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Nail Broth
A Folk Comedy
By Mark Scrivener

Place:

Scandinavia

Characters:

NETTIE SKEEN, a mean old woman

OLAF BASIL, a cunning, middle-aged tramp

Entrances are flexible (merely to indicate the existence of a front door, and a couple of rooms offstage).

A few mats are good to break the bareness of the stage and to help conceal the chord to the stove light.

The broth is cordial-coloured water; the things added are just thrown in. A bit of material (as long as it does not contain a water-soluble dye) can be used for the beef. The sardines are small, water-soaked pieces of bread- far easier for the tramp to swallow quickly. The brandy can be flat ginger beer and the bread and cheese, bread and cheese.

SCENE -A ROOM WITH AN OUTSIDE DOOR AUDIENCE RIGHT AND TWO INSIDE DOORS ON THE LEFT SIDE: ONE FORWARD, ONE BACK. ON THE LEFT THERE IS A STOVE WITH A BIG IRON POT NEAR IT. A CUPBOARD WITH SOME BOWLS, SPOONS, LADLE, A JAR WITH COINS AND SO ON. A SMALL TABLE AND A COUPLE OF STOOLS. NETTIE IS IN THE ROOM SWEEPING. A KNOCK ON THE RIGHT DOOR.

NETTIE

Well now, who's this then? It better not be one of those scrounging neighbours of mine come to steal some sugar or something.

NETTIE CROSSES AND OPENS DOOR. IN THE DOORWAY STANDS OLAF BASIL

OLAF

A very good evening to you, my good woman. Allow me to introduce myself. Olaf Basil's the name- Ol' to my friends.

OLAF BOWS AND TAKES OFF HIS HAT

NETTIE (SUSPICIOUSLY)

Well, good evening, then. I'm Nettie Skeen. And where do you hail from then?

OLAF (ENTHUSIASTICALLY)

South of the sun, east of the moon. Yes, I've been everywhere, roamed all over I have... *(AN AFTERTHOUGHT)* except for this village hereabouts, of course.

NETTIE

You must have travelled a lot then. And what will you be doing here then?

OLAF (*APOLOGETICALLY*)

Well, it's like this, you know. I rather need some shelter for the night, you know. Bit low on my luck, just at present. Not really used to asking for this sort of thing, you know.

NETTIE

Just what I thought! Well, you may as well be on your way at once, then. My husband's not at home, but I can call on my neighbours if need be, and my place isn't a boarding home or a rest place for wandering tramps!

OLAF (*WARMLY*)

Hey now, you mustn't be so unfriendly, you know.

OLAF ENTERS AND TALKS TOWARDS THE TABLE

NETTIE

Why not, then?

OLAF

Well, we're ALL tramps in one way or another, you know. Depends on how you look at things. Yes, we're all tramping under the same sky, (*HE GESTURES GRANDLY TOWARDS THE CEILING*) we're all travellers towards time's endless horizon, we're all wanderers in life under God's good heavens, and so we must help each other on life's long journey, you know.

NETTIE

Oh, all right, all right then. I'll let you to sleep on the floor for the night. (*REACTION FROM OLAF WHICH SHE DOESN'T SEE*) But you mustn't be getting the mad idea I can feed you or something, then. Haven't got a scrap of food in the whole house, and that's a fact. No, not even for myself. Well now, I'll be back in a minute, then.

NETTIE EXITS FRONT RIGHT DOOR

OLAF (*MUSING AND LOOKING AROUND*)

Well, well, well... She's not so badly off as all that. Quite comfortable, I'd say. Plenty of food here too, I'd reckon. Stingy old bag of bones, isn't she? Not a scrap of food in the whole house... well, well, well... Never mind that, I'll fill my belly here in some way; no worry there!

NETTIE RE-ENTERS

Well, Nettie, this is a fine home you have here; no doubt of that, you know. (*PATS HER ON THE BACK*) What a wise place to build indeed, I'm thinking! (*NETTIE SHOWS A POSITIVE REACTION*) You must be doing all right to own a lovely home like this, you know.

NETTIE (*SUDDENLY SUSPICIOUS*)

OH NO, it's hard time for us, it is!

