

Labels

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I WAS BROUGHT UP in the days when there was electric light but no television, and consequently people had to learn how to amuse themselves. It was the great heyday of hobbies. People made entire villages out of matchboxes, and battle-ships out of matches. They made balsa aeroplanes, embroidered cassocks with coats of arms and scenes of the martyrdom of saints, and pressed flowers. My grandfather knitted his own socks, made wooden toys, cultivated friendships with spiders in his garden shed, cheated at croquet, and learned how to produce his own shot-gun cartridges. My grand-mother's hobby was flower-arranging and social climbing, and my mother played spirituals on the piano in between sewing new covers for the furniture and knitting woolly hats for the deserving poor. My uncle rolled his own cigars from tobacco grown and cured by himself. My other grandmother spent happy hours in the garden collecting slugs that she could drop down the grating outside the kitchen, and below a hoard of portly toads would eat them before hiding themselves once more beneath the accumulation of dead leaves.

My two sisters had a hobby called 'dressing up'. It consisted of emptying the trunks in the attic, and draping themselves in the extraordinary clothes inherited from previous generations. Then they would go out into the street, posing as indigent old ladies, and beg coins from passers-by. One of my sisters, I forget which one, actually managed to wheedle a florin from our own mother, who failed to recognise her. We spent the florin on jamboree bags, sherbet fountains, and those dangerous fireworks called 'jumping jacks'. We set them off all at once in a field of cows, and sat on the gate gleefully watching the ensuing stampede. It was only me who got spanked for it, however, since little girls in those days were not judged to be capable of such obviously boyish mischief.

As for me, I evolved through a series of pastimes, which began as a toddler. My first hobby was saying good morning. I had a little white floppy hat that I would raise to anyone at any time of day, in imitation of the good manners of my father, and I would solemnly intone 'good morning' in a lugubrious tone of voice that I had probably first admired in a vicar. After that I developed an interest in drains, and would squat before them, poking with a stick at the limp shreds of apple peel and cabbage that had failed to pass through the grate outside the kitchen. I noticed that in the autumn the leaves turned grey, and I discovered the miraculous binding quality of human hair when it is intermixed with sludge. From this I progressed naturally to a brief fascination with dog manure, and am perplexed to this day as to why it was that occasionally one came across a little pile that was pure white. Nowadays one never sees such faecal albinism. My wife recalls that as a child she had assumed that such deposits were made by white poodles.

As infancy blossomed into childhood, so my interests multiplied. I made catapults, tormented the cat, pretended to be a cowboy, made boxes with air-holes so that I could watch caterpillars become chrysalides, made a big collection of model biplanes and Dinky cars, amassed conkers, marbles, seagull feathers, and the squashy bags in the centre of golf balls. At one point I became interested in praying, and knelt quite often over the graves of

our pet animals.

The morbidity of adolescence was to provide me with new joys, such as taxidermising dead animals and suffering relentless hours of torment from being agonisingly in love with several untouchable girls all at the same time. I read every Biggles book I could find, read Sir Walter Scott novels .without realising that they were classics, memorised hundreds of filthy limericks and rugby songs that I can still recite faultlessly, and discovered that it was possible to have wet dreams whilst still wide awake.

Many of my friends pursued arcane hobbies, such as collecting cigarette cards and cheese wrappers, shrinking crisp packets in the oven, train and bus spotting, egg-blowing, origami, inspecting each other's endowments behind clumps of bamboo, collecting African stamps, and farming garden snails in a vivarium. One of my friends made a hobby of moles, and carved perfect representations of them in softwood with the aid of a scalpel. Another collected one hundred and fifty pairs of wings from small birds that he had shot with an air-rifle. He then suffered a crisis of conscience and joined the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, becoming eventually one of the few people in this country to have spotted a Siberian warbler, which was unfortunately eaten by a sparrowhawk before the horrified eyes of thirteen twitchers concealed in one small hide.

Like everyone else I was reduced to extreme torpor and inactivity by the advent of television, but found that I was becoming increasingly depressed and irritable. After a couple of years I realised that I was suffering from the frustration of having no interests in life, and searched around for something to do.

