Snake Oil

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

“Doctor Nutbrown’s Incredible Remedies” was emblazoned on the side of the wagon that rolled into the town of Pratchett, Arizona. Holding the reins was Doctor Thaddeus Nutbrown himself, if that was his name, and beside him the pretty woman Susan, Mrs Nutbrown, if that is what she was.

“You can set yourself up beside the livery stables,” said Sheriff John Bigelow. “Just so long as you understand we will have no cheating in this town.”

“I can assure you that every one of my remedies is efficacious, Sheriff,” said ‘the doctor’, who enjoyed using such words to confuse and embarrass. “I will just call in to the local saloon to make myself known to the local populace.”

It seemed to Sheriff Bigelow that there were too many of these people, but when there is no real medicine this will have to do. At least this man had a novel presentation as the sheriff discovered when he attended the show that evening, as seemed to be his duty.

“I have remedies for all distempers here. This is not a case of one chemical for all ailments. We all know that there are charlatans out there who would sell you a cure-all. There is no such thing known in the real world of pharmacology. Different diseases require different cures.”

The sheriff thought that reasonable. Bottles of alcohol with treacle and bitter leaves that were said to be the answer to anything were common fare. But what could he do? If people buy it, he should let them. He would just remember this man’s face, and his name for the time being, in case it turned out to be rotgut.

“I have remedies for abscesses, anaemia, black jaundice, bloody flux, cancrum, catarrh, dropsy, dysentery, French pox, goitre, gout, haemorrhoids, lunacy, melancholia, miasma, palsy, scrofula, scurvy, stranguary, syphilis, thrush, variola, whooping cough any disease beginning with zee.”

And Sheriff Bigelow judged that he appeared to have some knowledge of medical science, or at least the words used in those mysteries, recited in alphabetical order.

“Ladies and gentlemen, but particular you gentlemen here, I also have to share with you what has become my most popular treatment. Some call it a miracle. To me it seems to be just that. Ladies and gentlemen, please meet Susan, my wife. I am sure that you can agree that she is beautiful, and more than that, a more agreeable woman you could not expect to meet. Here she is.”

She was indeed beautiful, and she smiled up an her husband as if he was the most important thing in the world. Sheriff Bigelow was married happily enough, but he doubted if he had ever been looked at like that.

“I am going to show you a photographic image of my wife captured some years ago, before she was my wife. Behold this!”

With a flourish a cloth was pulled from a large image in sepia tones showing a large bad tempered looking woman. The image was doubtlessly touched up a little, but one could perhaps discern some similarity to the slim and pretty smiling woman who stood below it, still looking up admiringly at her husband ‘Doctor’ Nutbrown.

“This Nutbrown’s Essence of Venus. If the lady you love takes just a swig per day, you will see the changes within three weeks. In most cases that is two, or three bottles to be on the safe side. She will lose that ugly fat and those jowls and become more feminine and more beautiful over time. But more importantly, the real beauty you will see is her smile when she looks at you. Gentlemen, how many of you get not looks but glowers from wives and women? Such things she likes doing it less than you like receiving them. Why is it this way? The truth is, her chemistry is out of whack. This will put it right. If she loves you, she will drink it. If you love her, you will make sure that she does. This will change your life gentlemen, and your ladies too. It is my most popular remedy because it does not just cure ills, it changes lives. And the cost is only 50c per bottle. You will never regret paying that, I can assure you. Just remember – this medicine is ONLY FOR WOMEN”.

Sure enough, he may have mentioned some of the other medicines but this was clearly the one in demand. In fact a tussle appeared to the extent that the sheriff felt that he should move forward.

He used his arms to hold back the crowd and to signal that a line should be formed. He turned to Doctor Nutbrown and said: “These are bold claims. There had better be something in them.”

“Don’t worry Sheriff,” the good doctor said. “In fact, if you are a married man then you should take three bottles. I insist you do. Don’t think of payment. They are your for nothing. If you wife does not fall in love with you all over again, I will expect you posse could hunt me down within a week.”

