

THE VOLCANO

by JOHN MICALLEF

A Parable about man as an existent-towards-death

THE sun was hot; the soil cracked and the grass parched. Flora and her husband were sitting under a chestnut tree; a bottle of wine was on the grass beside the skeleton of a roast chicken. They were relaxed, like they were back on their honeymoon picnic; but Victor was fat now in his late fifties, and had a double chin, and Flora with her features hard set as in rock looked older than her age. Victor reached out for the wine; he frowned as he twitched his back.

'Don't strain yourself!' She poured the wine.

He drank slowly as he gnawed at the leg of the roast chicken. 'What a blow-out!' he murmured. 'It reminds me of the past when I could eat a chicken all by myself'.

'We should be going.'

'What's the big hurry for, Flora? Let's watch the volcano spew fire.'

'I hate that monster up there; yet somehow it fascinates me,' she remarked.

'I'd be thrilled to see an eruption,' he said.

'You'd be scared to death,' Flora replied. 'But I - I would be thrilled. I've always been the stronger one, Vic.'

'That's why you *married* me?'

'That's why you married *me*. You needed a stronger woman to lean on.'

'You wanted to boss over me,' Victor said. 'You never loved me?'

'What a question after thirty years of marriage!'

'I was always scared to ask you.'

'What makes you bold now?'

'I'm still scared, but more curious than ever. I'm getting on, one of these days you'll bury me.'

'You speak like an idiot.'

'Perhaps! I don't care to live much longer. Life has beat me. The way we live – our bureaucratic organization, our charge-accounts, our computer systems – all very neat but dull,' he remarked. 'They take over our life – our hands become their tentacles. What a world we've made to live in!'

'Do you hate me? Flora asked.

'I put up with you.'

'Why?'

'You're the only thing I can relate to,' he said. 'We thrive on hate, you might say. It's our way of existing. If we cease to hate, we cease to live.'

A tramp came their way; he wore a beard several days old, his step was not so steady, his clothes were dirty, his trousers baggy and stained with grease, his coat pockets torn and his shoes had no laces.

'Good evening!' he remarked.

'What do you want?' Flora asked.

'Who? Me? Nothing. Unless, perhaps, you have something to drink.'

'There's plenty of water around,' Flora replied.

'Water's bad for the liver, ma'am.' He moved away. Then he saw the bottle, stopped and turned back. 'You couldn't spare a drop.'

Victor took a glass and filled it up. He was about to hand it over to the drunk, but Flora took away the glass from his hand. 'We don't lend out glasses,' she said.

'Sorry, no glass, no wine,' Victor remarked, as he drunk the wine himself.

'You're half-drunk, anyway,' she added.

'By nightfall, I'd be dead drunk, ma'am, if we survive, that is.'

'Why shouldn't we? It isn't the end of the world!'

'More or less – as far as we're concerned,' the tramp replied.

'You must be more drunk than I thought.'

'I wish I were, m'm, so I wouldn't bother about the blasted volcano.'

'What's wrong with the volcano?' Victor asked.

'I can't talk, man. My throat's dry.'

'Here drink.' He filled a glass of wine, spilt a little on his trousers, and handed it to him.

'This is good booze, man.'

'What's the matter with the volcano?' Victor insisted.

'Don't you feel the heat, man?' The tramp took off his jacket and threw it on the grass, then unbuttoned his shirt all the way and pulled it out of his trousers.

'It's sure hot,' Victor remarked, as he loosened his tie. Flora frowned at him, but he shrugged his shoulders; then he took off his tie just to spite her.

'Can I have another drop?' the tramp asked.

'On with your story first.' Flora wanted her wine's worth.

'I was on my way to the barber's,' the tramp said. 'I used to be a respectable person.' He burped. 'Hell! What does it matter now? If it's the end, why waste my money on a hair cut.'

'You look terrible!' Flora remarked.

'At this stage, appearances don't count, m'm. I spent all my money on booze. Another drop, please.'

Victor filled the glass, and handed it to him. 'Keep talking,' he said, as he took off his jacket, and threw it on the grass. Flora unbuttoned her blouse too.

'It should be cooler now that the sun is down. Why is it so clammy?' Flora remarked.

'It's like an oven now.'

'Look at the crater!' Victor exclaimed. How it glows in the dusk!

A man came up carrying a suitcase. He opened it, took out several instruments, took some measurements, scribbled a few notes, but he never said a word.