OLAF (*CHANGING TACK AND TRYING TO GET SYMPATHY*)

Yes, it's hard times I've fallen to as well, you know. Ever since my dear wife passed from this world of woe. Left me all alone in this cold life. (*HE LOOKS SORROWFUL*) Went to the bottle to drown my sorrows; lost my job, lost my home. Haven't eaten a morsel, not a bite, for two long days, you know. (*NETTIE WHO WAS BEGINNING TO FEEL SYMPATHY REACTS NEGATIVELY TO THE MENTION OF FOOD*) Begging your pardon, but you wouldn't have just a scrap of something to ease the gnawing ache of hunger, would you?

NETTIE

Don't try to get around me with your wagging tongue. Times are hard, just as hard for me. As I was saying to my husband, Wihl, the other day... "Wihl," I said,

"Times are hard, just so hard. I just don't know where the next meal is going to come from." No food in this house, so it's no use for asking for any!

OLAF (*PRETENDING TO BE SYMPATHETIC*)

Oh, you poor people! I'm so sorry. (*CONSPIRATORIALLY*) I'll tell you what! I'll show you a secret I don't show many folks- seeing how greedy and stingy many people are, you know.

NETTIE (*WITH CURIOSITY*)

What are you talking about then?

OLAF

Well now, there's not many people I'd show the great secret to, but seeing how needy you both are...

NETTIE

Well?

OLAF

Well, what I said about not eating- it's not altogether true, you know. I have to spin that sort of story so people take me for just a plain and ordinary tramp- it's hard to say what lengths some people would go to get my secret from me, you know.

NETTIE

What secret?

OLAF

WELL, seeing how your husband and you are so hard up. . .

(*GENEROUSLY*) I thought you might like to have dinner with me!

NETTIE (*AMAZED*)

DINNER WITH YOU! I'd like to know what you can offer us then!

OLAF REACHES DOWN AND PICKS UP THE POT AND HANDS IT TO HER

OLAF (*GRANDLY*)

He who has journeyed and has been

Over the hills and far and wide,

Sees many a thing that's never seen

By those who stay by their fireside!

(*CHEERFULLY*)

So-if you'd like me to brew us a beautiful dinner, just fill up the pot with water.

NETTLE

Oh, all right, then; but just remember I've got nothing here to help you then.

NETTIE EXITS FRONT LEFT DOOR

OLAF (*TO HIMSELF*)

This recipe's never failed me yet!

HE PULLS A LARGE NAIL FROM HIS POCKET AND LOOKS AT IT

CUNNINGLY. NETTIE RE-ENTERS WITH POT FULL OF WATER. OLAF

PALMS THE NAIL

OLAF

Just put it over the fire.

NETTIE

There you are.

SHE PLACES IT ON STOVE. (STOVE IS "LIT" FROM BEGINNING i.e. A HIGH BOX AFFAIR WITH LIGHT AND RED CELLOPHANE FOR EXAMPLE)

Well?

OLAF

Watch.

HE SHOWS HER THE NAIL, THEN PROCEEDS TO WEAVE A MYSTERIOUS SPELL AROUND IT WITH HIS HAND

Alchemy, Stone of the Wise,
Nail of Knowledge, before our eyes!

Mars, O Mars,
Your mighty metal is
What this magic nail can give
To the boiling water now-
Iron strength of brewing power!

Martis Ares, ferrum whole...
Flavour's locus- speak with soul!

So take the power to cook and boil
A rich and tasty broth with all
The feeling of a tasty brew;
The flavours I command of you!

HE TWIRLS THE NAIL AROUND

There!

HE THROWS THE NAIL IN THE POT

NETTIE

What on earth is this going to be then?

OLAF (*WITH SATISFACTION AS THOUGH HIS CONJURING HAD WORKED*)

Nail Broth.

HE STARTS STIRRING WITH A WOODEN SPOON THAT HE GETS FROM THE CUPBOARD

NETTIE

Nail broth, nail broth... that couldn't work, could it? Nail broth- my, if it did... wouldn't that would be a marvellous thing for poor people like us to know! Imagine that, nail broth then- I've never heard of anything like it. But if works, my, how I'd like to learn to make it.