I was in our corner-shop one day when I was most forcibly struck by the appealing eyes of a cat depicted on the label of a tin of catfood, and it occurred to me that a comprehensive collection of catfood labels might one day be of considerable interest to historians of industry, and that to be a connoisseur of catfood labels would surely be a sufficiently rare phenomenon for me to be able to become an eminent authority in a comparatively short time. Instantly I dismissed the idea from my mind as intrinsically absurd, and returned home.

An hour later however, I was mocking myself at the same time as I was buying the tin with the appealing picture of the cat. With the tin comfortably weighing down the pocket of my jacket on one side, I returned home once more, and eagerly lowered it into a pan of hot water so that I could soak off the label. I wrecked it completely by trying to peel it off before the glue had properly melted, and had to go out to buy another tin. This time I waited for the paper to float free of the can, and carefully hung it up on a line that I had stretched from a hot water pipe in one corner of the kitchen over to a hook that I had screwed into the frame of the window. I went out to the stationers and bought a photo-graph album and some of those little corner pockets which are sticky on only one side. I walked restlessly about the house all evening, waiting for the label to dry, and then could not sleep all night for getting up every ten minutes to go and test it with my fingers. In the morning, my eyes itching with tiredness, I glued the label into my album, and wrote the date underneath in white ink. Afterwards I went out and bought a hair-dryer and two more cans of catfood.

I was to discover that different manufacturers have different methods of securing their

labels. The easiest ones to get off are those which are glued with only one blob, relying on the rim of the can and their tight fit to keep them in place, and the worst ones are those which are stuck in place by means of large smears at every ninety degrees. On some of them the glue is so weak that one can peel it off immediately, without soaking, and others have to be immersed in white spirit. I made a comprehensive chart in order to determine at a glance the best methods of removing the labels.

I began to accumulate an embarrassment of delabelled tins, which grew unmanageable just as soon as I realised that one can obtain them in vast sizes, as well as in the smaller sizes that one commonly finds in supermarkets. I rebelled against the wasteful idea of simply throwing them away, and took to giving them away to friends who possessed cats. They were very suspicious at first, and were reluctant to give the food to their pets in case it turned out to be adulterated, or was in fact steamed pudding, or whatever. They soon came round to the idea, however, when the offerings were unspurned by their cats, as did the owners of the cat kennels, to whom I gave the industrial-sized cans. I did notice that many of these people were beginning to look at me askance, as though I were a little mad, and it is the truth that I stopped receiving invitations to dinner parties because my conversation had become monomaniac. I think the worst thing was when my wife left me, saying that she would not consider coming back until I had removed all the albums from her side of the bedroom. The house became a terrible tip because I had had no experience of doing the housework, and eventually I had to pay her to come back once a week in order to dust and tidy.

It occurred to me that the easiest way of obtaining labels would be to write to petfood companies and request samples, past and present, but I received no co-operation at all. My first reply was similar to all the others, and ran like this:

Dear Sir,

Our manager asks me to thank you for your kind letter, and assures you that it is receiving his closest attention.

With best wishes to you and your pussy, we remain, yours sincerely . . .

Having received this letter, I would hear nothing more.

It may surprise many people to know that the variety of catfood labels is virtually infinite. To begin with, every manufacturer changes the label fairly frequently in order to modify the targeting of the customer, and to attempt to gain an edge over other brands. Thus a brunette might be changed to a blonde to make a particular food more glamorous, and a Persian cat might be substituted for a ginger moggy in order to give an impression of high class. Shortly afterwards the woman might be changed to a beautiful Asian in order to appeal to the burgeoning immigrant market, and the cat be changed to a tabby to give it a no-nonsense, no-woofers-around-here, working-class appeal. The labels are often changed by the addition of "special offer" announcements, or, most annoyingly, by 'free competitions' where the competition is on the back of the label so that one has to buy two cans the same in order to have both the obverse and the front of the sticker in one's album.

In addition, every supermarket has its own brand, and every manufacturer is constantly adding to the range, so that, whereas in the old days there was just Felix, Whiskas, Top Cat, etc., each one now has flavours such as rabbit and tuna, quail, salmon, pigeon, truffles, and

calf liver, each one with changing labels as detailed above. Everyone knows that the food is mostly made of whales slaughtered by the Japanese for “scientific research”, cereals, French horses, exhausted donkeys, and bits of the anatomy of animals that most people would prefer not to eat, but recently the producers have cottoned on to the fact that cat owners tend to buy the food that their cat likes the most, and consequently have introduced greater and greater quantities of finer meat, so that indeed one finds real pieces of liver and genuine lumps of rabbit.

