mr. Pitts? And how did it start?"

Pitts scratched his grizzled head. He was little and spry-looking, with a face as red as a rooster's comb. "Dunno, Judge Pursuivant. Ain't kept up much on things, been pretty busy with my work. But I guess it's been goin' on since the Year One. . . ." He took a hand from the wheel and pointed ahead. "There's my place, up yonder, next to Hungry Hill. Your friend's rented a room there for you. You and him are my only boarders this summer."

A phrase had caught the judge's ear. "Hungry Hill?" he repeated, and gazed at the great green swelling, with its thatchy covering of evergreen brush and thicket. "It doesn't look hungry."

"I think that's the old Injun name. And there's a cave or pit, like an open mouth—" The driver broke off. "Well, here we are, getting there."

The house nestled comfortably at the foot of the big hill, with plump-looking trees around it—a house old and modest, but well built and well kept, with a stable and barn and rail-enclosed stock pen behind.

As the car stopped, someone came out on the porch and waved a long arm, then hurried down to shake hands with Pursuivant.

It was Ransome. He looked much improved in health and spirits since Pursuivant had last seen him, at New York in early spring. The doctors had apparently sent him to the right part of the country to get over his nervous breakdown. He was still gaunt, but there was color in his flat cheeks and sparkle in the dark eyes set deep under the bushy brows. Ransome was forty and looked younger, with a square, shallow jaw and black hair and mustache like curls of astrakhan.

"I saw your train come in, over yonder along the horizon," he told the judge, "and I sat out here to wait for Mr. Pitts to bring you back. Come on, both of you, and have a drink."

THEY followed him into a pleasant front room, with ancient flower-figured paper and white-painted woodwork, and massive old furniture that was older and better preserved than any of them. Ransome had set out a tray, with bottles, glasses, and a bowl of cracked ice.

"I thought that rabbit legend would fetch you when I wrote to you about it," he said to Pursuivant. "You collect such things, don't you? Hard to believe—but I've seen the bunny greeted on every road and path in Crispinville Township."

"Mr. Pitts here told me something about it," said Pursuivant. "Not much, though—not as much as I'd like to hear."

"Nobody seems to know much about it," Ransome said, pouring. "It's pretty well a local thing. Over in the next county, people hadn't even heard of it—said I was making it up. There's ice here, gentlemen. Take it or leave it?"

"Take it," said Pitts, with relish.

"Leave it," said Pursuivant, "and not much soda. . . . If you haven't any infor-

mation, Ransome, you must have a theory. You skeptics always have theories."

Ransome poured whiskey and spurted soda into the glasses. "Hnnn," he said, "might be a Negro thing—this used to be slave territory. One storekeeper in Crispinville thinks it may have come from the first English colonists; again, it might be Indian. But what keeps it so local? Can't you tell us, Pitts?"

"Not me," said Pitts, his eyes on the dewy glass held out to him.

They all drank. Pursuivant wiped his blond mustache. His spectacles were full of thoughtful lights.

"The rabbit's a great figure in folklore," he observed. "A witch named Julian Cox was tried in England in the 1660's, for turning into a rabbit. And Jules de Grandin once told me that southern French will turn back from a day's work because a hare hopped across their trail—bad luck, like a black cat."

"Never heard that," rejoined Ransome. "Of course, de Grandin's a fable-collector, like you. Of course, I read Uncle Remus when I was a boy—plenty of rabbit stuff there."

"And I used to carry the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit for luck," contributed Pitts, sipping at his highball.

Pursuivant was also turning over the Uncle Remus tales in his mind. They were impressive and sometimes grim, for all the bright humor of Joel Chandler Harris. Br'er Rabbit, seemingly so harmless and plausible, had tricked all the larger and fiercer creatures in self-defense, or for profit, or for mere cruel fun; hadn't Br'er Wolf been deluded into killing his own children, and Br'er Fox shunted into a fire so that all his progeny looked singed, down into the present day?

"Don't you think," Ransome was saying, "that you're paying too much attention to a silly little custom—a triviality?"

"Hey," protested Pitts, taking his nose from his glass, "it ain't silly when it's a township ordinance—you can't even hunt rabbits."

"And there are no trivialities in life, as Sherlock Holmes or somebody said," added Pursuivant. "As Mr. Pitts suggests, there must be a good reason for making the rule, and for observing it as well."

