



COLD CURES

Mrs D. staggered back into the house out of a cold autumnal day, wet and shivering and glad to be out of the wind. She heaved the door closed behind her, then picked up her shopping, and turned. And went no further.

In the middle of the hallway sat a strange device, a fantastic chimaera of robot and floor-mops, shiny chrome and dull black. A few red lights winked slowly and watchfully on what might have been its head. Clearly visible right in the centre of the construction was a flashy logo with the word HAMLABS™ and a lightning-bolt through the middle.

Mrs D sighed and put her shopping down again. “Where are you?” she called out.

There was a sudden hasty noise of pattering feet, then a heavy silence.

“I know you’re there,” she said.

At length a pair of whiskers peered around the door from the kitchen. “Skinny humans think they know everything,” complained the whiskers. “We not here.”

“Oh?” said Mrs D. “Then who am I talking to?”

Just then, the strange contraption gave a mighty crackle and some of the red lights changed to blue. Mrs D stepped back nervously. The thing jerked its head right and left, up and down.

“We not here,” it said in a tinny voice. “We miles and miles away. Only thing here is Dr. ColdCureBot®. You will obey me!”

Mrs D rolled her eyes. “I will not obey you. Just tell me who’s here. And how many carrots they’ve eaten.”

“We not eat no carrots!” exclaimed the tinny voice. “We just minding own business in kitchen!”

“So you are here, then?” said Mrs D.

The pair of whiskers vanished back round the corner.

“You cold?” asked the tinny voice from Dr. ColdCureBot®, by way of distraction.

Mrs D shivered. “Yes,” she said, “and I’d like to get past and sit beside a radiator before it gets worse.”

“Ah,” said the bot in a smug tone. “Skinny Human catching cold. Puny species. Hamsters never have colds. But HAMLABS™ have just very dab for Skinny Human. You interested?”

“Not at all,” said Mrs D, advancing on the robot.

The device rattled all of its limbs – there appeared to be six arms and a host of legs on wheels – and hissed threateningly. Mrs D backed off a little, nervously.

“Patient stand back!” commanded the voice. “Dr. ColdCureBot® will explain.”

“Oh dear,” murmured Mrs D. But she couldn’t get past, so she sat down on the bench and waited.

“Good,” said the voice. But this time it had lost its tinny quality. It sounded slow and soporific. One of the blue lights and changed to a golden-yellow. “So, what seem to be trouble? Cold? Leaking eyes?”

Mrs D nodded.

“Then lean forwards,” said Dr. ColdCureBot® in an inviting voice.

Mrs D found herself leaning forwards towards the bot. With a dread fascination she saw two shiny arms extending. At the end of each arm was a large cotton-wool pad, like half an ear-muff. Each pad made its way unerringly towards her eyes, stopped briefly, then gently dabbed away the trickles of dampness. It was actually quite comforting.

“Oh,” said Mrs D. “That was gentle.”

“Dr. ColdCureBot® always very gentle,” said the bot. Then half a dozen blue lights started flashing hypnotically while the tinny voice rasped out: “Always very gentle, always very always waaays waaaaays – *bababababa bababa* -!”

“Oops,” said the tinny voice, interrupting itself. “Slight hitch,” it said when the red lights had winked off again. “Never mind.”

There was a lengthy pause. Mrs D wondered about sneaking past. But before she could try, the bedside-manner voice came back on.

“Now what seem to be trouble? Skinny Human’s paws cold?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Extend paws!” it commanded. She did so. Another pair of arms extended towards her. Each arm ended in a pair of soft pads, a bit like a miniature trouser-press. These enfolded Mrs D’s hands. They were surprisingly hot and soon she felt quite warm again. While this was happening, the first pair of arms gently dabbed at her leaking eyes. Mrs D’s nose began to run. She sniffed, twice.

“Ah,” said the bot, “dribbly snout! Excellent!” Without warning, a third arm shot out. There was a sound like a vacuum-cleaner firing up and a sudden rush of air as the arm hovered close to her nose, ready to pounce. Mrs D could see a pair of small nozzles. Just in time, she pulled her head back. The sudden movement threw the eye-dabbers off-balance. They started battering the nose-drying arm. Which in turn swiped right and left in increasing fury, smacking the hand-warmers hard. Which bounced back hard on the two other sets of arms. Soon, several other arms joined in. These moved too fast for Mrs D to see what purpose they might have had. She kept herself well back. More and more red lights appeared on the metallic head. The whole machine started rolling up and down the hallway, flailing and lashing out dementedly.

“Oo-er,” said a small voice from the corner. Haricot Bert poked his nose round the corner. He was clutching a small device in his paws, pressing buttons at random, trying feverishly to bring Dr. ColdCureBot® under control.

“Batteries gone!” he wailed.

Bert darted out into the hallway, climbed nimbly up one of the supporting legs of the robot and tugged at some wires. There was a banshee screech and a deafening bang and a puff of smoke. The smoke alarm went off. All the lights on the robot burned red. And then went out. Haricot Bert flopped down to the floor.

“There,” he said breathing heavily. “All sorted. No worries. HAMLABS™ technology safe as houses.”

Mrs D gave him a long look and slowly shook her head.

“Patient feeling perhaps a little sniffly?” asked Bert, ignoring the look. “Need another consultation?”

“No,” said Mrs D firmly. “Not at all. I’ll just sit down beside the radiator and drink a nice hot cup of ginger and lemon.

“Dr. ColdCureBot® also dispense tea and hot chocolate,” said Haricot Bert hopefully. “When he fixed.”

“No, thank you,” repeated Mrs D. She marched into the dining-room and closed the door carefully behind her. And hoped for warmer weather.

