

# Benjamin's Mystery Soup<sup>1</sup>

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It was a beautiful spring day on Friday, on the fifth of June, in Munich, Germany in the year 1784. A smart-looking horse and carriage came to a stop on the fashionable Schwabinger Street in front of a palatial villa. The carriage had a single rider, obviously a person of importance if one were to judge by his clothing. The distinguished occupant was the 32-year-old Benjamin Thompson, recently knighted Sir Benjamin Thompson by King George III of Great Britain. Just having taken the oath of office as a colonel in the Bavarian army, he was basking in the joy of the moment. He chuckled to himself as he strode towards the entrance to his villa, thinking, "Little do the Bavarians know what is in store for them! When I complete my plan to reform the military, everything will change." The Elector of Bavaria, Karl Theodor, had not so long ago employed him as a colonel of one of the cavalry regiments of the army. In reality, though, Sir Benjamin had been given the post to become a troubleshooter for the army. The low-level position was a cover, and Karl Theodor had advised Sir Benjamin to take the time to learn German and French and gain detailed knowledge of the local situation before offering any advice.

Sir Benjamin took his role very seriously, but he was also ruthlessly ambitious. Over the next four years, he observed, made hypotheses, collected data, made measurements, and conducted experiments designed to offer solutions for the dire situation of the Bavarian society. It was one of the most exhilarating periods in Sir Benjamin's life, which he affirmed in a letter to his friend, Lord George Germain, the following summer: "I can say with truth that I hardly know what there is left for me to wish for. Rank, Titles, Decorations, Literary distinctions, and with some small degree of military fame I have acquired, the road is open to me for the rest." He had the freedom to work as he liked, and because no one knew his mission, he was free of criticism or opposition. Little did Sir Benjamin know both the fame and the opposition that awaited him.

Bavaria was beset by a veritable cancer of misery and lawlessness, and the army had become a hotbed of crime and disorder. The common soldier was not paid enough to survive, and there was much corruption, theft, and inhumanity in the army. Benjamin was shocked to discover that the peasant farmers feared military conscription so much that they would flee to the forest or even cut off a finger or two with an axe so as not to be forced into duty by the dreaded recruiting officers. In a lengthy and detailed document prepared for the Elector, Sir Benjamin expressed his deep criticism of the situation and suggested a radical and complete system of reform of the military. As a foreigner, the American-born Briton, Sir Benjamin could say things that no Bavarian dared say. Finally, on the seventh of February, almost four years after his appointment as colonel, Sir Benjamin completed

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