

Faith Cure on the Channel

By Algernon Blackwood

A letter from my vague friend was always a source of difficulty: it allowed of so many interpretations—contradictory often. But this one was comparatively plain sailing

“You said you were going abroad about this time. So am I. Let’s go as far as Paris together. Send me a line to above address at once. Thursday or Friday would suit me.—Yours, X.Y.Z.
“P.S.—I enclose P.O. for that 10s. I owe you.”

I received this letter on a Wednesday morning.

It was written from the Club, but the Club address was carefully scored out and no other given. The “P.O.” was not enclosed.

In spite of these obstacles, however, we somehow met and arranged to start on Saturday; and the night before we dined together in that excellent little Soho restaurant —“there’s nothing,” my friend always said, “between its cooking and the Ritz, except prices”—and discussed our prospects, he going to finish a book at a Barbizon inn, I to inspect certain machinery in various Continental dairies.

His heart, it was plain, however, was neither in the cooking nor the book, nor in my wonderful machinery. Like a boy with a secret, he was mysterious about something hitherto unshared. Happy, too, for he kept smiling at nothing.

“The fact is,” he observed at last over coffee, I’m really a vile, simply a vile sailor.”

“I remember,” I said, for we had once been companions on the same yacht.

“And you,” he added, holding the black eyebrows steady, “you—are another.” When dealing with simple truths he was often brutally frank.

“What’s the good of talking about it?”

“This,” he replied, paying the bill and giving me the amount of the “P.O.,” “I’ll show you.

He conducted me into a little box of a place bearing the legend outside “Foreign Chemist,” and proceeded first to buy the most curious assortment of strange medicines I ever heard of. Weird indeed must have been his ailments. I had no time for reflection, however, on the point, for suddenly turning to me by way of introduction, and allowing the eyebrow next the chemist to dance and bristle so as to attract his attention, he mumbled, “This is my seasick friend. We’re off to-morrow. If you’ve got the stuff ready we might take it now.” And, before I had time to ask or argue, he had pocketed a little package and we were in the street again.

Never had I known him so brisk and practical.

“It’s a new seasick cure,” he explained darkly as we went home; “something quite new—just invented, in fact; and that chap’s asking a few of his special customers to try it and give, their honest opinions. So I told him we were pretty bad—vile, in fact—and I’ve got this for nothing. He only wants vile sailors, you see, otherwise there’s no test—”

“Know what’s in it?”

He shook his head so violently that I was afraid for the eyebrows.

“But I believe in it. It’s simply wonderful stuff; no bromide, he assured me, and no harmful drugs. Just a seasick cure; that’s all!”

“I’ll take it if you will,” I laughed. “I could take poison with impunity before going on the Channel!”

He gave me one bottle. “Take a dose tonight,” he explained, “another after breakfast in the morning, another in the train, and another the moment you go on board.”

I gave my promise and we separated on his doorstep. It was a lot to promise, but as I have explained, I could drink tar or prussic acid before going on a steamer, and neither would have the time to work injury. I marvelled greatly, however, at my vague friend’s fit of abnormal lucidity, and in the night I dreamed of him surrounded by all the medicine bottles he had bought to take abroad with him, swallowing their contents one by one, and smiling while he did so, with eyebrows grown to the size of hedges.

I took my doses faithfully, with the immediate result that in the train I became aware of symptoms that usually had the decency to wait for the steamer. My friend took his too. He was in excellent spirits, eyes bright, full of confidence. The bottles were wrapped in neat white paper, only the necks visible; and we drank our allotted quantity from the mouths, without glasses.

“Not much taste,” I remarked.

“Wonderful stuff,” he replied. “I believe in it absolutely. It’s good for other things, too it made me sleep like a top, and I had the appetite of a horse for breakfast. That chemist ’ll make his fortune when he brings it out. People will pay a pound a bottle, lots of ’em.”

At Newhaven the sea was agitated—hideously so; even in the harbour the steamers rose and fell absurdly. Not all the fresh, salt winds in the world, nor all the jolly sunshine and sparkling waves, nor all that strong beauty that comes with the first glimpse of the sea and long horizons, could lessen the sinking dread that was in my— my heart. Truth to tell, I had no more belief in the elixir than if it had been chopped hay and treacle.

My friend, however, was confidence personified. “The fact is,” he said, laughing at the wind and sea, “the real fact is *I believe in that chemist*. He told me this stuff was infallible; and I believe it is. The trouble with you is funk—sheer blue funk.”

We stuck to our guns and swallowed the last prescribed dose just before the syren announced our departure—and fifteen minutes later. . . .

It was a degrading three hours; and the sting of it was that my friend, with a hideous cap tied down about his ears, a smile that was in the worst possible taste, and a jaunty confidence that was even more insulting than he intended it to be, walked up and down that loathsome, sliding, switchback deck the entire way. Not the entire way, though, for half-way across he disappeared into the dining-room, and returned in due course with that brown beard of his charged with bread-crumbs, and between his lips actually—a pipe. And, without so much as speaking to me, he paced to and fro before my chair, when a little of that imagination he put so delightfully into his books would have led him discreetly to pace the other deck where I could not see him. I thought out endless revenges, but the fact was I never had time to think out any single revenge properly to its conclusion. Something—something unspeakably vile—always came to interfere; and the sight of my friend, balancing up and down the rolling deck chatting to sailors, admiring the sea and sky, and puffing hard at his pipe all the time, was, I think, the most abominable thing I have ever seen.

Simply marvellous, I call it,” he told me in the *douane* at Dieppe. “The stuff is a revolutionary discovery. It’s the first time I ever ate a meal on a steamer in my life. Sorry you suffered so. Can’t understand it,” he added, with a complacency that was insufferable. I was positively delighted to see the Customs officer open *all* his bags and litter his things about in glorious confusion. . . .

In Paris that night our little hotel was rather full, and we had to share a big two-bedded room. My friend groaned a good deal between two and three in the morning and kept me awake; and once, somewhere about five a.m., I saw him with a lighted candle fumbling at the table among a lot of little white paper packages which I recognised as his purchases from that criminal London chemist who had concocted the seasick cure.

It was at nine o'clock, however, while he was down at his bath, that I noticed something on the table by his bed that instantly arrested my attention. Regardless of morals, I investigated. It was unmistakable. It was his own bottle of the seasick cure. He had never taken it at all!

Then, just as his step sounded in the passage, it flashed across me. He had made one of his usual muddles. He had mistaken the bottle. He had swallowed the contents of some other phial instead.

Revenge is sweet; but I felt well again, and no longer harboured any spite. There was just time to hide the bottle in my hand when he entered.

"Awful headache I've got," he said. "Can't make out what's wrong with me. Such funny pains, too."

"After-effects of the seasick cure, probably. They'll pass in time," I suggested. But he remained in bed for a day and a night with all the symptoms of *mal de mer* on land.

It was many weeks later when I told him the truth, and showed the bottle to prove it—just in time to prevent his telling the chemist, "I have tried your seasick cure and found it absolutely efficacious," etc.

"What cured you," I said, "was far more wonderful than anything one can buy in bottles. It was faith, sheer faith!"

"I believe you're right," he replied meekly. "I believed in that stuff *absolutely*." Then he added, "But, you know, I should like to find out what it was I *did* take."