OLAF

Well, just watch me, my good woman. First off, you see, like me you must say a powerful little spell over your nail to get everything in just the... well, in the right mood, you know. It's very important to draw the spirits of plenty to our endeavours, if you know what I mean. Yes, very important that is.

NETTIE

Yes, yes.

OLAF (*CONFIDENTIALLY*)

But the main thing is in the stirring, you know. Stir slowly, around like this. Above all, twelve times clockwise, and seven times anticlockwise... Twelve for the great signs of the zodiac, you know, and seven for the seven spheres within them. *HE DEMONSTRATES* Woolly-headed ram, mighty bull, tricky twins, nipping crab,

lion pouncing on its prey, fortune's fair maiden, weighing scales and then the sting. Next the archer hits the mark, then the sneaky goat, life's water and something fishy last of all. Moon's for change, Mercury is cunning, Venus seeming, dazzling sun and then brave Mars jovial Jupiter and old man time.

NETTIE

My head is spinning round and round!

OLAF

So, it's most important, don't you see, to call upon the powers on high. The currents from the stirring (don't you understand me wrongly now) can then work with the iron in the nail to form.

NETTIE (*ABSORBED*)

Yes, yes, then.

OLAF

Temperature's important too, you know. Not too hot, not too cold. It's a good idea to bring it slowly and gently to the boil- if you know what I mean.

NETTIE (*PEERING IN*)

I see.

OLAF

This sort of a nail mostly makes a good broth, you know. But this time it's just possible it might be rather thin, as I'm afraid I've had to use the same nail all week. (*WISTFULLY*) Ah, if only we had a handful or two of oatmeal to thicken it up a bit, it'd be glorious, you know. (*WITH A SIGH*) Still what we don't have, there's no use thinking about.

NETTIE

Well, well, what about that then! Do you know, now I come to think about it I do have a little oatmeal somewhere.

SHE EXITS

OLAF (TO HIMSELF)

The magnetism of my nail begins to do its work, attracting what it needs from hidden places.

NETTIE (RE-ENTERING, WITH A SMALL BAG OF OATMEAL)

Here you are, do you think this will help then?

OLAF (TAKING THE OATMEAL)

Yes, yes, this is fine. (*HE PUTS ABOUT HALF THE OATMEAL IN THE POT AND CONTINUES STIRRING*) You know, this broth would be splendid, good enough for company, if we had just a few potatoes and say, some salted beef. (*HE ADDS THE REST OF THE OATMEAL*) But that's the way of the world, you know; and what we don't have there's no point in wishing for.

NETTIE

It's a funny thing, but now you mention it- I have a vague idea that I do have some potatoes and beef somewhere. Wait a second. I'll just go and see then.

SHE EXITS

OLAF (STIRRING)

Well, well, this nail is preparing a great broth, that's for sure- but maybe we can go for perfection!

RE-ENTER NETTIE WITH BEEF AND POTATOES

NETTIE

Here, do you think these will do then?

OLAF (*TAKING THEM*)

Oh, yes. These will do the trick all right! (*HE THROWS THEM IN*)

(*INSTRUCTIVELY*) As you see, it's all in the stirring, gentle-like, you know- that's how I go, gentle and slow. Now, now, iron nail, cook the broth and cook it well.

(*ENTHUSIASTICALLY*) You know, Nettie this'll be delicious, good enough for any of the greatest people in the land.

NETTIE

AMAZING, imagine that then! and all made with just a nail!

OLAF

In fact, you know I'd say, you could practically serve this broth to the king himself- of course, you'd have to add some flavouring, say a drop of milk and a little barley. You know, if poor people like us just had such things- why, with the help of this nail we'd be able to feast like we were in the king's court itself! I know, you see, 'cause I served under the royal cook for a while, in my better days... and this is very like the broth he used to have every evening!

NETTIE

Well! Well! Like the king himself, eh? I never then-!

OLAF

Still, you know, what we don't have there's no use hankering after.

NETTIE

Now let me think then. Yes, yes. I'm almost certain I've a little barley somewhere and I'm pretty sure I'm not quite out of milk. I'll just go and check then.

OLAF (*TO HIMSELF*)

WELL, well, as they say: there's more than one way to skin a cat.