Ransome laughed loudly. His own drink had been long and strong, and he was at the bottom of it. "Time for me to do some missionary work," said he. Rising, he took two objects from the table.

They were the stock and barrels of an excellent shotgun, and they snicked neatly together in his knowing hands. He grinned above the weapon. "It's summer, and rabbit's aren't fit to eat, but just for the sake of smashing a superstition—" And he fed two shells into the double breech.

Pitts got up. "Better not do it, Mr. Ransome. It's 'gainst the law."

"I'll pay any fine, or whatever," laughed Ransome.

Pursuivant also rose, and set down his empty glass. "I want to go back to town and look into the community records. I'll leave my suitcase, and be back before sundown."

"Shall I run you back in the car?" offered Pitts.

"No, thanks. It's fine weather and lovely country, and only four miles. I'll walk." Pursuivant turned to Ransome. "Promise me you won't go rabbit-hunting until I return."

"Oh, all right," Ransome agreed, and stood the gun in a corner. He saw the judge to the door.

CRISPINVILLE was not the county seat, but Pursuivant knew that there would be a township trustee, a clerk and a constable. When he reached the ham-

let, he approved once again the well-painted old houses and the quaint little stores with canopy-like arcades jutting out over the wooden sidewalk, admired the square-steepled church that dominated all. He estimated that what Pitts called "the Year One" for this community would be well before the middle of the Eighteenth Century.

"There were settlers here before Daniel Boone's time," he thought, and inquired for the home of the township clerk. Finding it, he introduced himself.

The clerk was a frail ancient named Simmons, who prided himself on having most of his teeth and needing no spectacles. He was vague about old records, and only when Pursuivant pleaded did he pry into the clutter of files and trunks that jammed a rear room of his house.

"I been the Chrispinville clerk for forty-four years," he grumbled, "and nobody never asked to see them original papers. Huh, they must be in this here oldest chest."

The oldest chest was very old indeed, made of unpainted hard wood from which a covering of rawhide was all but rotted away. Mr. Simmons probed and fiddled in the rusty lock with a brass key that might have gone with Noah's strong box, once or twice calling on heaven to witness his displeasure that the guards did not turn; but then Pursuivant stepped to his side and lifted the lid with a creak of the hinges—the lock had never been fastened. Inside lay papers, yellow and dusty, tied into bundles with antediluvian-looking twine. Simmons examined one handful, then another.

"Yep, these is the old records. Huh, the oldest bunch will be on the bottom, I expect." He dug down, and brought up a sheaf. "This is what you'll want, Judge."

Pursuivant took the papers, unfastened the string, and carefully unfolded them to avoid breaking at the creases. They were covered with writing in rusty ink. At the head of the first was printed in block letters, crude and archaic but forceful:

RECORDES OF
Yᵉ TOWN COUNCIL OF CRISPINVILLE,
FOUNDED Yis DAY Ye 14 JUNE,
ANNO REGNII GEORGII II
NONO

The ninth year of the region of George II; Pursuivant computed that it would be 1735 when Crispinville was founded as a formal community. The clerk let him carry the documents into the dining-room and spread them on the top of the table.

THE paper on which the records had been written was not of the best, and two centuries had made it brittle and teatan; but the first clerk of the township had written fluently and in a good bold hand, with all the underlinings and capitalizations of his age. There was a list of names, with official titles opposite, some half-dozen members of that original council. Then, as the first item of history:

> This day we, the Chosen Council of the Town of *Crispinville,* did pay to certain Indians the Price agreed upon for the Lands whereon our Company will live and plant and reap. . . .

The price was itemized, and Pursuivant saw that, as usual in such matters, the Indians had all the worst of it—gaudy cheap cloth, beads, rickety hatchets and knives, one or two muskets and a horn of powder, and certain bottles of raw New England rum. The screed went on, and suddenly Pursuivant was aware that, upon the very threshold of his researches, he had found the origin of the custom he was tracing:

> . . . The Indians engaging on their Part to respect our Rights and Boundaries and to keep the Peace, asking only that we observe their Manner of (as our Interpreter putteth) *Greeting the Hare;* that is, we shall not hunt Hares nor snare them, but upon meeting

them, salute and bespeak them as apertly as it were a *Christian Man*, and not a silly Hare.

