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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PEOPLE SOUP ***



PEOPLE SOUP

By ALAN ARKIN

Illustrated by JOHNSON

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When you took pot luck with this kitchen scientist, not even the poor pot was lucky!

Bonnie came home from school and found her brother in the kitchen, doing something important at the sink. She knew it was important because he was making a mess and talking to himself. The sink drain was loaded down with open soda bottles, a sack of flour, corn meal, dog biscuits, molasses, Bromo-Seltzer, a tin of sardines and a box of soap chips. The floor was covered with drippings and every cupboard in the kitchen was open. At the moment, Bonnie's brother was putting all his energy into shaking a plastic juicer that was half-filled with an ominous-looking, frothy mixture.

Bonnie waited for a moment, keeping well out of range, and then said, "Hi, Bob."

"Lo," he answered, without looking up.

"Where's Mom?"

"Shopping."

Bonnie inched a little closer. "What are you doing, Bob?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Can I watch?"

"No."

Bonnie took this as a cue to advance two cautious steps. She knew from experience how close she could approach her brother when he was being creative and still maintain a peaceful neutrality. Bob slopped a cupful of ketchup into the juicer, added a can of powdered mustard, a drop of milk, six aspirin and a piece of chewing gum, being careful to spill a part of each package used.

Bonnie moved in a bit closer. "Are you making another experiment?" she asked.

"Who wants to know?" Bob answered, in his mad-scientist voice, as he swaggered over to the refrigerator and took out an egg, some old bacon fat, a capsuled vitamin pill, yesterday's Jello and a bottle of clam juice.

"Me wants to know," said Bonnie, picking up an apple that had rolled out of the refrigerator and fallen on the floor.

"Why should I tell you?"

"I have a quarter."

"Where'd you get it?"

"Mom gave it to me."

"If you give it to me, I'll tell you what I'm doing."

"It's not worth it."

"I'll let you be my assistant, too."

"Still not worth it."

"For ten cents?"

"Okay, ten cents."

She counted out the money to her brother and put on an apron. "What should I do now, Bob?"

"Get the salt," Bob instructed.

He poured sardine oil from the can into the juicer, being very careful not to let the sardines fall in. When he had squeezed the last drop of oil out of the can, he ate all the sardines and tossed the can into the sink.

Bonnie went after the salt and, when she lifted out the box, she found a package containing two chocolate graham crackers.

"Mom has a new hiding place, Bob," she announced.

Bob looked up. "Where is it?"

"Behind the salt."

"What did you find there?"

"Two chocolate grahams."

Bobby held out his hand, accepted one of the crackers without thanks and proceeded to crumble the whole thing into his concoction, not even stopping to lick the chocolate off his hands.

Bonnie frowned in disbelief. She had never seen such self-sacrifice. The act made her aware, for the first time, of the immense significance of the experiment.

She dropped her quarrel completely and walked over to the sink to get a good look at what was being done. All she saw in the sink was a wadded, wet Corn Flake box, the empty sardine tin and spillings from the juicer, which by this time was beginning to take on a distinctive and unpleasant odor. Bob gave Bonnie the job of adding seven pinches of salt and some cocoa to the concoction.

"What's it going to be, Bob?" she asked, blending the cocoa on her hands into her yellow corduroy skirt.

"Stuff," Bob answered, unbending a little.

"Government stuff?"

"Nope."

"Spaceship stuff?"

"Nope."

"Medicine?"

"Nope."

"I give up."

"It's animal serum," Bob said, sliced his thumb on the sardine can, glanced unemotionally at the cut, ignored it.

"What's animal serum, Bob?"

"It's certain properties without which the universe in eternity regards for human beings."

"Oh," Bonnie said. She took off her apron and sat down at the other end of the kitchen. The smell from the juicer was beginning to reach her stomach.

Bobby combed the kitchen for something else to throw into his concoction and came up with some oregano and liquid garlic.

"I guess this is about it," he said.

He poured the garlic and oregano into his juicer, put the lid on, shook it furiously for a minute and then emptied the contents into a deep pot.

"What are you doing now, Bob?" Bonnie asked.

"You have to cook it for seven minutes."

Bobby lit the stove, put a cover on the pot, set the timer for ten minutes and left the room. Bonnie tagged after him and the two of them got involved in a rough game of basketball in the living room.

"BING!" said the timer.

Bob dropped the basketball on Bonnie's head and ran back into the kitchen.

"It's all done," he said, and took the cover off the pot. Only his dedication to his work kept him from showing the discomfort he felt with the smell that the pot gave forth.

"Fyew!" said Bonnie. "What do we do with it now? Throw it out?"

"No, stupid. We have to stir it till it cools and then drink it."

"Drink it?" Bonnie wrinkled her nose. "How come we have to drink it?"

Bobby said, "Because that's what you do with experiments, stupid."

"But, Bob, it smells like garbage."

"Medicine smells worse and it makes you healthy," Bob said, while stirring the pot with an old wooden spoon.

Bonnie held her nose, stood on tiptoe and looked in at the cooking solution. "Will this make us healthy?"

"Maybe." Bob kept stirring.

"What will it do?"