It was when my collection began to go international that I hit the financial rocks. I had been working for several years as a bailiff, a job to which I was well suited on account of my great size and my ability to adopt an intimidating expression. I had managed to remain afloat by cutting expenses wherever possible; my house was falling apart, my garden was a wilderness, my car was ancient, I had bought no new clothes for five years, and I cut my own hair with the kitchen scissors. I once sat down with my albums and worked out that I had spent the equivalent of two years' salary on catfood. But I was not broke.

What brought everything to a crisis was a trip to France in pursuit of a debt defaulter. I stopped off in a Champion supermarket, and, whilst looking for a tin of cassoulet, I happened upon rows and rows of catfood with beautiful labels, many of them in black, with distinguished scrolly writing upon them. It was love at first sight, and I bought every single type I could find, not just there, but in every Mamouth and Leclerc supermarket that I passed. I broke the back axle on the way home, and my hoard of tins eventually arrived by courtesy of the Automobile Association's relay service.

Naturally it became worse and more disastrous by the month. I made frequent weekend trips to France, and returned burdened with cans of Luxochat, Poupouche and Minette Contetue. Thereafter I took sick leave from work and discovered the treasure trove of Spain. Not for me the Alhambra; it was Seniorito Gatito, Minino, Mich Miao and Ronroneo. I came home bursting with happiness and joie de vivre, planning to cover Germany, and found that my world had fallen apart. My skiing had been discovered, and I was fired from my job, at exactly the same time that I received final demands for the electricity, the gas, the telephone, and a reminder to pay my television licence. I sat amongst my albums and my pile of Spanish cans, and realised that I had allowed myself to drift into disaster. I beat myself about the head, first with my hands, and then with a rolled up newspaper. I raised my eyes to the heavens in exasperation, moaned, rocked upon my haunches, and smashed a dinner plate on the kitchen floor. Pulling myself together, I made an irrevocable decision to destroy my entire collection.

Out in the garden I built a sizeable bonfire out of garden waste and my old deck-chairs, and went indoors to collect the albums. I found myself flicking through them. I thought, 'Well, I might just keep that one, it's the only Chinese one I've got', and 'I'll not throw that one away, it's a Whiskas blue from ten years ago', or 'That was the last one I got before my wife left. It has sentimental value.' Needless to say, I didn't burn any of them; I just got on with soaking off the labels on the Spanish cans.

My unemployment benefit did not even begin to cover my personal expenses as well as the cost of acquiring new tins, and I was reduced to buying stale loaves from the baker, and butcher's bones with which to make broth. I had to slice the bread with a saw, and would attempt to extract the marrow from the bones with a large Victorian corkscrew. I became

demented with hunger, and the weight fell off me at a rate equalled only by the precipitate loss of my hair from extreme worry. One day, in desperation, I opened one of my tins, sniffed the meat, and began to reason with myself.

'It's been sterilised,' I said to myself, 'and a vet told me that it's treated to a higher standard than human food. OK, so it's full of ground testicles, lips, udders, intestines and vulvas, but so are sausages, and you like them. And what about those pork pies that are full of white bits and taste of gunpowder? They don't taste of pork, that's for sure. Besides,' I continued, 'cats are notoriously fussy and dainty eaters, apart from when they eat raw birds complete with feathers, and so if a cat finds this acceptable and even impertunes people for it, maybe it's pretty nice.'

I fetched a teaspoon, and dipped the very tip of it into the meat. I raised it to my nose and sniffed. I thought that in truth it smelt quite enticing. I forced myself to place the spoon in my mouth, conquered the urge to retch, and squashed the little lump against my palate. I chewed slowly, and then ran to the sink and spat it out, overwhelmed with disgust. I sat down, consumed with a kind of sorrowful self-hatred, and began to suffer that romantic longing for death that I had not felt since I was a teenager. My life passed before my eyes, and I had exactly the same kind of melancholy reflections about the futility and meaninglessness of existence as I had experienced after Susan Borrowdale refused to go to the cinema with me, and my sister came instead because she felt sorry for me.