To this last, certain of our Company did take Exception, and notably *Capt. Scadlock*, that such Custom was Childish and Fond; but the Chief Person of the Savages, him they call *King Mosh*, did bide firm, saying that the Rabbit was the *Ototemon* of their People and sacred; and further that if we pledged not our Word to continue their Custom, they would never sell the Land, be the Price paid Ten Times Over. And finally the *Rev. Mr. Horton*, our Minister of *God*, did earnestly pray us to give over, shewing that we had Precedent in that the First Missionaries to *Britain* did respect and observe certain Festivals and Useages of the old Heathen; saying further that, right so as we took pity of these simple Indians their Beliefs, right so would they incline to stand our Friends. And so it was agreed upon both Sides, we all signing our Names, saving only *Capt. Scadlock*, and the Matter placed of Record and made a Rule whereby to Govern and guide the Town henceforth.

Pursuivant smiled in his mustache as he read, a smile of scholarly relish. He could see in his mind's eye that meeting, the stark jack-booted colonists and the brown, insistent savages. King Mosh—he had spoken out well for his people and faith, even against Captain Scadlock, who undoubtedly was the chief of the colony's armed forces; and the minister, Mr. Horton, had shown rare tact and liberality—perhaps, good man, he had hoped for converts among those Indians on whose behalf he spoke.

But that hope had been in vain, Pursuivant saw as he read further in the records. Less than a year later there had been a fight, and it had gone against the Indians. The same clerk wrote:

. . . and a Searching Party, following the tracks of *Captain Scadlock* upon the Second Day after his Vanishment, did trace him to that Hill which the Indians do call *Gontolah* (that is, the *Hungry Hill*). . . .

"Hello!" muttered Pursuivant, half aloud. "That's the hill back of Pitt's place!"

. . . and did find him, at the Mouth of the Cave near the Summit; and he had perished miserably, of many small Wounds, so thick upon him that no Inch of his Skin remained whole, nor did any Jot of his Blood remain unto him. And the Indians swore by their false gods that he came to his Death for failing to *greet the Hare*, rather pursuing and slaying Hares upon the Hill; which we took as meaning to say, that they themselves had slain the Captain. Wherefore, falling to our Arms. . . .

The remainder of the account was unsavory, and dealt with a one-sided conflict. The dead Indians were scalped, it seems, and the prisoners taken all hanged. A few survived and escaped the carnage. That had finished the savages in the vicinity. Only the name of the hill, and the rabbit-greeting, remained to memorialize them.

At this moment, the clerk came in and tapped his shoulder.

"Judge," he said, "here's Morgan Pitts come to find you."

Pursuivant looked up, his big forefinger marking the place on the old sheet of paper. Pitts came in, his eyes wide with serious wonder. "Judge Pursuivant," he said, "Mr. Ransome hasn't come back."

"Hasn't come back from where?"

"He went hunting for a rabbit—"

Simmons made a choking sound of protest, and Pursuivant sprang to his feet, quick as a cat for all his bulk. "Hunting for a rabbit? He promised me—"

Pitts nodded glumly. "Yes, sir, I know he did. But when you left, Mr. Ransome, he took his gun and went out. Said he'd be back in fifteen minutes. But"—the man's lips were quivering—"but he ain't. I think, Judge, you better come."

The old records of Crispinville, telling of superstition and pioneering and grim battle, had cracked and crumbled in Pursuivant's clenching hands. He laid down the remains.

"Have you brought your car, Mr. Pitts? All right, we'll drive back together."

THE house was still empty when they got there. Pursuivant moved away through the back yard, across a meadow and among brush and small trees at the foot of the hillside. It was as bright and hot as a tropical seashore. The judge's blue eyes had found and followed the trail of Ransome's tennis shoes. Pitts followed just behind.

"It's bad stuff, hunting rabbits," he chattered. "Folks around here don't believe in it—and when people don't believe—"

"It's best to string along with such beliefs, I agree," finished Pursuivant for him. "Look, Mr. Pitts. He found a rabbit trail here—fresh."

They could see that Ransome had squatted down above the pattern of little paw-prints in the leaf-mold; his toes only made deep depressions, and beside them was the narrow oval where he had rested the gun-stock. Then he had risen and followed the game slantwise up the hill. Pursuivant and Pitts went up after him, through dragging belts and tangles of brush, some of it thorny. Pitts spoke again:

"Look, Judge." He pointed with a knobby old forefinger to a whole clutter of tracks. "More rabbits—Mr. Ransome's hunting a mess of them."

