

PERUNA, etc:  
A Modern Medicine Show

Presented to  
the Athenaeum Society  
of Hopkinsville, KY

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*Marvin D. Denison*

A Preachment, dear friends, you are about to receive  
on John Barleycorn, nicotine, and the temptations of Eve!

**CHORUS (see next page)**

V. 1

**Once I was happy and I had a good wife.**

**I had enough money to last me for life.**

**I met with a gal and we went on a spree.**

**She taught me to smoke and to drink whis-key.**

**CHORUS**

V. 2

**Write on the cross at the head of my grave,**

**To women and whiskey here lies a poor slave**

**take warning dear stranger, take warning dear friend**

**They'll write in big letters these words at thy end.**

**Chorus**

$\text{♩} = 64$

**Jim**

**Marvin**

**Mark**

**Ci-gar - eets and whis-key and wild, wild**

**Ci-gar - eets and whis-key and wild, wild**

**wo-men. \_\_\_\_\_ They'll drive you cra-zy, they'll drive you in -**

**wo-men. \_\_\_\_\_ Drive you cra-zy, they'll drive you in -**

**sane. \_\_\_\_\_ Ci-gar - eets and whis-key and wild, wild**

**sane. \_\_\_\_\_ Ci-gar-eets, whis-key and wild, \_ wild**

**wo-men. \_\_\_\_\_ They'll drive you cra-zy, they'll drive you in - sane. \_\_\_\_\_**

**wo-men. \_\_\_\_\_ They'll drive you cra-zy, they'll drive you in - sane. \_\_\_\_\_**

But the major "legal" way to avoid this awful fate--take a powder--a pill-- or even better an elixir of tremendous and mysterious power and an even more exotic name--the more foreign the better!

ENTER Peruna!! Say it with me--all together now-- rise up and shake down that 12th shrimp and join the crusade for this marvelous curative!

Peruna Peruna Peruna Peruna Peruna Peruna Peruna Peruna

The October 7, 1905 article, "The Great American Fraud" by Samuel Hopkins Adams, recounted in the next few minutes was the first of a series of 12 that appeared in Collier's The National Weekly.

The editor of Colliers, Norman Hapgood, had become so affronted by the fraud and effrontery of the patent medicine business, that he decided on a major campaign to expose them. He sought out a reporter capable of digging out the facts and writing a hard-hitting full scale exposure of medical quackery. The man was Samuel Hopkins Adams. This choice may have been one of the shrewdest in the annals of journalism.

Samuel Hopkins Adams (1871-1958) PK of Myron Adams, Jr. and Hester Hopkins Adams. Sam is a direct descendent of the more famous Massachusetts' Adamses, although his grandfather considered this branch of the family in the 19th Century to be "an effete and unenterprising lot...clung (clinging) to an easeful existence in



Massachusetts while the hardier pioneers of the breed were risking the perils and hardships of the wilderness that made up Western New York in 1791!" Despite this rather harsh assessment of their celebrated relations, Sam's great-great-grandfather (Captain John) was a revolutionary war officer; his son (Abner) became one of the contractors on the Erie Canal. Abner's first son had five sons, the youngest married into the Hopkins family, thus linking their family to the descendants of Stephen Hopkins (Rhode Island), one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence! That marriage produced Samuel Hopkins Adams. Enough genealogy for the evening!

Samuel had enrolled at Hamilton College in Clinton, NY at age 16 and would later note that the entire class of 1891 "evinced a certain disinterest in the consumption of midnight oil." He survived the freshman year, but didn't quite make it through the next due to repeated absences, a classroom incident with a bean shooter, and attendance at an evening party after having been recorded as sick during the day! (Some things never change!!) Sam simply said that he and the faculty had "a slight difference of opinion...on a matter of discipline." After an uneventful term at Union College over in Schenectady, Sam returned to Hamilton--with a new resolve to attend class.

After another brief forced temporary exit, he did graduate and went to the big city to work for the NY Sun and from there moved to a variety of writing jobs eventually beginning the 20th century with McClure's and later Colliers.

The publication of the entire series starting with this article, followed by others in 1905 & 1906, so outraged the public that Congress was finally able to enact the first of several pure food and drug laws in 1906. The new law was called the 'Wiley' act after Dr. Harvey Washington Wiley, chief chemist of the U. S. Department of Agriculture who had conducted tests for 20 years evaluating various foods & drugs and who helped Adams with his research. Even before the first article appeared, the Commissioner of Internal Revenue issued an order to his Collectors, ordering them to exact a special tax from the manufacturer of every compound composed of distilled spirits, "even though drugs have been added thereto." The list of "tonics," "blood purifiers" and "cures" was published by the Treasury Department.

