

THE MAGIC SPOON

By Eric A. Kimmel

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ONE Hanukkah eve a stranger appeared in Chelm: a handsome man wearing an elegant black coat and a tall silk hat. He carried a large suitcase. No one knew his name or why he had come, but he was clearly a man of wealth and taste.

Whether a stranger is rich or poor makes no difference to the people of Chelm. The people of Chelm are very hospitable. Any newcomer appearing in town is always invited to someone's home for dinner.

"Come to my house. We're having latkes tonight. My wife, Esther, makes the best latkes in Chelm," said Simon Goose.

"No, come home with me!" Feivel Bonehead insisted. "You've never tasted latkes until you've tried the ones my mother makes."

Everyone began arguing about who would have the honor of cooking latkes for the stranger. Finally the stranger said, "Friends, there is no need to quarrel. I am going to cook my own latkes tonight. I invite all of you to be my guests."

"How are you going to cook latkes without a stove, a bowl, or a pan?" Motke Fool asked. "You don't even have any potatoes. Everyone knows that you can't cook latkes with nothing."

"You're wrong," the stranger replied. "You certainly can cook latkes with nothing...if you have a magic spoon!" He opened his suitcase and took out a long wooden spoon.

"It looks like an ordinary spoon," said Berel Dunce.

"There is nothing ordinary about it," the stranger exclaimed. "With this spoon, I can make latkes from nothing. You don't believe me? Bring me a mixing bowl and I'll show you."

"You can borrow mine," said Esther Goose. She ran home and brought back her mixing bowl.

“Thank you,” the stranger said. “Gather around, people of Chelm! Prepare yourselves to witness a miracle. You are about to see latkes made from thin air.”

The stranger held the mixing bowl while he stirred and stirred with the wooden spoon.

Motke Fool looked into the bowl. “I don’t see anything. What are you stirring? That bowl is empty.”

“Making latkes from nothing takes time,” the stranger replied. “Trust me. It will be worth the wait.”

The people of Chelm watched as the stranger stirred and stirred. Suddenly he asked, “How do you like your latkes? I prefer mine plain, but some people like to add a pinch of salt.”

“Salt? Of course you must add salt. What are latkes without salt? And pepper, too!” everyone agreed.

“I’ll get some salt,” said Berel Dunce. He soon returned, carrying a saltshaker and a pepper mill. He threw a few pinches of salt into the bowl and added some pepper, too.

“Thank you,” the stranger said, as he went on stirring.

After a while he looked up. “These latkes will be fine the way they are. However, some people like to add one or two eggs. And maybe a handful of meal.”

“Of course!” Esther Goose exclaimed. “You must add meal, and at least two eggs. And oil. Otherwise the latkes will fall apart when you try to cook them. Keep stirring. I’ll get what you need.”

Esther ran home and came back with three eggs, a cup of oil, and another cup of meal. “Add these to the latkes. They’ll taste wonderful!” she said as she poured the ingredients into the bowl.

“Thank you,” said the stranger. “Look what’s happening! The latkes are beginning to form.”

The people of Chelm stared into the bowl. Amazing! A frothy yellow liquid had suddenly appeared.

“Keep stirring!” the people of Chelm cried. They could hardly contain their excitement. They were witnessing a miracle with their own eyes.

The stranger stirred and stirred. After a while he said, "These latkes will taste delicious. There's only one thing we might add to make them better."

"What's that?" asked Simple Kalman.

"An onion."

"Of course, an onion! Why didn't we think of that?"

"Why only one onion?" said Feivel Bonehead. "Add lots of onions. Then the latkes will really taste good!"

Feivel ran home to chop some onions. He came back and poured them into the bowl.

"That's just what we needed," the stranger said. "I can't think of anything else except..."

"Except what?"

"Oh, never mind. It really isn't important. The latkes will be fine without..."

"Without what?" the people of Chelm shouted.

"Well, if you really want to know.... It never hurts to add a few potatoes."

"Potatoes! Of course! How can you have latkes without potatoes!"

