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*The  
Potion*

*Matias Travieso-Diaz*

## The Potion

By Matias Travieso-Diaz



*Holy song of thanksgiving of a Convalescent to the Deity, in  
the Lydian Mode*

Title of the Third Movement of Beethoven's String Quartet No.  
15, Op. 132

I felt the end was near. After years of struggling against physical and emotional adversity, my body was finally giving up the fight. A malevolent intruder grew in my stomach, bringing a deep discomfort and pain that sapped my energy and forced me from time to time to stop all forms of activity, including – alas – composing.

This final malady could not have come at a worse time. I had been busy working on my Fifth Symphony, into which I was pouring a lifetime of learning and experience; I expected it would be my most important work. When the stomach pain struck, I had finished the Allegro first movement and was bringing the Minuet close to completion. The progress of the infirmity distracted me to the point that I could barely hold a quill in my trembling hand. I would stop writing and turn my attention inward, to examine the progress of the disease and lament the destruction it was leaving on its wake.

Doctor after doctor saw me, prescribing a wide range of treatments – elixirs, emetics, bleedings, hot- and cold-water treatments. I submitted to all, but none seemed to have any effect save make my disposition more and more sullen.



A couple of physicians suggested that spending a few weeks in the countryside, eating simple foods and breathing air free of contaminants, would help cleanse my body of pernicious humors. I consented to the suggestion because I have always loved nature and the idea of a retreat from civilization was increasingly appealing. So, in the early summer, I moved to lodgings in a small village in the mountains, many leagues away from the hubbub of the city. Physicians were scarce in those parts, and while the quality of the treatment arguably diminished, what I lost in patent draughts was gained in peace of mind.

One afternoon I was dozing off, forgetting for a moment my pain, when I was awakened by the arrival of an unexpected visitor who made himself known to the inn's owner as "Doctor Mirabilis, come all the way from Illyria." When asked to state the nature of his business, the visitor indicated: "It has come to my attention that a famous man has taken residence in this establishment, and I have certain business to transact with him."

This overheard exchange left me fully awake and seething with anger, for I had sought refuge in the country partly to escape the idlers and well-wishers whose importuning had made my debilitated condition worse. I put on my slippers and walked out into the common room, ready to castigate the interloper for invading my privacy. My plans were thwarted when the visitor moved briskly in my direction and extended a bony hand that eagerly seized mine.

"My dear Sir, I feel so privileged by the opportunity of meeting you!"

I was startled for a moment by the effusive greeting and, before I could collect myself and reprimand the visitor, the man continued:

"Dr. Schildhorn, who I believe has been your physician for a number of years, mentioned that you were in ill health and informed me of your general whereabouts, and I made haste to come and offer my services to you!"

Schildhorn was one the arguably best qualified among the charlatans who had attempted to cure my gastric malady. I made a note, however, to dismiss him as one of my doctors and maybe take some future action to punish his indiscretion. At the moment, I replied coolly:

“How do you know Dr. Schildhorn?”

“I used to practice medicine for a while in Basel, and at the time he was an intern at the University Hospital. We became friendly and have kept in touch over the years.”

“How did he come to mention my name?”

“In my recent visit to Vienna, I had dinner with him and he bragged a little about the famous people from all over the Empire he has treated. Naturally, your name came up at once and he alluded to your current indisposition.”

“And what is your specialty?”

At this, the man was silent for a second and I had an opportunity to take a closer look at him. He had a swarthy complexion and was quite tall and thin. His face was dominated by a large, aquiline nose, and his massive head appeared even larger by the tangled mess of black curly hair that crowned it. More than a sober physician, he resembled a carnival performer of sorts.

“In general,” he finally replied, “I fix seriously broken things.”

“What do you mean?”

“For present purposes,” he continued, “suffice it to say that I have developed a medicinal draught that cures most physical afflictions. I have come to offer it to you.”

My negative feelings towards Doctor Mirabilis were enhanced by the obvious quackery he was attempting to foist on me. “Are you a fool, Sir, or are you taking me for one?”

Doctor Mirabilis smiled deprecatingly. “It is not important whether I am foolish or not. What matters is whether what I offer can alleviate your suffering.”

“That, I doubt very much. Good day.” I turned my back, heading towards my room.

“Would you at least consider giving my medication a little trial?”

“What do you mean?”

He produced a silver flask from a coat pocket. I noticed, for the first time, that he was wearing heavy winter clothes though the summer weather was balmy. There was definitely something odd about the man.

“Please humor me by trying a sample of my potion in a glass of water, and judge the results for yourself.” He went to a sideboard, picked up a pitcher and a wine glass, and filled the glass with water. He then lifted the stopper from his flask and carefully poured a few drops into the wine glass. The water immediately became turbid and acquired a greenish hue. “Here, try this” he offered.