The American Medical Association reprinted the entire Collier's series in a booklet also entitled The Great American Fraud and sold 150,000 copies under three revised editions through 1912. In 1906 the AMA set up its own chemical laboratory to evaluate which products were worthy of being granted permission to advertise in the AMA Journal. Dr. Arthur J. Cramp was the director of this project. As his work grew he created The Propaganda Department which not only prepared material alerting physicians to medical quackery but also broadened its audience to include laymen being fleeced by quacks. From exposes written in the Journal he began publishing a series of pamphlets on various quack themes such as "Mechanical Nostrums," "Obesity Cures," etc. The AMA expanded these pamphlets into a three volume series of books with the first appearing in 1911, a second in 1921 and the final one in 1936. The

first two were entitled Nostrums & Quackery and the third volume was entitled Nostrums & Quackery and Pseudo-Medicine. They remain today an important source of information about medical quackery in the first part of this century.

A centerpiece of these first articles was Peruna. Peruna was patented and sold by Dr. Samuel B. Hartman of Columbus, Ohio. Hartman, a German immigrant, created an elixir of water, seven (unidentified) drugs, and 28% (by volume) Cologne spirits--90 proof alcohol!! Throw in a little burned sugar for coloring, a little cubeb for flavor and for about 8 cents, including the cost of the bottle, you have a quart of Peruna to sell for \$1.

The alcohol content of champagne and clarets at the time was around 8 to 9%. Beer averaged about 5%. This was potent stuff. Another popular product, Hostetter's Stomach Bitters approached the levels of bottled-in-bond-whiskey--a whopping 44.3% alcohol!!

These products, and a great variety of others, usually claimed cures for catarrh (the common cold?), but the Peruna label defined pneumonia and tuberculosis as catarrh of the lungs and heart disease as catarrh of the heart. Dr. Hartman published *The Ills of Life* allowing the reader to diagnose virtually any illness as catarrh and prescribing "a teaspoonful thrice daily or oftener" as a effectual cure for everything from canker sores (catarrh of the mouth) to measles. Appendicitis was, you guessed it, catarrh of the appendix. (Colic, mumps, convulsions,

neuralgia, rheumatism) Literally “whatever ails you” could be ameliorated by steady and regular doses of Peruna. What went without general acknowledgement by the company, of course, was that much larger doses were common, especially after the lower consumption no longer had the desired effect. The Peruna book declared that Peruna “can be used any length of time without acquiring a drug habit” and that “nobody could get drunk on the prescribed doses”.

Hopkins noted that “three wineglassfuls in forty-five minutes as a prescription might temporarily alter a prohibitionist’s outlook on life”. Here he obliquely hit on the true nature of the business. In areas of strong Womens Christian Temperance Union activity and among the dedicated teetotalers, patent medicines were literally a godsend! Booze without the stigma--taken by clergy, women, and children--perfectly legal--to say nothing of extremely profitable to both producer and retailer. Gone were the hucksters in the mule-pulled carts on the courthouse squares. These products had hit the mainstream and were on the shelves of legitimate store owners all over the country. The drinker of Peruna didn’t want to get drunk; but, if it, or Paine’s Celery Compound, relieved depression, then bring it on!

This “unconscious drunkenness” was documented by the Journal of the American Medical Association’s first-hand account of a respected clergyman ill from some undetermined malady. Upon examination, his physician pronounced him suffering from chronic alcoholism who was,



at the time of the exam, drunk beyond a shadow of doubt. The family was aghast but told the doctor that for six months the Reverend had been using Peruna as a tonic to "build him up" and combat chronic fatigue. They swore he had taken nothing else as a cure for six months. Newspapers of the time advertised "cures" for Peruna "habits" and in the mountains of West Virginia the "Peruna jag" was a standard term for intoxication.

Hopkins quoted this harrowing tale from the wilds of Wyoming:

"Two men suffering from delirium tremens and one dead is the result of a Peruna intoxication which took place here a few days ago C.E. Armstrong of this place (Pinedale, WY) and a party of three others started out on a camping trip to the Yellowstone country, taking with them several bottles of whiskey, and ten bottles of Peruna, which one of the members of the party was taking as a tonic. The trip lasted over a week, the whiskey was exhausted, and for two days the party was without liquor. At last someone suggested that they use Peruna, of which nine bottles remained. Before they stopped the whole remaining supply had been consumed and the four men were in a state of intoxication, the like of which they had never known before. Finally, one awoke with terrible cramps in his stomach and found his companions seemingly in an almost lifeless condition. Suffering terrible agony, he crawled on his hand and knees to a ranch over a mile distant, the process taking him half a day. Aid was sent to his three companions. Armstrong was dead when the rescue party arrived. The other two men, still unconscious, were brought to town in a wagon, and



are still in a weak and emaciated condition. Armstrong's body was almost tied in a knot and could not be straightened for burial."

