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## **SNAKE OIL**

By Wendy MacLeod

*Dr. Samuel Hartman, a dignified middle-aged man with muttonchops, stands at a podium, in a turn-of-the-century suit and string tie. Beside him is a table full of matching cobalt blue bottles, with labels that read: Dr. Samuel B. Hartman's Peruna Tonic.*

### **DR. SAMUEL B. HARTMAN**

"Dr. Samuel B. Hartman, Dr. Samuel B. Hartman, Dr. Samuel B... what the hell kind of doctor is he," says you, "might be one of those *philosophy* doctors, don't know a spleen from a gallbladder; might be one of those *self-proclaimed* doctors, never cut up a cadaver!" And while it's true I won't be waving a diploma in your face, it is also true that I was blessed with a vocation; I was called to doctoring.

You sir, do you have a farming degree? No, you do not. What you have is a *farm*! You madam, you call yourself a mother! And why not? I see the child! You are a mother because you spend your days *mothering*. It's about verbs not nouns! We can proclaim ourselves whatever the hell we want, but at the end of the day, it's about what we *do*, what set of skills do we offer that they don't got! What product do we offer that does something they need doing!

The feed salesman comes through town, does he have a degree in salesmanship? No sir, he does not! What he has is a *product*! It's not about *salesmanship*. It's about *do my livestock eat it and do it fatten them up for the slaughter!* It's about *do my mule pull the wagon or do it fall down dead in the road!* It's about *do my hog taste good come Easter? Do my chickens peck when the lady's apron unfurls!* I pity the feed salesman selling sawdust, because he is going to find next year's doors *justifiably* slammed in his face!

Lucky the man with a product sells itself. Behold Dr. Samuel B. Hartman's Peruna Tonic. "Hell's bells, says you, why there's nothing but castor oil in there, cleans out your insides, or whiskey makes you forget the symptoms caused you to dose in the first place!" And maybe they're in there. I won't deny it. But ask any cook worth her salt and she will tell you it's all about the *recipe*. It's all about the *combination*, the *proportions*, the properties working in *tandem* to address the cancers, the black lung, the creaks in the bone didn't use to be there, the creaks so loud that just reaching for the water glass on the bedside table

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results in a goddamn symphony of osteopathic percussion!  
Begging your pardon, ma'am, but the arthritis it gets me  
worked up; the arthritis keeps a man from getting the hay in  
before the rain, it keeps a woman from tending her stove,  
her poultry, her children.

My own sainted mother, God rest her soul, took to her bed  
when her bones gave out, at an ungodly early age. I used to  
watch her pretty face at the upstairs window, looking out at  
me and my brothers playing in the barnyard, and I thought to  
myself, if I could only cure that woman's ills. If only she  
could be hanging her washing on the line the way she used to  
do. If only she could see me off to school with a lunch  
pail, steaming with the smell of her own fresh bread. If  
only I could see her dance again at the harvest dance. If  
only...

*Dr. Samuel Hartman dabs at his eyes  
with a handkerchief.*

Do you know what my mother's name was? Peruna. This  
product, this homeopathic *homage*, not only addresses the  
decaying bones that bedevilled her, but a multitude of ills  
in the human body! The female hysteria, the barren womb,  
the wobbly cock!

How can one product cure so many ills? What the Chinaman  
says is your chi is out of balance, your life force is  
pooling in some areas which denies it to others. Dr. Samuel  
B. Hartman's Peruna Tonic is like the stick pushing through  
the accidental dam of autumn leaves, allowing the stream to  
flow freely, your cattle to drink, your children to swim,  
and your wife to draw the water she needs to go about her  
daily work.

That's what the Chinaman says. I'd be blaspheming if I told  
you what *I* say, what I really think. No, I can't, I won't,  
I dasn't...

*Dr. Samuel Hartman holds up his hand  
to fend off the crowd's entreaties.*

I will tell you this much. All that is within this potion  
was created by God. God gave us ills and he gave us the  
means to cure those ills if we can but trust. Trust the  
messenger. As the bearer of His grace, I am His living  
apostle, and I have been called to testify.

I hear your questions, your reservations, your unspoken  
doubts: "He ain't no minister, he ain't no doctor, and he  
sure as hell ain't no apostle, Dr. Samuel B. Hartman is a  
*salesman!*" Ladies and gentlemen, I don't deny it. My

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mother declared me a natural-born salesman the day I sold a pail of milk to a dairy farmer.

You all know that a salesman sells, but what is he looking for beyond his need to divest himself of the merchandise he carries from pillar to post? I cannot speak for every salesman, but ever since my mother passed, I have been looking for that thing called Home. I've been looking for it in hotel rooms, in the back of a wagon, and in the next town which soon becomes the last town.

It is not profit that drives me forward. It is my hope to one day find that Home with my sainted mother in Heaven, to be with her as she was before she was struck down. In hopes of achieving this heavenly perch, I am determined to use my God-given gifts to help those struck down to rise up.

Will those of you in wheelchairs stand up and walk a teaspoon later? I cannot promise you that. But with God's grace and with your own abiding faith, you will, at the very least, see a *marked improvement*. Over time. Remember, it took the Lord Himself seven days to create the world!

What I *can* promise is a physical compensation that will manifest itself somewhere in the body. If your legs don't recover themselves, your arms will suddenly seem miraculous strong! If your lungs don't empty of phlegm then your heart will leap into the breach! If your complexion does not turn as smooth as a baby's bottom, then you'll find your tresses growing thick as Samson's.

But now is the moment to look deep in your heart and call forth your faith because like our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, I am only with you for a short time. Now is the moment to consider your infirmity and consider your coinage, because tomorrow I must needs forsake you. Yea verily, this is God's Grace in a bottle. And with His grace comes hope. And what price, ladies and gentleman, can we put on hope?

Clear a path, gentlemen. Let the lady so moved partake.