The judge's shaggy head shook. "I'm afraid not. See here—some of the paw-prints fall over Mr. Ransome's shoe-marks. This bunch—flock—whatever you call a number of rabbits—it came along later. Mr. Ransome is hunting only that first one that made the lone trail."

"I see," said Pitts softly. "I see; and these other rabbits—are—*hunting Mr. Ransome!*"

IT WAS hotter than they had thought, as they pushed through one more clump of brambly growth, and came to where hunters and hunted had met.

They had not the time nor the wish to read more than the essentials of the story written in large tracks and small upon the soft, spurned earth. Pursuivant began talking swiftly, pointing here and there.

"Look! Ransome stopped and, probably, aimed his gun. He was looking yonder, perhaps at that dark hollow place among those vine-grown saplings. The rabbit must have stopped there." He crossed over and peered. "Yes—see! The tracks were turned toward Ransome. It stopped and turned on its heels, to look at him."

"Like it was mocking him," said Pitts, and swallowed hard.

Pursuivant looked at the leaves behind the tracks. They were cut to pieces by shot—Ransome must have fired both barrels at that rabbit as it sat up to gaze at him. And then—

Pitts was down on one knee. "They swarmed over him as he fired!" he cried shakily. "Look, Judge—they rushed him from behind, right here!"

Pursuivant made a step and bent to pick up something from a patch of leafy weeds. "His gun!" he said, and snapped open the breech. "Both barrels were fired—he must have thrown it at them. Then he was unarmed."

He returned to where Pitts kneeled. The flurry of tracks seemed to say that Ransome had fallen, as under the impact of many missiles; what those missiles were could be deduced from the strength of certain hind-leg marks, telling of how rabbits had sprung straight upward and at the face or chest. The gun still in his hand, Pursuivant stooped to make out what had happened to Ransome then.

Here were hand-prints, deeply driven, as though weight had been supported upon the palms. Here was the scrape of a dragged knee, and another, with repetitions beyond—yes, Ransome had crept upon his hands and knees, stunned, wretched, driven. For at either flank of

his trail were the trails of his little adversaries, herding and harrying him, toward the dark opening among the vines where he had seen and fired upon the quarry that was really a decoy.

"Poor Mr. Ransome," Pitts was saying. "He should have obeyed the law—you got to respect things like that, or—"

"Stay behind me," commanded Pursuivant, and bent, thrusting with the muzzle of the shotgun into the space among the vines.

Within was empty gloom, for here the hill rose abruptly under a masking of herbage, and in it was a cave.

"Gontolah—the Hungry Hill," remembered Pursuivant. Yes, as Pitts had said, this place looked like an open, starved mouth, a lune-shape hole with a flat rim of rock above and another below, like gaping lips. And something was wedged in that mouth-like cavern.

He forced himself to touch it. His fingers closed on a slack, damp wrist. With a heave and a scrape, he dragged the body into view.

Yes, it was Ransome, or what had been Ransome. Pursuivant knew him by the contours of that pounded, lacerated head, by the leanness of the blood-boltered body inside chopped-up rags.

Pitts whimpered as the thing came into the light.

"Poor Mr. Ransome," he said again. "Now I know how—*oh!*"

Pursuivant whirled like a top at that final gasp of horror. He saw, too, what Spencer had seen.

The spaces among the bushes along their back trail were full of rabbits, all lean and gray with black and white blazings on legs and ear-tips, and all a trifle larger than ordinary. Every eye in that horde was turned upon the two men, and the eyes of meat-eating animals. They were an army, moving concertedly and purposefully upon the judge and Pitts, who stood cut off with their backs to the cave.

Pursuivant's big fists tightened on Ransome's shotgun. He would not throw it, he told himself at once—clubbed, its metal-shod butt would smash these little assailants to rags. But Pitts was trying another weapon.

With eyes and outstretched hands he addressed himself to the foremost of the rabbits, the one that moved cautiously but steadily ahead of the press, like an officer leading troops in an orderly advance. He spoke, audibly and with a tremble of fear:

"H-howdy, Mister Rabbit!"