NETTIE (*RE-ENTERING WITH THE BARLEY AND MILK*)

I found some then.

OLAF

Thank you, this will make it really fine, you know. (*HE POURS THEM IN*). Just give it all a bit more stirring, so... (*HE LIFTS THE SPOON AND TASTES THE BROTH*) Ah, yes. Now it's ready... we'll have a fine, old feast! You know, of course, the king and queen always used to have a glass of brandy... and sardines... and cheese and bread with their broth... ah, yes, I well remember how we used to prepare it for them. All nice and royal with a tablecloth and all, of course. (*HE CONTINUES STIRRING*) Still you can't have everything, I suppose, and what you don't have, you know, there's no earthly reason to go wishing for.

NETTIE

Ah, wouldn't it be nice to eat just like the king and queen do- for once then. I think that if I look real hard... I do have a tablecloth, and we have a little brandy somewhere and a bit of bread and cheese, maybe even some sardines too.

NETTIE EXITS

OLAF

Well, that's one of the best brews I've ever made.

NETTIE RE-ENTERS. SHE PLACES THE SARDINES, BRANDY AND BREAD AND CHEESE ON THE CUPBOARD.

NETTIE

I found it all, you see. I'll just set the table then.

NETTIE SPREADS THE TABLE SETS THE BREAD AND CHEESE ETC ON IT

OLAF (*AS SHE IS DOING SO, STILL STIRRING*)

I'll just test the broth once more. (*HE MAKES A GREAT SHOW OF LIFTING A SPOON OF IT UP, SMELLING AND TASTING IT*) Ah, yes, yes. That's perfect! Just like the king's own broth, you know. Now if you've got some bowls handy, I think it's about ready to be served, you know.

NETTIE

I do have some bowls somewhere.

NETTIE GOES TO THE CUPBOARD AND PRODUCES BOWLS AND SPOONS.

And there are some knives and plates for the extras as well then.

NETTIE SETS KNIVES AND PLATES ON TABLE

OLAF

That's fine, fine! Now then, allow me to serve you your broth, Your Majesty! (*HE LADLES A MODEST AMOUNT INTO NETTIE'S BOWL*)

And a little for me. (*HE LADLES A LOT INTO HIS OWN BOWL WHILE NETTIE'S BACK IS TURNED AS SHE TAKES HER BOWL TO THE TABLE*)

Note- it is desirable that the broth has some colour, this can be achieved safely by cordial in cold water.

NETTIE (*TASTING THE BROTH*)

This is delicious! It's just amazing, amazing it is.

OLAF (*SWAMPING IT DOWN*)

HMM, yes. It is delicious, if I say so myself! Just like the king's, you know! Allow me to serve you a few sardines, Your Majesty!

HE DOES SO. The sardines can be wet bread scraps for ease of consumption

And a couple for myself! (*OLAF RISES AND SERVES NETTIE, AS SHE GOES TO EAT HE TURNS AWAY FROM HER AND GOBBLES DOWN THE REST OF THE SARDINES*)

OLAF SITS DOWN AND THEY CONTINUE TO EAT

OLAF

Yes, it's wonderful what you can do with a simple nail if you know how, you know. But, of course, the extra ingredients do help a little bit. But as I said before the main thing is in the stirring.

NETTIE

Yes, the stirring.

THEY CONTINUE EATING

OLAF

Allow me to serve you some bread and cheese. (*HE CUTS HER A SMALL SLICE AND HANDS IT TO HER.*) I'll save myself a bit too. (*HE QUICKLY SLIPS THE REST IN HIS POCKET, LEANS FORWARD SO SHE CAN'T NOTICE THE VANISHED CHEESE AND FOCUSES HER ATTENTION ON THE CONVERSATION*) You know, those were the days when I worked under the king. You should have seen HIS dining room. Huge it was. Lit by shimmering candles in chandeliers, with all the finest people in the land sitting up and discussing deep matters or laughing lightly...

NETTIE

AH, wonderful!

THEY FINISH THEIR BROTH

OLAF

Well, that's as nice a drop of broth as I've ever tasted. Right royal it was, wasn't it?

NETTIE

Marvellous- and think of it, all made with a nail!