“I will do nothing of the sort” I replied indignantly. “How do I know you are not trying to poison me?”

“Well, I’ll show you” he took the glass and drank a couple of gulps.

Nothing happened.

Doctor Mirabilis set the wine glass on the table and stared at me. “Well, are you going to try it?”

I scowled but, recognizing that the challenge was hard to evade, picked up the glass and brought it to my lips and drank a mere sip. The taste was bitter but bracing.

A strange mix of sensations then overtook me. On the one hand, I felt dullness, befuddlement, as if waking up in a strange room, unable to find my moorings. At the same time, the intense pain in my stomach seemed to have abated and become a distant discomfort.



“What is happening?” I asked in confusion.

“It is a foretaste of the future” replied the doctor. “This elixir will subdue the pain and, if taken in sufficient quantity over some period of time, will eradicate the disease that afflicts you. Drink it regularly for two or three weeks and you will be cured.”

“That seems too good to be true,” I protested.

Doctor Mirabilis coughed and issued a short, awkward laugh. “Well, there is a little something ... a small physical price that you would have to pay.”

“What is the price?” I bristled. The thought of the popular tragedy of Doctor Faust immediately came to mind. Was I being offered a bargain that would damn my immortal soul?

“Nothing to worry about” replied Doctor Mirabilis, waving his hands as if dismissing my reluctance. “This medicine works in part by dulling sensations, including pain. Drink it and the sharp feelings and emotions that you might otherwise experience will be erased. You will feel calm and free from the ups and downs that bedevil most people. You will experience peace, perhaps for the first time in your life.”

I let the implications of these words sink in, as the temporary relief from the sample began to fade and mental sharpness and physical pain returned. “Would I be able to compose once I achieved that blissful state?” I retorted.

“I can’t opine as to that” replied Doctor Mirabilis. “I’m not a composer and my exposure to music is limited to what I hear in the taverns. I suppose that some types of music with more emotional content would be harder to write after taking this medication.”

Alarm bells were already ringing in my head when I asked the next question: “Would there be a way to experiment? I mean, drink a little and stop to see what it does?”

For the first time in our meeting my visitor showed signs of disquiet. “I don’t think so. In order for the treatment to be effective, the medication must be allowed to run its course completely. If the treatment is only partial, you may not get cured, but the dullness side effect may nonetheless persist.”

“I see. One more question: How much will this treatment cost me?”

“We can discuss the fee later. However, it won’t be much. It will be a great honor for me to restore the health of such an illustrious man.”

“And perhaps you will let the world know of your great deed?”

The man’s skin was too dark to register a full blush but I noticed something in his expression akin to embarrassment. “I suppose I may” he acknowledged.

“I need to think about this” I concluded. “Please come back in a couple of days and I will let you know my feelings on the matter.”

“As you wish” replied Doctor Mirabilis. “I will give my address to the landlady. Please summon me when you are ready to discuss treatment details. In the meantime, should I leave the flask with you in case you want to sample the potion’s properties again? It is almost empty.”

I was about to turn down the offer, but a sharp pang of pain from my midriff made me change my mind. “Thanks.” I replied curtly, pocketing the flask. “Have a good day.”

#

I began wrestling with the problem the moment the door of the inn closed behind Doctor Mirabilis. I was highly suspicious of the doctor. The man was definitely some sort of scoundrel, but was not demanding payment, so outright fraud was probably out of the picture. On the other hand, he had a lot to gain – in prestige and perhaps in the ability to peddle his invention – if he could point to me as a satisfied customer.

Given his interest in making the sale, I expected he would probably play down the negative side effects of administering the potion, including the decline of my mental faculties. Thus, I had to assume that should I pursue the treatment I would become a dullard and my musical career would come to an end.

If the medicine worked as intended, on the other hand, I would be cured and I might embark on a decade or more in which to enjoy life and perhaps move into a new phase as conductor, pianist or music teacher.

Which was more important? My life or my art? I suspect that the answer might be different depending on when it was posed. And there lay the rub, for at this moment I was in the midst of writing a masterpiece that could well be the crowning point of my career. Should I prolong my life at the risk of being unable to finish the symphony? Yet, the suffering caused by the malady was leaving me paralyzed and almost unable to continue writing. What to do?

I spent a couple of sleepless nights agonizing over the dilemma. On the third day, I wrote a short note and had it delivered to Doctor Mirabilis. In essence it said thanks for your offer but I must decline it. I will continue to fight this battle on my own.

#

My greatest personal strength is the ability to write music that reflects the conflicts in my soul, my efforts to master adversity, my views of the world and my fellow men. I decided to draw on that strength to help me overcome my physical weaknesses. I would remain in the country, would take such medications as appeared beneficial, would eat sparingly and as healthily as I could. And I would force myself to continue composing, no matter what the pain.