As he took the bottles he could see some in the queue now formed look disgruntled. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Not that he had the product, but that he regarded them all as benighted fools.

Maureen Bigelow was no happier to see him home than she was any other day, but no sadder either. He was her husband. Duty not love kept her in harness, but in truth there was love there, if she would have taken the time to think about it.

“This will make you happy with me, the snake oil salesman said!’ Sheriff Bigelow stood the tree bottles on the table.

“Maybe you should drink it.”

“It’s only for women,” he said.

“Presumably because we have the problem and men don’t”.

“I won’t go into things I don’t understand,” he said. “I’ll stick with my whiskey”. And he pulled the cork from the bottle. He drank regularly but not excessively. He drank to take the edge off, not to make the edge disappear.

In the morning the bottles were still where he had left them. Joshua Bigelow, her younger of the two boys was eating a bowl of oatmeal.

“I am sick of working at the stables, Ma,” he said.

“You seem like you are sick of everything Josh,” she scolded. “You hardly do any work there anyway. You just mope around. Don’t think I haven’t seen you sneaking off. None of the local ranchers will take you.

“I don’t ride so well Ma,” said the boy from under his shaggy mop of hair. “Nothing seems to go right for me. I want to get ahead, but I just can’t find my place. I have to say it, I’m just not happy.”

“Well your father might have the answer for that,” said Maureen. “It turns out that he has been given those 3 bottles of medicine just there. He wanted me to take it, but you seem mighty sadder than me. A swig every day, he told me. Should be at least 8 swigs in a bottle.”

Joshua looked at the bottles vacantly, as he did most things.

The sheriff was busy with other matters and had little time for family. Some cattle had gone missing from the K-Star Ranch, and there was talk that a neighbouring ranch had picked up the unbranded dogies for themselves. A potential range war was an important issue for law enforcement.

But he was back in town some days later to see Doctor Thaddeus Nutbrown pack up his wagon and call upon the Sheriff’s Office on his way out of town.

“I have to say that the first bottle is almost finished and I see now change in my wife,” said Sheriff Bigelow with a wry smile.

“I detect scepticism, Sheriff,” said Dr. Nutbrown. “But I can assure you that this is real. It is a compound that I secured from the Indians. They use it upon their berdache people.”

“Those of them man-woman folk?”

“The Indians, all of them to my knowledge, believe that a special spirit enters the body of a woman in her teens and makes her suddenly attractive and ripe as her blood comes. Then that spirit starts ebbing away from about 10 years after that, so that it slowly reduces until by the time her quinny is all dried out, it is gone completely. This “Essence of Venus” is that spirit in liquid form.”

“Interesting,” said the Sheriff. “But no effect on Mrs. Bigelow that I can see.”

“I will give you two more bottles, Sheriff. A thank you for your hospitality. That will be all that is needed. It may be slow to show the first effects but after 5 bottles in succession the process is unstoppable.”

They walked outside to the wagon and as Dr. Nutbrown checked the wheels Sheriff Bigelow went over to Mrs. Susan Bigelow to wish her well.

“It must be a hard life on the road, and Dr. Nutbrown tells me you have been doing this for years?”

“He has,” she said. “I have only been doing this for a few months. I am the third Mrs. Nutbrown. He has to keep her young and fresh.”

As the wagon pulled away, the Sheriff saw Long John Jacobs from the livery stable walking over with his son Joshua trailing behind.

“I am sorry Sheriff,” said Long John. “I am going to have to let your boy go. Suddenly he can’t even lift a bale of hay!”

There was Joshua, looking so sad that Sheriff Bigelow could not dream of striking him as his father might have done when he was that age. The boy’s eyes seemed somehow bigger and softer, as if the boy was getting younger rather than older.

“Come on, son,” he said. “Let’s get you over to Mabel’s Boarding House and see whether we can’t find work for you there.” Which is what he did.

At home that night he put the other two bottles of Nutbrown’s Essence of Venus on the sideboard, which is where all five bottles remained until fully consumed.