But these cogitations were interrupted by a very pleasant aftertaste from my mouth, and by the fact that I was salivating copiously. I picked up the can at my feet, and sniffed it again. 'All it needs,' I said to myself, 'is a touch of garlic, a few herbs, and it would really make a very respectable terrine.'

I took it into the kitchen and emptied it out into a dish. I peeled three cloves of garlic and crushed them. I grated some fresh black pepper and some Herbes de Provence, and mashed the meat with the extra ingredients. I squashed it all into a bowl, levelled it off with a fork, decorated it with three bay leaves, and poured melted butter over it so that it would look like the real thing when it came out of the fridge.

It was absolutely delicious spread over thin toasted slices of stale bread; it was positively a spiritual experience. It was the gastronomical equivalent of making love for the first time to someone that one has pursued for years.

I suffered the indignity of being visited by the same firm of bailiffs for which I used to work, but my old mates were kind to me and took only things that I did not need very much, such as the grandfather clock and my ex-wife's Turkish carpet. They left me my fridge, my cooker, my collection of books on the manufacture of terrines and pates, my vast accumulation of garlic crushers, peppermills, herbs and French cast-iron cookware. I never could do things by halves, I always had to have complete collections.

I became extremely good at my new vocation. The more expensive catfoods made exquisite coarse pates and meat pies (my shortcrust pastry is quite excellent, and I never leave big gaps filled up with gelatine, like most pie-makers). The cheaper ones that have a lot of cereal generally do not taste very good unless they are considerably modified by the addition of,

for example, diced mushroom and chicken livers fried in olive oil. Turkey livers are a little too strong and leave a slightly unpleasant aftertaste.

The fish-based catfoods are generally very hard to use. With the exception of the tuna and salmon, they always carry the unmistakable aroma of catfood, which is caused, I think, by the overuse of preservatives and flavour-enhancers. They are also conducive to lingering and intractable halitosis, as any owner of an affectionate cat will be able to confirm.

And so this is how catfood, which got me into so much trouble, also got me out of it. I began by supplying the local delicatessen, and was surprised to find that I was able to make over one hundred per cent profit. I redoubled my efforts, and learned to decorate my products with parsley and little slices of orange. I learned the discreet use of paprika, and even asafoetida. This spice smells of cat ordure, but is capable of replacing garlic in some recipes, and in that respect it is similar to Parmesan cheese, which, as everyone knows, smells of vomit but improves the taste of minced meat.

I also discovered that the addition of seven-star Greek brandy is an absolute winner, and this led me on to experiments with calvados, Irish whiskey, kirsch, armagnac, and all sorts of strange liquors from Eastern Europe and Scandinavia.

But what really made the difference was printing the labels in French, which enabled me to begin to supply all the really expensive establishments in London: Terrine de Lapin à l'Ail sounds far more sophisticated than 'Rabbit with Garlic', after all. I had some beautiful labels printed out, in black, with scrolly writing. I have become very well-off, despite being a one-man operation working out of my own kitchen, and I am very contented. I have outlets in delicatessens and restaurants all over Britain, and one in Paris, and my products have even passed quality inspections by the Ministry of Agriculture and Foods. It might be of interest to people to know that my only complete failure was a duck pate that was not made of catfood at all.

I go out quite often on trips across Europe, looking for superior brands of catfood with nice labels, and my ex-wife often comes with me, having moved back in as soon as I became successful. She has become most skilful at soaking off labels, and is a deft hand with an hachoir. The liver with chives was entirely her own invention, and she grows most of our herbs herself.

I recently received two letters which greatly amused me. One was from a woman in Bath who told me that my terrines are 'simply divine' and that her blue-point Persian pussycat 'absolutely adores them' as well.

The other was from a man who said that he was beginning a collection of my 'most aesthetically pleasing' labels, and did I have any copies of past designs that I could send to him? I wrote back as follows:

Dear Sir,

Our manager thanks you for your letter and asks me to assure you that it is receiving his closest attention.

Naturally I never wrote back again, nor did I send him any labels. None the less I feel a little sorry for him, and anxious on his behalf; it's easy enough to turn catfood into something nice, but what do you do with hundreds or jars of pate? With him in mind, I had a whole new range of labels printed in fresh designs, with details of a competition on the reverse.