



HORSERADISH AND BUTTERCUP TEA

There was considerable disquiet amongst the staff, when the authorities announced that Horseradish and Buttercup tea-bags were to be withdrawn immediately from sale. Analysis of the mortality rates amongst eighty- to ninety-year-olds had revealed a worrying increase in deaths amongst those who regularly imbibed this particular herbal concoction. A new study had been urgently commissioned by the Department for the Development of Health, Ageing-Well and Motorways (DfDHAM), to determine whether it was the horseradish, or the buttercup, or a combination of the two which had led to an increase in the numbers of deaths amongst nonagenarians in a picturesque village in Scotland. The herbal remedy had claimed the lives of three respected senior citizens - "the Bilston Three" as they were now known in the popular press - in the space of barely a year. All the evidence pointed to Horseradish and Buttercup Tea.

The beneficial effects of this herbal remedy had been known for centuries: restriction of the growth of nostril, ear-lobe and eyebrow hair in persons over the age of forty-nine. Additional benefits included a pronounced improvement in the management of hearing-aids. Minor side-effects, such as loss of short-term memory, intolerance of anyone younger than oneself, and many other things which I cannot now remember - all these were considered anecdotal at worst, and unproven at best. Most recent studies indicated that such side-effects were neither accelerated nor contained by the regular consumption of tea (see *Nature*, Nov 2002). However, the Bilston tragedy suggested that a precautionary principle be adopted.

At the Retirement Home for Commodians, the ban caused an immediate crisis. The matron swore and disappeared into her office to consider the contents of a bottle of Bollinger; the orderlies sat sadly in the store-room, smoking cannabis for its medical benefits and considering how best to deal with the likely consequences of the ban. The residents, for their part, sat bitterly in corners and grew hair from their nostrils.

Within three days, it was apparent that the staff of the Home were fighting a losing battle. No sooner had they dealt with the bushy eyebrows of old Mr Herriot, than hair from the lobes of Jimmy Reid, his avowed enemy sitting next to him, tripped them up. A young trainee nurse, on his first day at work, was almost lost in a twining, strangling mass of hair which snaked suddenly from the ear-lobes of old Professor Archibald as he shook his fist at *Ready, Steady, Cook!*. Only the swift intervention of a passing orderly saved the young man from horrible asphyxiation. The Professor was greatly displeased at the interruption to his programme, and scolded them for hours with epithets in Latin and Greek.

Dainty old dears became enveloped overnight in manes of wiry hair which sprouted from cheek, chin and jowl; small children, obliged to visit their ancient relatives on a Sunday afternoon, were observed screaming in terror before old ladies transformed into Were-Grannies of the Forest. Lady Cunningham MBE, the first European regulator of GTM (the Greenwich Time Mountain), who had sadly become irregular at the age of 98, was increasingly mistaken for her bearded husband, who visited every Wednesday, shortly after *A Question of Sport*. On the third Wednesday of the crisis, a confusion of identities allowed Mrs Cunningham to leave the Home, while her protesting husband was restrained with an injection of Horlicks. To avoid a scandal, no one reported the mistake.

As for the staff, their hands were soon covered with blisters as, hour by hour, they moved amongst the

commodians with scissors, shears, secateurs, Stanley-knives and anything sharp beginning with “s”. Sacks were filled in seconds. Electric hedge-trimmers were deployed. Old Miss Skuld, whose days were spent trembling in front of the *Scandinavian Shopping Channel*, was pressed into service, her excess energy driving a cunning arrangement of pedals and wires to turn a grinding-wheel which sharpened the blades of blunted knives and scissors. As the crisis worsened, desperate plans to use cigarette-lighters and heat-strippers were laid, only to be prohibited at the last moment on the advice of the Fire Brigade consulted - reluctantly - by Matron.

Lawyers for the Home, appalled at the cataclysm which was overtaking their client’s business, appealed to the local Health Authority for an exemption from the ban. To no avail. “We have neither authority nor cause to consider any exemptions to this temporary prohibition,” they wrote. “The follicular situation you describe is, of course, under constant review.”

After a week, the ranks of determined staff wavered. Some simply did not turn up for work, others reverted to their previous business of placing residents in front of large and loud televisions and looking in on them on an hourly rotation (breaking this routine only when the creeping growth interfered to such an extent with the electrics that intervention with a fire-extinguisher was required). Matron greatly amused herself with sending threatening letters to the relatives of residents who had fallen behind on payments.

Only one member of staff had any continuing concern for the residents whose excess hair now spilled out of control from doors and windows. Surprisingly, perhaps, it was the young nurse, Horace, whose career had come within a whisker of termination in Prof Archibald’s room. Exploiting the gap in the supply-chain, he had set up a black-market in Horseradish and Buttercup Tea. After curfew, a grey van would pull up outside the kitchen-door; parcels would be unloaded in exchange for envelopes. Then, as relatives visited, young Horace would wink discreetly, draw the visitors to one side; large wads of paper money would change hands; soon thereafter, certain commodians could be observed drinking from flasks in brown paper-bags held lovingly by those same relatives. It was noticed that young Horace began to turn up to work at the wheel of a Porsche. On one occasion, he appeared in a Ferrari, whose female driver was of an age, and length of leg, to cause old Mr Marjoribanks to expire in an un-monitored moment of over-excitement.

As Horace’s secret supply business grew, so the burgeoning of over-stimulated facial hair receded. Day by day, the remaining staff began - literally - to see light at the end of a very dark and hairy tunnel. Where previously, an hour’s snipping, tugging and slicing had resulted in a respite of perhaps a day or two for any one resident, now it seemed that no one ever reverted to their previous state. No one, that is, except poor Miss Singleton, who had no living relatives and whose hidden fortune was precisely that. In a fit of generosity, however, Matron authorised a subsidy from her bank account in Zurich. And, on a glorious Sunday in June, the Twilight Home for Retired Commodians was again follicle-free.

But it was then a sad day for young Horace, who by now had entered the list of the Top Fifty Wealthiest Scots, when the DfDHAM rescinded its ban on Horseradish and Buttercup Tea. The official story was that clinical trials had identified a single rogue batch, from a supplier in Gorebridge. However, it was rumoured that the mother of the Chancellor was in a nursing-home in Fife. For obvious reasons of security, this rumour could not be verified. But Horace, having put enough money into wise investments, was set up for life. When he took his leave of the Retirement Home, he even donated a Very Large Cheque Indeed for the purchase of reading-glasses - “the next big thing”, he murmured, touching the side of his nose slyly.