And yet, his wife Maureen seemed unchanged. He was perhaps more disappointed than surprised. He had little time for travelling sellers. And perhaps not even disappointed. Now that she had taken all of this fabled remedy he was mindful that his wife’s often abrasive manner was almost endearing to him.

“Get your boots off and put them on the hearth,” she snapped.

“I see that Dr. Nutbrown’s special medication has not made you any happier, and certainly not as mellow as he promised,” he said.

“Hmmpf,” she snorted. “I have no need of that. It is our son that needed your happiness drug, so he is the one that has been drinking it, not me!”

And with that – or maybe not straight away but soon after – in walked Joshua with a smile on his face that seemed to prove the itinerant doctor’s claims.

“What are you wearing?” The Sheriff’s eyes were bulging in horror.

“It is called a pinafore, Pa,” said the boy, who could not resist a sway, but not a spin, to show how loose the garment was. “It’s a big apron that Mabel recommended I wear while cleaning the rooms and helping in the kitchen.” The boy was beaming at his parents, his eyes sparkling with joy. It was not all like the sad creature who seemed to be moping his way through life.

“And what have you done to your hair?” Maureen chimed in.

“It’s a snood, Mom. You should try one. It just keeps your hair out of the way while you are working. I like to keep things neat and tidy.”

Since when, thought Maureen. But she could not deny that working at the Boarding House had been good for him, or was it something else that had pulled her boy out of his funk.

Sensing that his wonderful clothes might not have won approval, Jason said: “It is just that I have come straight from the boarding house, that’s all. I will change.”

But it seemed to Sheriff Bigelow that he already had.

“It’s that Nutbrown’s Essence of Venus,” he exclaimed, to no one in particular, partly in anger but more in marvel.

“You said it was a feel-good,” snapped Maureen.

“I thought you were taking it, Woman. It’s on the label. Venus. Like the goddess, not the planet. You’ve turned our son into a woman.”

The confused boy felt it was time to intervene: “I have been turned into a woman”.

He said it flatly. Not as if it was a question with the stress on the last, or a statement with a stress on the second word. Just flat, as if in a dream, or a nightmare. He untied the pinafore at the back and let it fall off his shoulders, and then he undid his shirt and pulled it open. There his chest displayed two small but quite distinct mounds each centered with a nipple that was much too wide and pink for any boy.

“Oh my Lord!” said Maureen.

It was not what a young man should do, least of all this far west, but tears began to flow from the eyes of Joshua Bigelow. Big tears that made his big eyes look like dark pools and his wet eyelashes look longer. His cheeks seemed to flush with his clear dismay and it seemed to Sheriff Bigelow that his son was becoming female right in front of him.

Sheriff John Bigelow was as hard as steel, so folks said. He had hunted down tough outlaws with courage and tenacity, and dealt with even the biggest drunks with skill and strength, but his heart was big. People knew that too. Small offences, and even the not so small, could be dealt with without the full force of the law if you could reach his heart, and it seemed that lay close to the surface. He was not one who had never held his children in his arms. Now seemed the time, despite his son’s age. He took and held him … as he might a daughter, if he had ever had one.

“What am I going to do, Dad,” sobbed Josh.

“The process is unstoppable.” Sheriff Bigelow repeated the words as Dr. Nutbrown had spoken them. “I just don’t know how far it’s going to take you.”

Maureen Bigelow knew in that moment how much she loved her husband. In fact she knew it most of the time but tried to make sure he did not see it. It was a sure way to be taken advantage of. Her duty was to make her man the best that he could be, and he was.

She placed a hand on his shoulder and the other hand on her son’s hair. He had always worn it too long, in the style of gamblers, gunfighters and adventurers in the illustrated newspapers, but now it seemed even longer, and softer, and shinier.

She had been a pretty girl in her younger days, but not nearly as pretty as this child.

“I’ll ride south and seek out that Doctor,” said the Sheriff. “If there is a way to fix this then I will find it.” And Sheriff Bigelow is a man of his word, so in the morning, that is what he did.

It had been weeks since Doctor Thaddeus Nutbrown had visited his town, but the trail was easy to follow. Every town remembered him. Many remarked at the miracle he had performed on some of their womenfolk.