'What are you doing?' Victor asked.

'I'm running some tests to study the stages of the eruption.'

'What eruption?'

'What are you doing here?' the scientist said. 'Everybody's leaving town. The volcano might explode any minute.'

'Then why don't you go too?' Flora asked.

'I have a job to do.'

'Look!' Victor shouted. 'The flame is curling up.'

'That's the pit of hell,' said the tramp.

'It's behaved well all these years,' Flora commented.

'It's sure misbehaving now, m'm,' the tramp said. 'God! I'm thirsty. Can you spare another drop?'

Victor gave him the bottle. He stuck it in his mouth and drank it dry.

'Man, I tell you, before the night is out, it will be spitting fire and brimstone,' the tramp said, as he took off his shirt. 'I hope the lady doesn't mind,' he added.

'You've been drinking too much,' Flora remarked.

'What do you expect me to do? Beat my chest and confess my sins? I enjoyed my sins and I couldn't care less what happens to me or to the rest of the world once I'm dead.'

The scientist went on with his tests; Flora and Victor stretched out on the grass.

'Don't you believe in God?' Flora asked the tramp.

'Is he going to hold back the explosion?'

'You never can tell,' Victor murmured.

The scientist turned. 'What has to happen will happen.' Then he went back to his instruments.

'We'll find out before the night's over,' Flora added.

'Let's go and have a ball. You don't want to waste your last night doing nothing,' the tramp went on. 'Leave your sleeping bag, if she wants to stay and we'll go and get two broads.'

'Look man, take another bottle and leave us in peace.' She handed him the bottle. 'Now beat it,' she added as he grabbed it and left. 'That man was getting on my nerves.'

'What's happened to you, Flo? You gave him our last bottle.'

'Vic, if it's the end, we don't need it.'

'You're a strange woman.'

'I was thinking,' Flora said; then she stopped.

'You don't have to think, Flora. 'We're in a mess, anyway.'

'I was thinking.' Flora ignored his interruption, 'I gave you a hell of a time.'

'It's too late for all that jazz, Flo.'

'I wanted to tell you before - but,' she broke off.

'You're human, Flora! You really feel -'

'What a pity it's too late!' Flora murmured.

'You've become sentimental?'

'I've wasted my life.'

'Are you scared, Flo?'

'If only I could start all over.'

'Quit your silly talk, Flo. Let's go home.'

'Home? What's the use?'

'Let's run away, then,' Victor said.

'Where would we go?'

'Away from the volcano.'

'There are volcanoes all over the world.'

'So there's nothing we can do?' Victor asked.

'You'd like to go and have some fun for a change.'

'I've put up with you long enough, Flo. I can stick it out another night.'

The scientist was climbing higher up the volcano to take more measurements.

'If only it rained!' Flo remarked.

'Let's cut off all the ifs and face facts.' He took off his jacket and his shirt slowly, as though he was peeling them off.

'If I were at home, I'd shed off all my clothes.'

'Why don't you?' Vic asked, as he took off his trousers.

'What if the tramp comes back?'

'Who cares!'

She took off her blouse, and her skirt. She looked grotesque with her huge rear; but Victor was as shapeless with his bulge on his tummy, and his flat chest.

'We sure look funny!' Flora remarked.

'Does it matter how we look? For the first time, we are looking at each other and we are waiting to die.'

The smoke was thicker now, and it was creeping down from all sides. They wiped off the sweat with their wet clothes and they brushed the ashes off their bodies. Small stones began to roll down the mountain.

The tramp came back, wearing his sandals and his trunks. 'How do you like my outfit? I'm melting. Have you any more booze? I know you did your good deed for today; but do another one for tomorrow. Because there ain't going to be any tomorrow.'

'We ran out of juice too,' Vic murmured. 'Here's some money, perhaps you can find some to buy.' He emptied his purse in the tramp's hands.

'Thanks, old man, you sure have a big heart. Why do people have to wait for a crisis to be kind? I have to run now before the bars close down or burn up.' He ran away.

'I'm going to die, but I don't care,' Victor remarked.

'The heat's gone to your head, Vic.'

'No, Flo. I've never been happy. I just want to die. I never had enough guts to kick the bucket; tonight I'm kind of glad it's going to be over.'

'Did I make your life that miserable?'

'We never understood each other, Flo.'