While these products had been around for generations, the growth of the popular press, newspapers and periodicals, had provided the advertising vehicles to fuel the demand and increase sales. The 1900 census figures disclosed a \$59,600,000 business in patent medicine--wholesale cost!!

The Peruna company's advertising budget approached \$2 million a year--in 1900 dollars! It would take a brave, or wealthy, publisher willing to risk loss of such cash. *Ladies Home Journal* had been the first. In 1892 Edward Bok, the editor, announced that his magazine would no longer accept patent medicine advertisements. In opposition was the powerful Proprietary Medicine Association. The trade group adopted a ploy that was so effective it should have been patented (Groan) Sorry ! In advertising contracts with over 15,000 newspapers was the following clause: "It is hereby agreed that should your state or the United States government, pass any law that would interfere with or restrict the sale of proprietary medicines, this contract shall become void". Then whenever a bill threatened, the PMA would simply remind the press of the contract clauses--almost without fail resulting in a raft of high-minded editorials condemning this interference with free enterprise, etc. etc. etc. Collier's magazine lost \$80,000 a year when they dropped the patent medicine ads as an accompaniment to Hopkins' articles.

Where were they selling? Sales were strong in all the states where prohibition existed. The mid-west and south were huge sales areas as was Maine. The problem of the "Peruna drunks" became so severe that the Bureau of Indian Affairs banned it from retail sale in the areas under their jurisdiction. Hopkins demanded essentially two things: First, that the government stop permitting liquor to be disguised as medicine--thus escaping the federal taxes associated with alcohol. Secondly, that the labels clearly state the percentage of alcohol each bottle contained. Were both to happen everyone would then know what they were drinking--be it called swamp root, bitters, nerve-builders, or spring tonics. While this may seem a logical set of requests, it presented much more of a practical problem than it may at first glance appear.

The Peruna company had a long-standing practice of acquiring written endorsements of well known people and high government officials. The company in their in-house self-gratulatory publications claimed the endorsements were the result of the transcendent virtues of Peruna. They published a pamphlet entitled *Fifty Members of Congress Send Letters of Indorsement to the Inventor of the Great Catarrh Remedy, Peru-na*. In this printed info-mercial there are quotes from 36 of these "50" Congressional letters. However, in 21 of the 36 there was no indication that the Congressmen had ever used the product. Most were in this vein:

"My secretary had as bad a case of catarrh as I ever saw, and since he has taken one bottle of Peruna he seems like a different man." Romulus

Linney of Taylorsville, NC. Congressman Linney's one sentence was typical of the entire document. Coupled with the huge advertising budgets, restrictive contracts, and "legitimacy" from wide-spread endorsements, the patent medicine companies hardly felt a real threat from a mere journalist. However, as the pressure increased, change was beginning. We were years away from nationwide prohibition and real "modern" regulation and disclosure laws were decades away, but these charges and counter-charges have incredible similarities to battles much closer to home and nearer to our own pocketbooks.

Alas, the glory days of Peruna are gone. This grand and glorious label is now only found on Peruna skin-care products. These are lotions, creams, powders, and shampoos for external use only! I have a price list and 800 # if anyone would like to indulge. It's in these products that the origin of the word is most correctly used. In Finnish, Peruna means potato. All the modern Peruna skin-care products have a potato starch base.

Peruna is as well the proud long used name of the SMU mustang mascot. When that Texas school takes to the field, Peruna is right there ready to lead the charge.

But, for those looking for the real Peruna contribution, look no further then the first decade of the 20th century when Peruna was the rage and Sam Adams preached deliverance.

## Rebuttal:

I would be horribly remiss if I did not at the outset acknowledge my esteemed, semi-sober and as yet unindicted co-conspirators: the Right Honorable Judge Adams and the left-of-center semi-honorable Dr. Schweizer for their willingness to help begin our journey back to the beginning of the 20th century. My apologies to the late, great Peter Sellers, wherever he may be. The song first caught my attention when he performed it on the Muppet Show!