“My wife seemed to have reached that age when she lost interest in her man,” remarked the sheriff in one town, as he did the courtesy of calling on the local law in every town he visited. “Then a few bottles of that Essence of Venus and it is like she was ten years before. Not just hungry for love again, but looking younger, and more at risk of producing more brats for me to feed.”

Were there stories of men or boys taking the medicine? “Nobody would be that stupid. That stuff is for women only” came the reply. Sheriff Bigelow stressed over who was responsible. Was it him for not telling Maureen more? Or her or Josh for not reading the label? Or was it the label? It should have carried a warning. He would find Dr. Nutbrown and speak to him of the law.

And then, after several days on his horse, and several towns, he saw the wagon.

Dr. Nutbrown had just finished his presentation and was seeing off the last of his customers, most having purchased Essence of Venus. While Sheriff Bigelow may have been inclined to step in and stop this trade, it was not his jurisdiction, and he wanted all the time he had to deal with the man whose chemistry had so changed his boy.

“I remember … Sheriff Bigelow is it?” Dr. Nutbrown hailed him cheerfully. It rather knocked the lawman off his stride.

“We need to talk,” said the Sheriff. “There has been an accident with one of your medicines.”

“But all my medications are safe, Sheriff, provided you do not exceed the stated dose.”

It seemed that Mrs. Nutbrown cold sense the tension, as women often do. She suddenly moved between them, saying: “Sheriff, why don’t you gentlemen sit and talk and I will find you something to drink.”

“I won’t be drinking anything you are serving,” he snarled in reply. “The last thing has my son growing a pair of tits.”

There was a moment of shocked silence. Nobody knew what to say next. It seemed that whoever spoke first might take responsibility. Some seating had been arranged for the presentation. Sheriff Bigelow slumped onto a stool.

“It’s only tea,” said Mrs. Nutbrown.

“I always explain to everybody that this is only for women,” the doctor said softly. And then with real empathy that even his target, head in hands, could hear: “This must be really bad for you.”

“But does it have to be bad for your son,” chirped Mrs. Nutbrown. She had appeared with hot water which she poured into a large colorful pot.

Sheriff Bigelow raised his head in puzzled disgust. He had ridden for days in a state of distress and she was smiling at him. Her words seemed a cattle prod.

“I want to show you something Sheriff,” she said. With a move that was so swift Sheriff Bigelow had no time to avert his eyes with propriety, she raised her skirts and dropped her drawers. There in plain sight even as the sun was setting, was a small butt obvious penis.

He looked up at her face. It was smiling and even prettier than he remembered from his first sight of her, and he did remember that first sight.

“You drank this stuff?” he asked.

“I did,” she said. “And let me tell you, I have never been happier. Is your son happy? I mean he will be worried about what you think, but is he happy?”

“He flits about with a smile on his face, like a silly girl, if that’s what you mean,” the Sheriff murmured.

“I mean is he happier than he was before … before he changed?”

Sheriff Bigelow knew the answer but could not bring himself to say it. She went back to the pot and poured him out a mug of tea, and one for her husband as well. She planted a kiss on her man’s cheek.

“I don’t know whether you believe in fate, Sheriff?” said Dr. Nutbrown. “Mistakes are mistakes. Perhaps you did not hear my warnings. Perhaps your son ignored them. But rather than blame anybody, consider whether this might be the hand of fate. Some boys were never meant to grow into men. Take my Susan here. Could you imagine her as a man? No! She is a woman. And I thank the Lord every day that she is.”

“My understanding is that she is just the current Mrs. Nutbrown,” sneered the Sheriff.

“I hope that she will be the last,” said the doctor. “I never had much faith in my “Essence of Venus” before her, but now I do. Down to only one does a week now I expect her to remain forever young and fresh – the perfect woman and the perfect wife. Your new daughter should hope to find a man whom she can make as happy as me.”

Sheriff Bigelow had expected to return home with blood on his hands, but instead they held another 6 bottles of Essence of Venus for his excited daughter Joshua.

The End

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