

## THE ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS AND DEATH OF THE ELDER PLINY

*To Tacitus*

Your request that I would send you an account of my uncle's end, so that you may transmit a more exact record of it to posterity, deserves my acknowledgements; for if his death shall be celebrated by your pen, the glory of it, I am aware, will be rendered for ever deathless. For although he perished, as did whole peoples and cities, in the destruction of a most beautiful region, and by a misfortune memorable enough to promise him a kind of immortality; although he has himself composed many and lasting works; yet, I am persuaded, the mentioning of him in your immortal writings will greatly contribute to the perpetuation of his name. Happy I esteem those whom Providence has gifted with the ability either to do things worthy of being written, or to write in a manner worthy of being read; but most happy they, who are blessed with both talents! In which latter class my uncle will be placed both by his own writings and by yours. The more willingly do I undertake, indeed solicit, the task you set me.

He was at that time with the fleet under his command at Misenum.<sup>1</sup> On the 24th of August, at about one in the afternoon, my mother requested him to observe a cloud of very unusual size and appearance. He had sunned himself, then taken a cold bath, and after a leisurely luncheon was engaged in study. He immediately called for his shoes and went up an eminence from which he might best view this uncommon spectacle. It was not at that distance discernible from what mountain this cloud issued, but it was found afterwards to be Vesuvius. I cannot give you a more exact description of its shape than by comparing it to that of an umbrella pine-tree. For it shot up a great height in the form of a trunk, which extended itself at the top into several branches; because, I imagine, a momentary gust of air blew it aloft, and then failing, forsook it; thus causing the cloud to expand laterally as it dissolved – or possibly the downward pressure of its own weight produced this effect. It was at one moment white, at another dark and spotted, as if it had carried up earth or cinders.

1. See below, p. 392, n.

My uncle, true savant that he was, considered the phenomenon to be important and worth a nearer view. He ordered a light vessel to be got ready, and gave me the opportunity, if I thought proper, to accompany him. I replied I would rather study; and, as it happened, he had himself given me a theme for composition. As he was coming out of the house he received a note from Rectina, the wife of Bassus, who was in the utmost alarm at the imminent danger (his villa stood just below us, and there was no way to escape but by sea); she earnestly entreated him to save her from such deadly peril. He changed his first design and what he began in a scientific, he pursued in a heroic frame of mind. He ordered large galleys to be launched, and went himself on board one, with the intention of assisting not only Rectina, but many others; for the villas stand extremely thick upon that beautiful coast. Hastening to the place from which others were flying, he steered his direct course to the point of danger, and with such freedom from fear as to be able to make and dictate his observations upon the successive motions and configurations of the dreadful volcano.

And now cinders, which grew thicker and hotter the nearer he approached, fell into the ships, then pumice-stones too, with stones blackened, scorched, and cracked by fire; then the sea ebbed suddenly from under them, while the shore was blocked up by landslips from the mountains. After considering a moment whether he should retreat he said to the captain who was urging that course, 'Fortune befriends the brave! Take me to Pomponianus.' Pomponianus was then at Stabiae, distant by half the width of the bay (for, as you know, the shore, curving gently in its sweep, forms here a receptacle for the sea). He had already embarked his baggage; for though at Stabiae the danger was not yet near, it was full in view, and certain to be extremely near, as soon as it spread; and he resolved to fly as soon as the contrary wind should cease. It was entirely favourable, however, for carrying my uncle to Pomponianus. He embraced, comforted, and encouraged his alarmed friend, and in order to soothe the other's fears by his own unconcern, desired to be conducted to a bathroom; and after having bathed, he sat down to supper with great cheerfulness, or at least (which is equally heroic) with all the appearance of it.

In the meanwhile Mount Vesuvius was blazing in several places with spreading and towering flames, the refulgent brightness of which the darkness of the night set in high relief. But my uncle, in

order to soothe apprehensions, kept saying that some fires had been left alight by the terrified country people, and what they saw were only deserted villas on fire in the abandoned district. After this he retired to rest, and it is most certain that his rest was a most genuine slumber; for his breathing, which (as he was pretty fat) was somewhat heavy and sonorous, was heard by those who attended at the door of his bedroom. But the court which led to his apartment now lay so deep under a mixture of pumice-stone and ashes that, if he had continued longer in his bedroom, the way out would have been blocked. On being aroused, he came out, and returned to Pomponianus and the others, who had sat up all night. They consulted together as to whether they should hold out in the house, or wander about in the open. For the house now tottered under repeated and violent concussions, and seemed to rock to and fro as if torn from its foundations. In the open air, on the other hand, they dreaded the falling pumice-stones, light and porous though they were. Yet this, by comparison, seemed the lesser danger of the two – a conclusion which my uncle arrived at by balancing reasons, and the others by balancing fears. They tied pillows upon their heads with napkins; and this was their only defence against the showers that fell round them.

It was now day everywhere else, but there a deeper darkness prevailed than in the most obscure night: relieved, however, by many torches and other illuminations. They thought proper to go down upon the shore to observe from close at hand if they could possibly put out to sea, but they found the waves still running extremely high, and against them. There my uncle, having thrown himself down upon a disused sail, repeatedly called for, and drank, draughts of cold water. Soon after, flames and a strong smell of sulphur (their forerunner) dispersed the rest of the company in flight; him they only aroused. He raised himself up with the assistance of two of his slaves, but instantly fell; some unusually gross vapour, as I conjecture, having obstructed his breathing and blocked his windpipe, which was not only naturally weak and constricted, but chronically inflamed. When day dawned again (the third from the last which he beheld) his body was found entire and uninjured, and still fully clothed as in life; its posture was that of a sleeping rather than a dead man.

Meanwhile my mother and I were at Misenum. But this has no connexion with history, and your inquiry went no farther than

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concerning my uncle's death. I will therefore put an end to my letter. Suffer me only to add that I have faithfully related to you what I was either an eye-witness of myself, or heard at the time, when report speaks most truly. You will select what is most suitable to your purpose; for there is a great difference between a letter, and a history – between writing to a friend, and writing for the public.

Adapted from WILLIAM MELMOTH (1746)<sup>1</sup>