"How can we afford it? We sell so many!"

Yesterday Waitrose had a whole fridge section of cottage cheese which had reached the day before its sell-by date, reduced from 87p to 47p per carton. They'll never sell these today, I thought. I'll bet there's a further reduction tomorrow.

Sure enough, this morning they were all down to 17p. What a bargain! Better than wholesale! The texture won't be as good after freezing, but by the time I've mixed it up the rest of my lunch-time glop, it'll be just fine. So I filled up my canvas carrier bag from the Oceanside [California] Farmers' Market – a bag that has carried home many kilos of exquisite produce from all over Europe – until it had reached its full capacity, which was two dozen cartons. There were still another dozen remaining, but one mustn't be greedy.

Staggering down the aisle, I picked up what I was sent for – a bag of organic onions and half-a-dozen free range eggs for a neighbour She only wanted three for a recipe and there was a box with two cracked eggs marked down to 40p, so there were a few more pence knocked off the bill.

At the check-out counter the sales clerk started feeding my purchases past the barcode scanner. He looked at the sales slip as it fed out, scratched his head, pushed a couple of buttons, and continued totalling.

The final bill, including twenty-four cartons of cottage cheese at 17p, the onions at 95p and the eggs at 40p came to £1.16. "This is ridiculous," I said. "Not only is the cottage cheese free, but it's knocked 19p off the bill for the other two items."

The clerk showed me the sales slip. "The computer is programmed to give a 50p discount on every two cartons you buy. That means that for every pair you get 16p taken off the rest of the bill. There's nothing I can do about it. It's in the computer."

It still didn't add up, but I paid my £1.16 and left. At home I took a closer look and discovered that the scanner had charged me full price for two cartons of cottage cheese, thus cheating me out of £1.40. If it had given me the correct total, Waitrose would have paid me 24p for the labour of carrying home a heavy bag of free groceries. I shall go back tomorrow, point out their error, and demand a refund!

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