I discovered that, for me, composing was an effective short-term medication. There is strength in music making that helps one transcend the foibles of the body. My health continued to fail, but my soul burned bright through the creative process.

I wrote the Adagio, the third movement of the symphony, between the summer and fall of that year. Like my physical condition, the music oscillates between passages of immense pain and others of joyful resolve to prevail; it ends having all the pain and the joyfulness merge in a contemplative counterpoint. Writing the last movement, an impassioned Allegro, went quickly on the heels of the Adagio.

I premiered the symphony in November to acclaim by the critics and the public. Perhaps the Adagio will be played at my funeral, when that day comes.

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Late in December, around Christmas, I sat by the fire not thinking of much, just enjoying the warmth and cheer of this, my last holiday season. The flames drew fantastic shapes, some of which reminded me of creatures from the stories grandma would tell me in my early years. I felt at peace and ready to take leave of the world.

The pressure of a hand on my shoulder brought me back to reality. With some difficulty, I turned my head and focused my sight on the man standing by the armchair. Recognition was accompanied by an unpleasant jolt. It was Doctor Schildhorn, who I had stopped seeing after my meeting with Mirabilis last summer. I still resented Schildhorn's indiscretion, which had nearly caused me to give up my career in the hope of better health. I scowled and greeted him harshly:

“What are you doing here, Schildhorn? Didn't I leave instructions with my housekeeper not to let anyone disturb me?”



“Don’t blame Mathilde. I told her that I had some urgent news to impart and she let me in, since she has known me for years.”

“And what is the important news that gives you leave to bother me?”

Schildhorn lowered his head. “There is no news. I know you no longer employ me as your doctor and I have just become aware of the reason for my falling out of favor. I have come to offer my apologies. This being the holiday season I am hoping you will find it in your heart to forgive me.”

I looked at him reproachfully, so he went on: “I hardly know the man who calls himself Doctor Mirabilis; we were mere tavern acquaintances in Basel, and I know nothing about his medical skills, if any. By plying me with wine, he was able to extract from me information that allowed him to locate you. This was a gross error on my part, and I am truly sorry for it.”

I still did not reply, so he followed up with a question: “What did he say to you? Was he trying to sell you something?”

I broke down and summarized in a few words my conversation with Mirabilis. Schildhorn took a deep breath and commented: “You were wise in turning down his offer to supply you with his potion. I expect that it was some addictive drug that would have left you in thrall to him. After a while he would have started demanding money to continue the ‘treatment’ and you might not have been able to refuse.”

My response appeared to surprise Schildhorn: “I actually tried what was left in the flask he left with me. The stuff seems to work; my pain was gone for a couple of days. At the end, however, my refusal was grounded more on a weighing of my priorities than on any reservations about Mirabilis’ character. See, were he to appear before me now, when my most important work is done, I might take him up on his offer.”

“But would you really give up your mind and perhaps your freedom to add more months to your life?”

“Possibly. That is a difficult question. Life is precious, and anything that prolongs it is worth considering. I have managed to continue composing even though my remaining days are few. I no longer write symphonies, but simpler things like piano sonatas and songs. As long as I breathe and my mind is active, I can get new things done. Yet, were he to come back and offer me that flask, I might take him up on it. But I have had no need to resolve the issue because Mirabilis has not come before me again.”

Schildhorn then surprised me. With a broad smile that barely concealed his duplicity, he confessed: “Actually, I know Doctor Mirabilis rather well. I spoke to him recently and he asked me to beg you to give him another chance to provide you with his elixir. Would you consider meeting with him?”

I was appalled by Schildhorn’s chicanery, yet my response was quick: “I am willing to meet with Mirabilis again, but I am unsure of the outcome. I have managed to remain productive. I no longer compose symphonies, but write simpler things like piano sonatas and songs. As long as my mind is active, I can get new things done. Perhaps that is the secret of a life well lived; do as many useful things as you can, big or small, in the time that Fate has granted you. But I will see what he has to offer.”

“So, for you whether to prolong life is still not a simple question,” wondered Schildhorn.

“Life and death decisions never are” I responded.

END

**About the Author:**

Matias Travieso-Diaz describes himself as “notorious Cuban, Animal Farm’s goat, Green Bay Packers and Barça fan, and lover of dogs, opera, classical theater, jazz, Italian food and vino.” He was born in Cuba and migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. He retired and turned his attention to creative writing, a lifelong passion.

Over sixty of his stories have been published or accepted for publication in paying short story anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Some of his unpublished stories have received “honorable mentions” from a number of publications.

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