

MEASLE SOUP

'That's what it says. In black and white: Weasel Soup.'

'Oh, give it to me!' shouted his father impatiently. 'You've read it wrong, you silly boy.'

His father put down his soup-spoon, and glared across the table at Cosmo, who was holding the empty soup-packet upside down and reading out the ingredients. He held out his hand for the packet.

'Now, the first thing you do is, you hold it the right way up. Don't they teach you anything at all at that school? It's all changed for the worse since my day, I'll tell you.'

Cosmo's father turned the packet the right way up. And looked at it twice, rubbed his eyes, looked again. Turned it over and looked at the back. Thoughtfully, he took another spoonful of the soup. Cosmo had by this time scraped his bowl

right to the bottom and was idling over a piece of bread.

Father cleared his throat. ‘This doesn’t say Weasel Soup, my boy. See this letter here – what is it?’

Cosmo looked at it idly. ‘It’s an M’, he replied.

‘So that makes this word – not Weasel – but M...?’

‘Measle?’

‘Right.’ Father put down his soup-spoon, and looked closely at his son’s face. ‘What’s that spot on your cheek? And that one there? Quick, go and get a mirror – have I got any spots?’ There was a note of panic in his voice.

Cosmo jumped down from the table, and got his father a mirror. By the time he returned with it, his face was covered with red blotches. His father grabbed the mirror and gasped. He, too, was measles.

‘Where’s that packet?’, he muttered. He picked it up and began to read aloud.

‘Measle Soup...another grate new lynchtime treat from Auntie Agony’s Old Time Cauldron...! What dreadful spelling... Have you tried our other tasty products yet? Go on, give ‘em a treat with Chicken Pox Nuggets, Mumps and Potatoes, or Apple Scarlet Fever (delicious with some soothing cream!)... Ingredients – ‘. Cosmo’s father stopped and stared and then made a disgusted face. ‘How appalling! How could they put something like that out on the shelves?! And what was your mother thinking of when she bought it?!’

Cosmo and his father sat glumly, scratching idly at their spots. What were they to do? They would be in deep trouble if Mother came home and found them like that – and it wouldn’t matter a whit that she had bought the soup in the first place, because she had told them to cook some fortifying beans and veg, not something from a packet.

Cosmo picked up the packet and studied it carefully upside-down. Then he started and peered more carefully at it.

‘Here. Dad, look at this.’

‘No, you idiot,’ said his father crossly, ‘You’re reading it upside-down again. Why can’t you be sensible!’

‘No, but this time it’s real – look!’

His father took the packet wearily, and gave it a cursory glance.

‘There’s nothing there, boy. Now stop wasting my time – I’m trying to think...’

Cosmo took the packet back, turned it upside-down again and began to read:

‘On production of this packet at any stookist of Auntie Agony’s Old Time Cauldron products, the costumier may demand and receive a cure for any illness contradicted. Your stationary rights are not afflicted. Dad, what’s a stookist?’

Cosmo’s father looked up.

‘What are you blethering about now? Didn’t I tell you to keep quiet? Anyway, what do you mean – a stookist? You mean a stockist, don’t you?’

‘Oh, all right then’, said Cosmo, ‘I’ll go and get the cure myself – where did Mum buy this?’

Cosmo looked at the price-label stuck to the bottom: ‘SupaFeva – where’s that then, dad?’

Sighing, his father took the package, and read the bits Cosmo was pointing out. All of a sudden he shouted with glee and jumped up:

‘Come on! It’s all OK now! Why can’t you read properly? – it says here that if you go back to the shop which sold you it, you’ll get a cure. If you spent more time reading and less time dreaming, you would have found this out before me.

‘But-’ Cosmo was too late; his father had already rushed out, jingling his car keys.

SupaFeva turned out to be a tiny little doorway jammed between a hairdressers and the Post Office. Outside there was little to show that there was a shop there, beyond a dull and dirty blackboard propped up against the open door and blocking the entrance, proclaiming (or at least it once did – now it only hinted)

SupaFeva

Official Stookist of Many Fampious Names.
Sole Scottish Stookist of
Auntie Agony's Old Time Cauldron Products.
Many another connoisseur dish stooked.

Cosmo's father rushed in, hotly pursued by his son; and came to a sudden standstill. The shop was little larger than a broom cupboard. Two steps inside the door was the counter. Behind the counter stood the tallest, thinnest man you ever could hope to see, so tall that he had to bend backwards from his knees and forwards again from his hips and again from his shoulders, just to avoid bumping his head on the ceiling. As a result, he looked down at his customers from behind their heads, even though he stood in front of them. It was most disconcerting.

'Quick!' whispered Cosmo's father, 'Where's the packet?' He turned and stared grimly at the shop-owner: 'Now then, sir, my wife bought this packet here last week: we've come for the cure.'

In a surprisingly squeaky voice for once so high, the man replied:

‘Oh, but certainly, sire. Now, from which partical alimnt do you suffer – my eyesight’s not so good these days. Was it beriberi, or yellow fever? – a partical favourite these days, although not my cup of tea – or should I say my cup of soup!’ He tittered, and twisted himself down to get a bottle from the shelves behind the counter.

‘No, no – just measles,’ said Cosmo’s father impatiently. ‘Do you have the right cure there – we don’t want to catch something else by getting the wrong antidote.’

‘Oh yes yes yes yes yes. Measles – now where did I see that last? Or am I out of it? I think I may have sold the last bobble – oh no, you’re in lick, sire, here I still have a bobble nowadays.’ He blew the dust of it and set it carefully on the counter. ‘It’s all yours, sire, if you will just yield up the used soup packet. To square it with my supplier, you understand.’

Cosmo's father thrust the empty packet at the shopkeeper and grabbed the bottle of medicine then whirled round to exit. Just outside, Cosmo tugged his father's sleeve.

'Hadn't we better get another packet, in case Mum finds out we've eaten it?'

'Mm, yes, good idea, son. Here's the money, you get it and I'll bring the car round – if we hurry we'll be back home before her...'

Minutes later, they were back at the dining-table, the measles having disappeared almost as soon as the liquid in the bottle passed their lips. Not a second too soon: Mother returned.

'Didn't you have a proper lunch, then?' she demanded.

They coughed guiltily. 'Er no; well, we didn't feel very hungry, did we, Cosmo?'

Cosmo shook his head. 'No, not beriberi hungry, thanks, Mum'

‘Oh, do I have to do *everything* for you?’ she scolded in exasperation ‘You could at least have opened a packet of soup!’

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