

TUMBLEWEED THOMPSON'S YOUTH TONIC

A Frontier Tale

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Seems as though pretty near everyone in Snakeskin Junction accumulated at least one memorable Tumbleweed Thompson story. Myself, I've got a pocketful. Over that summer, I acquired enough yarns to last me through many a quiet stretch in my life to come. Of all the adventures involving me and Tumbleweed, seems as though the one most folks come back to is the one about the tonic. That seems a good place to start, since it's likely one that that will make me look less guilty than the others. But that's for you to decide, I guess.

On an unusually stifling Sunday afternoon in early June, I was looking for a means to avoid another three hours stuck at home assisting Ma during her Baptist Mission Board sewing circle meeting. But, how? Of honest escape plans, I had precious few options. And Ma could sniff out a fib a mile away. She operated with a gentle hand outside the house, and a firm one inside. I can even now picture the hickory switch resting quietly in the corner of the kitchen, exerting its singular, terrifying influence upon 12-year old Eugene Teitsworth – that would be me – during a moment where I sat casually considering a mischievous action. Just the rustling sound of it being lifted from its place beside the hutch was enough to make my hind parts start aching, and make me re-think any wrongdoing.

Now Ma's sewing circles were nothing to sneeze at. She took her responsibilities as wife of Ezekiel Teitsworth, pastor of Mount Carmel Church very seriously. And the sewing circle was her premier event. The quilts created throughout the summer by her band of loyal wives and widows would be sold at the Turner County Fair in August, with the proceeds benefiting a variety of charitable projects throughout the Colorado frontier.

Which was all well and good, but I couldn't fathom another afternoon squashed into that stuffy living room with a dozen women, listening to Mrs. Bradbury drone on about the symptoms of her gout, and the means she had devised to reduce the swelling in her left big toe. Cleaning our new bathroom – we were among the first in Rattlesnake Junction with indoor plumbing – was strike two. And Ma suggesting I help serve the tea – while wearing her blue gingham apron – was the last straw.

So that Sunday, when Ma proclaimed herself in need of a bottle of molasses for her prize-winning ginger snap cookies, I quickly and loudly volunteered myself for a trip around the corner to McReedy's General Store.

"Back in a jiffy, Ma," I promised, hand outstretched, aiming to reach the doorknob before her usual litany of commandments. Moses only had 10 of them. I should have been so lucky.

"There and back, lickety split," Ma said, wooden spoon dangling from her right hand. "No chin-wagging, lolly-gagging, or loitering with any of your friends, you hear me?"

My eyes immediately shifted to the hickory switch, although I had no real reason to be afearred of Ma's warning. You see, I wasn't exactly at the center of my social circle in those days. In fact, I wasn't even on the edge of one. There was no circle to speak of. There wasn't even a line. And yet, that was the impression she gave – small, but mighty.

I nodded and ducked out the back door just as Widow Springfield was coming in. As usual, she had to turn herself sideways to fit through the frame, and I squeezed myself through the narrow crevice between her shirtwaist and the door jam, stuffing Ma's money into the front pocket of my pants.

With the scent of freedom in my nostrils, I leapt off the porch, bolted past the lilac bushes that framed our front walk, and burst onto the road encircling our town square – actually a circle – once again thankful our house lay on the center of what excitement existed in Snakeskin Junction in those days. There was bound to be some sort of diversion to attend to before picking up the molasses and slowly, deliberately, trudging back home. But, alas, it was Sunday afternoon, and under the instruction of Ezekiel Teitsworth, most were home observing a quiet Sabbath.

I rounded the first bend in the circle, the general store square in my sights. Then, I heard it – a swaggering, golden voice, ringing across the square like a railroad mallet colliding with solid iron.

“Friends, are you weary in body and brain? Is there a hitch in your giddy-up? Is your swagger not waggin’? Is your life panning for gold but coming up empty? Step right up and take a swig from the fountain of youth: Dr. Beauregard J. Thompson’s rejuvenating, intoxicating, sure-to-be motivatin’ Youth Tonic. Guaranteed to pep up any poopy disposition you encounter in your life.”