There was a momentary pause in the oncoming torrent of fur. A little eddy showed, then a parting in the ranks. They were making a way for Pitts to retreat through them, and he needed not a moment to make up his mind. He fairly darted along that open lane, which closed behind him. The expanse of fuzzy backs and upturned green eyes resolidified, and above it Pitts looked back at Pursuivant.

"Better say the words," he advised huskily. "They're closing in on you."

THEY converged slowly and smoothly, flowing like a puddle of grease—but grease scummed over with fur and green-black eyes, sprouting a meadow of ears. Pursuivant lifted the clubbed shotgun and set himself to strike. The leader-rabbit sprang suddenly at him. Pursuivant swung the gun, as a batter strikes at a ball. He could not miss—but the weapon swished thinly in the air, and the little sinewy body struck him at the base of the throat. A moment later more rabbits were springing at him—a dozen, a score, hundreds. His flailing with the gun did not find a single mark. He swayed under the bombardment, but kept his feet—he was stronger and bulkier than Ransome, he would take more battering to bring down—

"Say the words, Judge!" Pitts's voice

pleaded with him from beyond. "They ain't real rabbits—they'll finish you!"

Fighting, clawing at the rain of buffets, Pursuivant found his mind turning from the struggle to consideration of something else. What had the Indian, King Mosh, called the rabbit? *Ototemon.* Strange word. But with a familiar sound . . . suddenly he saw blue expanse, fringed with green. The sky among the treestops looked into his face, for he had come down upon his back. The rabbits had felled him. They were swarming around and upon him, their feet striking like great raindrops, incessantly and with precision —a rhythm that sapped his strength and his consciousness—again and again, on the same places.

How could he escape these airy blows and kicks? There seemed one way to crawl along—but it would lead to the cave, where Ransome had been. And once caught there, they'd have him. They'd dance upon him forever and forever, until he died, torn and bled to death by uncountable strokes—it would be like the falling of water upon a Chinese victim of the old drop-death—

"Say the words!" beseeched Pitts tearfully, his voice faint as an echo. "Say the words—howdy—"

Ototemon—the term meant something sacred to the Indians. And the minister, Mr. Horton, had gone on record as saying that the honest faith of savages could be respected, must be respected—

Somehow he got upon his feet, and lifted his hands as Pitts had done.

"Howdy," he mumbled thickly. "Howdy, Mister Rabbit."

And he stumbled and staggered away. Nothing prevented him. Pitts's hand caught his arm, supporting him. He was safe, being led downhill.

"Who'll believe?" he was saying to himself. "Who'll believe? . . ."

"Don't worry, Judge," Pitts replied. "We're all right now. And this has happened before—all the folks say that the rabbits kill people near that cave. When some stranger drops out of sight, the folks go look for them and bury them —it ain't thought strange any more—I'll get a couple of men from town to help me bring back Mr. Ransome—"

Pursuivant was content to leave it at that. Later he would write and make an inquiry of Dr. Trowbridge, de Grandin's friend and fellow-scholar of the occult.

TROWBRIDGE'S letter came after the judge had returned to New York.

My Dear Pursuivant:

The meaning of the word *ototemon* should betray itself because of the familiarity of its corruption—*totem.* It's Algonquin and, as well as I can establish, means a local sacrosanctity, generally embodied in some animal. A tribe or clan or community would claim that such animals were in reality the reincarnated spirits of dead ancestors, and full of supernatural power for good or evil.

I was sorry to hear about Ransome's death. Why are you so mysterious? De Grandin joins me in inviting you out to Huntingdon, to tell us about it. We have a strange story or two of our own that might intrigue you.

Yours, etc.,

And Trowbridge's almost indecipherable signature wound it up.

Pursuivant laid down the letter and reasoned himself out of any sense of defeat. He had wanted to respect the custom from the first, had blamed Ransome for defying it. Mr. Horton, the long-dead minister of Crispinville, had felt the same. *"We had precedent in that the first Missionaries to Britain did respect and observe certain festivals. . . ."* It might be heathen to greet a rabbit, yet it was part of formal and sincere religion. And when you were in Crispinville, you should do what the Crispinvillagers did.

Judge Pursuivant decided not to feel fouled by his experience. Only he would never look at a rabbit again, and keep his heart from thumping nervously.