OLAF

Allow me to serve you some brandy, your Majesty. *(HE POURS HER A LITTLE)*
And a little for me. *(HE POURS HIMSELF A LOT)* A toast to the nail!

NETTIE

To the nail then! *(THEY DRINK)* AH! I'm getting sleepy.

OLAF

Me too. Well, if you don't mind, I'll just stretch out here on the floor.

HE GOES TO LIE ON THE FLOOR

NETTIE

No, no. I can't have a fine, wise man like you sleeping on the floor in my house then. Come, I'll find you a nice bed in the spare bedroom for you to sleep on. My children used to sleep there, but they're all grown up and leading their own lives now. But we kept the bedroom anyway: as I said to Wihl, you never know who might be dropping in to visit overnight. *SHE INDICATES THE BACK DOOR LEFT*

OLAF

Well, it's just like sweet Christmas time, it is. I've never, you know, in all my travelling, come across a nicer person.

NETTIE GOES TO THE CUPBOARD AND GETS A COUPLE OF COINS OUT OF A WOODEN JAR

NETTIE (*GIVING HIM THE COINS*)

Here's a little repayment for what I've learnt from you. And many, many thanks then. We'll be able to live in comfort now I've learnt the trick of making nail broth.

OLAF

Well, it's not so difficult as long as you remember to add something good to flavour it and remember the stirring, won't you?

NETTIE

Yes, yes. I will. Good night then.

OLAF

Good night. Much thanks for the loan of the pot.

HE EXITS BACK DOOR LEFT

NETTIE (*LOOKING AFTER HIM*)

My, my, you don't meet men like that every day, that's for certain. No, such brilliant people don't grow on every bush.

THE END

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Olaf's Song

Mark Scrivener

unaccompanied

Mark Scrivener

When I was a lit - tle lad, My mo - ther said,

"I'll tell you true, It's best to help and make folks glad

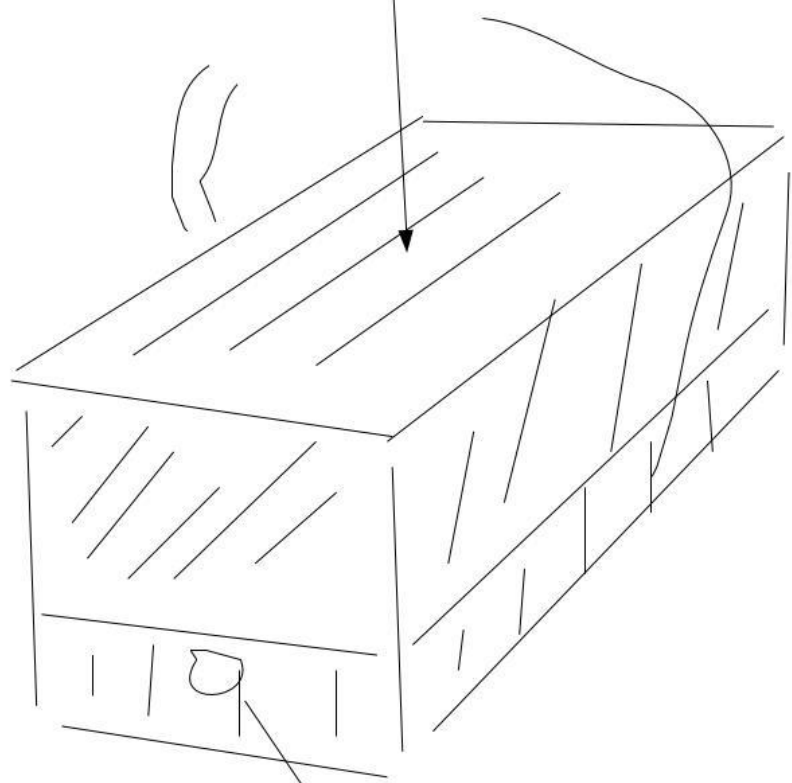
That they ev - er met with you ."

TECHNICAL NOTES

The light of the fire of the stove can be made from a red bulb within a simple box-like structure painted black for the stove. The light shines through the grating.

CHORD
hidden as far as possible
behind

WOODEN GRATING



LIGHT