"You'll see." Bob took two clean dish towels, draped them around the pot and carried it over to the formica kitchen table. In the process, he managed to dip both towels in the mixture and burn his already sliced thumb. One plastic handle of the pot was still smoldering, from being too near the fire, but none of these things seemed to have the slightest effect on him. He put the pot down in the middle of the table and stared at it, chin in hand.

Bonnie plopped down opposite him, put her chin in her hands and asked, "We *have* to drink that stuff?"

"Yup."

"Who has to drink it first?" Bob made no sign of having heard. "I thought so," said Bonnie. Still no

comment. "What if it kills me?"

Bobby spoke by raising his whole head and keeping his jaw stationary in his hands. "How can it hurt you? There's nothing but pure food in there."

Bonnie also sat and stared. "How much of that stuff do I have to drink?"

"Just a little bit. Stick one finger in it and lick it off."

Bonnie pointed a cautious finger at the tarry-looking brew and slowly immersed it, until it barely covered the nail. "Is that enough?"

"Plenty," said Bob in a judicious tone.

Bonnie took her finger out of the pot and stared at it for a moment. "What if I get sick?"

"You can't get sick. There's aspirin and vitamins in it, too."

Bonnie sighed and wrinkled her nose. "Well, here goes," she said. She licked off a little bit.

Bob watched her with his television version of a scientific look. "How do you feel?" he inquired.

Bonnie answered, "It's not so bad, once it goes down. You can taste the chocolate graham cracker." Bonnie was really enjoying the attention. "Hey," she said, "I'm starting to get a funny feeling in my—" and, before she could finish the sentence, there was a loud *pop*.

Bob's face registered extreme disappointment.

She sat quite still for a moment and then said, "What happened?"

"You've turned into a chicken."

The little bird lifted its wings and looked down at itself. "How come I'm a chicken, Bob?" it said, cocking its head to one side and staring at him with its left eye.



"Ah, nuts," he explained. "I expected you to be more of a pigeon thing." Bob mulled over the ingredients of his stew to see what went wrong.

The chicken hopped around the chair on one leg, flapped its wings experimentally and found itself on the kitchen table. It walked to the far corner and peered into a small mirror that hung on the side of the sink cabinet.

"I'm a pretty ugly chicken, boy," it said.

It inspected itself with its other eye and, finding no improvement, walked back to Bobby.

"I don't like to be a chicken, Bob," it said.

"Why not? What does it feel like?"

"It feels skinny and I can't see so good."

"How else does it feel?"

"That's all how it feels. Make me stop being it."

"First tell me better what it's like."

"I told you already. Make me stop being it."

"What are you afraid of? Why don't you see what it's like first, before you change back? This is a valuable experience."

The chicken tried to put its hands on its hips, but could find neither hips nor hands. "You better change me back, boy," it said, and gave Bob the left-eye glare.

"Will you stop being stupid and just see what it's like first?" Bob was finding it difficult to understand her lack of curiosity.

"Wait till Mom sees what an ugly mess I am, boy. Will you ever get it!" Bonnie was trying very hard to see Bob with both eyes at once, which was impossible.

"You're a sissy, Bonnie. You ruined the opportunity of a lifetime. I'm disgusted with you." Bob dipped his forefinger in the serum and held it toward the chicken. It pecked what it could from the finger and tilted its head back.

In an instant, the chicken was gone and Bonnie was back. She climbed down from the table, wiped her eyes and said, "It's a good thing you fixed me, boy. Would you ever have got it."

"Ah, you're nothing but a sissy," Bob said, and licked off a whole fingerful of his formula. "If I change into a horse, I won't let you ride me, and if I change into a leopard, I'll bite your head off." Once again, the loud *pop* was heard.

Bonnie stood up, wide-eyed. "Oh, Bob," she said, "you're beautiful!"

"What am I?" Bob asked.

"You're a bee-yoo-tee-full St. Bernard, Bob! Let's go show Melissa and Chuck."

"A St. Bernard?" The animal looked disgusted. "I don't want to be no dog. I want to be a leopard."

"But you're *beautiful*, Bob! Go look in the mirror."

"Naah." The dog paddled over to the table.

"What are you going to do, Bob?"

"I'm going to try it again."

The dog put its front paws on the table, knocked over the serum and lapped up some as it dripped on the floor. *Pop* went the serum, taking effect. Bobby remained on all fours and kept on lapping. *Pop* went the serum again.

"What am I now?" he asked.

"You're still a St. Bernard," said Bonnie.

"The devil with it then," said the dog. "Let's forget all about it."

The dog took one last lap of serum. *Pop!* Bobby got up from the floor and dejectedly started out the back door. Bonnie skipped after him.

"What'll we do now, Bob?" she asked.

"We'll go down to Thrifty's and get some ice cream."

They walked down the hill silently, Bobby brooding over not having been a leopard and Bonnie wishing he had stayed a St. Bernard. As they approached the main street of the small town, Bonnie turned to her brother.

"You want to make some more of that stuff tomorrow?"

"Not the same stuff," said Bob.

"What'll we make instead?"

"I ain't decided yet."

"You want to make an atomic bomb?"

"Maybe."

"Can we do it in the juicer?"

"Sure," Bob said, "only we'll have to get a couple of onions."

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