



MODERN VICES ♦

Snake Oil: The Golden Age of Quack Cures

An AI Wrangler illustrated story



From the film

MARTY

Settle in by the fire, friends, for tonight's vice is a peculiar one, the vice of believing, the hunger to be cured, and the golden age of the men who sold that hunger a lie in a pretty bottle. For a long stretch of years, before there was any real law to stop them, you could buy a bottle promising to heal absolutely anything, and it might contain cocaine, or opium, or alcohol, or worse, and the men who sold it grew rich. This is the age of snake oil, Carol, and the miracle cure that cured nothing.



CAROL

The vice of believing. Marty, that is a gentle and a sad way to name it, because who among us has not wished, desperately, for a bottle that would just fix things.

Where does the very phrase snake oil even come from?



MARTY

From a real man and a real fraud, Carol, a fellow named Clark Stanley who styled himself the Rattlesnake King. He would stand before a crowd, cut open a live rattlesnake, and boil it before their eyes to make his miraculous Snake Oil Liniment, sworn to cure every ache a body could have. It was pure theater. And when the authorities finally tested his famous snake oil years later, Carol, they found it contained no snake at all, just mineral oil, some beef fat, a little red pepper and turpentine for the tingle. Not one drop of the promised cure. And so his name became the name for every worthless remedy ever sold, snake oil.



CAROL

No snake in the snake oil. Marty, that is almost perfect, isn't it, the very product was a lie about a lie. But surely the dangerous ones were worse than beef fat and turpentine. What was really in these bottles?



MARTY

Ah, Carol, this is where the tale turns from silly to frightening. These patent medicines, as they were called, carried no honest list of ingredients, and they were often built on the strongest drugs known. There were soothing syrups for teething babies whose secret active ingredient was morphine. There were tonics and cure-alls loaded with cocaine, sold as a pick-me-up for tired mothers and nervous clerks. The great Coca-Cola itself began its life, Carol, as a medicinal tonic that in its earliest days contained a trace of cocaine, right there in the name. And a respectable German drug company sold a new cough medicine it promised was a safe, non-addictive wonder, and marketed it under a cheerful brand name. That cough medicine was heroin.



CAROL

They sold heroin as a gentle cough syrup and cocaine as a tonic for tired mothers. Marty, that is horrifying, and the poor people buying it had no idea at all what they were feeding their families.



MARTY

None whatsoever, Carol, and that is the crux of the crime. It was not that dangerous substances existed. It was that they hid inside a bottle labeled only Doctor So-and-So's Celebrated Cure, with no warning, no ingredients, no truth. A mother quieting her colicky baby with a soothing syrup had no notion she was giving the child morphine, and could not have known even if she wished to. The whole trade ran on secrecy and on grand, thundering promises. Cures for consumption, for cancer, for baldness, for female complaints, for whatever ailed you, all in the one bottle, all a lie, and some of them slow poison.



CAROL

And I imagine there was no one to stop them, no rule that said you had to tell the truth. Marty, how did people even come to trust such things?



MARTY

Through spectacle and story, Carol, the traveling medicine show. A wagon would roll into a small town, and there would be music and comedy and a dazzling pitchman in a fine coat, and testimonials from planted men in the crowd who swore the cure had raised them from their deathbeds. It was entertainment and salvation rolled together, and in a world with little real medicine and much real suffering, people wanted so badly to believe. And there is one case, Carol, so grim it finally helped turn the tide. A wealthy man drank a popular health tonic, a water that was, unbelievably, laced with radium, the radioactive element, sold as a source of energy and vigor.



CAROL

Radium, in a drink you bought for your health. Marty, tell me that is not what I think it is.

MARTY

It is exactly what you fear, Carol. The man drank bottle after bottle of this radium water, believing it was making him strong, and it was slowly, horribly destroying him from the inside, his very bones coming apart. He died in agony, a rich and ruined man poisoned by a wonder cure, and a newspaper wrote his epitaph in a headline that has never been bettered for grim honesty. The radium water worked fine, it said, until his jaw came off. That scandal, and the muckraking journalists who exposed the filth and fraud in the whole industry, finally shamed the nation into acting.

CAROL

Until his jaw came off. Marty, that is ghastly and unforgettable, and I suppose it took something that ghastly to move the lawmakers. What did they finally do?

MARTY

They passed the first real laws, Carol, the beginnings of what we now take for granted. A Pure Food and Drug Act, requiring that dangerous ingredients at least

be named on the label, so a mother could know there was morphine in the syrup. In time this grew into the whole apparatus of testing and honest labeling and proof that a medicine actually does what it claims before it may be sold. It seems obvious to us now, Carol, that a bottle of cure ought to contain what it says and do what it promises, but that plain idea was bought at the price of countless ruined and poisoned people, and it was the snake-oil age that finally taught it.

CAROL

So all the labels and warnings we never even read today were written in the harm done to those people. Marty, that changes how I will look at a medicine bottle. What is the meaning you take from the golden age of quackery?

MARTY

This, Carol. Of all the vices we will speak of this season, the snake-oil trade preyed on the tenderest thing in us, not the wish to escape or to feel pleasure, but the simple, human, desperate hope to be well, to save a sick child, to ease a dying parent. And a whole industry grew fat by turning that hope into a lie in a bottle. The lesson is not to stop hoping, Carol, for hope is precious. The lesson is that when someone promises you a miracle and profits by it and will not tell you what is in the bottle, the hope is real but the cure is snake oil, and the price is paid in the very lives it promised to save. I'm Marty Shepard.

CAROL

And I'm Carol, and tonight I am thinking of all those trusting souls at the medicine show, aching to be healed, and the honest labels we owe to their suffering. Hope all you like, friends, but ask what is in the bottle. Come back to the fire.