The people of Chelm ran home. They came back with potatoes, washed and grated. They poured these into the bowl. The results were amazing.

"Latkes, just the way I make them!" Esther Goose gasped.

"If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't believe it," said Motke Fool.

"Imagine that! Latkes from nothing!" cried Berel Duncie.

"And now they're done!" The stranger held out the bowl for all to see. "Let's cook them and see how they taste."

Everyone followed the stranger over to Esther Goose's house. Esther placed an iron pan on the stove. She poured in some oil. When it was hot, she added the latke mixture, a tablespoon at a time. The latkes began to cook. They filled the kitchen with their delicious smell.

"And to think this was all made from nothing," said Simple Kalman. He still couldn't believe it.

Soon the latkes were done. "Let's see how they taste," the stranger suggested.

They tasted delicious!

"These are the best latkes I ever ate," said Motke Fool.

“I never cooked better ones myself,” said Esther Goose.

“It is truly a miracle. Latkes from nothing,” said the rabbi.

The latkes disappeared in a flash. The people of Chelm demanded more, so the stranger mixed up batch after batch with his magic spoon. The people of Chelm provided the extra ingredients.

When all had eaten their fill, the stranger washed his magic spoon. He dried it with his handkerchief and put it back in his suitcase.

“Thank you for a lovely evening and a happy, happy Hanukkah,” he said. “Now, if you will excuse me, I must be on my way”

“Where are you going? Stay here with us. Hanukkah’s just begun. We can have latkes every night,” said Berel Dunce.

The stranger shook his head. “No, I really must be off. My friends in Lublin are expecting me. I have to leave now. Otherwise I’ll be late.”

“Go then, but may I ask if you might be interested in selling that magic spoon of yours?” Motke Fool asked.

“Oh no!” cried the stranger. “I couldn’t sell this spoon to anyone. It has been in our family for two hundred years.”

“Then would you lend it to us for the rest of Hanukkah? We’ll give it back when you return from Lublin.”

“We’ll pay you five hundred zlotys,” said Berel Dunce. “It’s worth it, just to taste those latkes again.”

The stranger hesitated. “I’m not sure. What if the spoon broke? What if it got lost? Or stolen?”

“Don’t worry about that,” said Motke. “We’ll pay you five hundred zlotys and give you a thousand more as a deposit. If-God forbid!-anything were to happen to the spoon, the thousand zlotys would be yours to keep. How can you lose?”

“I accept,” the stranger replied. “Everyone says the people of Chelm are honest folk. I’m sure I can trust you.”

Motke Fool opened up the iron box and counted out fifteen hundred zlotys. “There you are!” he said as he handed them to the stranger.

The stranger put the money in his suitcase. He handed Motke the magic spoon. “When I come back from Lublin, you’ll return my spoon to me?”

“Agreed,” said Motke. “And you’ll give us back our thousand zlotys.” They shook hands.

The stranger smiled. Without another word he tipped his hat, picked up his suitcase, and walked out of town.

The people of Chelm feasted every night for the rest of Hanukkah. They made piles and piles of latkes with the magic spoon. Of course they added some extra ingredients-salt, pepper, meal, oil, eggs, onions, and potatoes.

But, strange to say, the mysterious stranger never came back. When he still hadn’t appeared a month after Hanukkah, the people of Chelm sent word to Lublin. Nobody there knew anything about him.

The people of Chelm waited the rest of that year, and the next, and the year after that. But the stranger never returned.

“As long as we have the magic spoon, we may as well use it,” said Motke Fool. So every year they made heaps and heaps of latkes out of thin air, enough for the whole town.

“Do you think the stranger will ever come back?” Simon Goose asked as he spread applesauce and sour cream over his latkes.

“So what if he doesn’t?” said Stupid Shmelke, finishing his fifth helping. “We still have the magic spoon. We can still make latkes from nothing. A secret like that is worth millions, and it only cost us fifteen hundred zlotys.”

Together they laughed. “We got the best of that bargain!”