'I'm scared, Vic. I wish I could live my life all over.'

'You have a few hours left. Live them up to make up for a lifetime wasted,' Victor said.

'What can I do?' She took his hand; then she leaned over his shoulder.

He caressed her hair. 'We've not made love since, since —' and he stopped.

'We've never made love, Vic, not really. Perhaps I've never been capable of loving or even feeling.' She put her arms round his body. 'I want to love you, Vic.'

'Since when?' Vic's voice was scornful.

'Since now.'

'Am I supposed to believe you?'

'I know it sounds phony, but I do feel. I'm beginning to love you.'

'We're going to die,' Victor said.

'I don't want to die; but what can I do?'

'You can do nothing,' Victor replied.

'Can I love you enough to make up for thirty years of misery?' She brushed away the ashes from his shoulders and wiped the sweat on his face.

'You really care?' Vic murmured. He sniffed; then he began to cough.

'You've got that cough again,' she whispered.

'It's the sulphur from the mouth of that beast.'

She hugged him and kissed him — the first kiss since their honeymoon. 'It's so funny I'd like to scream.'

'We're finally learning to live and we've got to learn to die,' she said.

The volcano rumbled like thunder on a sudden storm. The leaves on the tree were all shrivelled up.

'If only we could start all over!' Flora murmured.

'We found each other's love, Flo. It's too late, I know, but I rather die than go back to our hate.'

'We don't have to go back to our hate. We can start clean this time.'

'We are what we've made ourselves, Flo. Love is easy now; because we're leaving – both of us. If we had to live together we'd be at each other's throat once again,' he remarked.

'I'm scared of death.'

'I'm scared of life, Flo. We tortured each other and – let's face it – we enjoyed our sadism.'

'We've exploited each other's weakness, Vic. Now our fear brought us together. Somehow, we've learned to share our fear and we found our love.'

'Come closer,' he whispered. She pushed her body against his, and kissed him. 'I'm ready to die now,' he said. 'Imagine going back to my stamp-collecting to kill time, and our sandwich dinners, while we watched those silly programmes on the telly, and my loneliness when I tried to make love to you and I couldn't even function like a man because you were so damn frigid.'

'We don't have to go back to that.'

'But we will, darling. We'd start torturing ourselves once again.'

'Do you love me a little, Vic?'

'I loved you a lot once, a long time ago; then my love died inside me.'

'I killed your love,' she said.

'Somehow you left the seed in my heart. It's sprouting again now, I'm drawn to you; I don't hate you any longer.'

'I used to hate myself for hating you, Vic; now I'm beginning to respect you.'

'I didn't think you were capable of love; now as I embrace you, I feel less scared. Perhaps because I am no longer lonely, since I found your love,' he said.

'I never respected you, because you were so damn inefficient. You let everybody treat you like dirt, because you were honest.'

'I was lucky I could hold my job,' he said. 'I barely saved my self-respect. Now it will be over in an hour or two. If we had to start all over –' He broke off.

'You've never forgotten nor forgiven me,' she said, 'but now it doesn't matter.'

The tramp was back, retching and singing. 'I beg your pardon,' he said as he saw them locked in an embrace.

They ignored him, so he reeled out. 'I'd like to go now while the going's good,' Victor murmured.

'We've got a reason to live now.'

'So we've got a reason to die,' he explained. 'We've always lived under a threat: we didn't realize it, and life became a matter of routine. Now all of a sudden we see the volcano and smell the sulphur; so the ground breaks open under our feet and we begin to live.'

'When we face death?' she asked.

'When we accept death.'

The tramp was back. 'It's hundred and twenty in the moonlight,' he uttered.

'You ran out of booze again?'

'I'm bored. This business of waiting for death gets on my nerves. Hell, I couldn't find a broad. The demand exceeds the supply, I guess.'

'You're dead drunk.'

'Not yet; but I'm working on that too.'

The scientist came down; he stopped and wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. 'Any minute now,' he said. 'That crater might go like a huge hydrogen bomb.'

'That's only your opinion,' Victor commented.

'A scientist has no opinions. I deal in facts as far as I can.'

'I'm going fishing,' the tramp said.

'The sea is boiling.'

'That's good. I catch the fish with instant cooking. See you - if you're still around.' He walked away.

'How do you manage to keep your cool?' Flora asked the scientist.

'I concentrate on my work and forget the rest of the world.'

'What if we all die? You've been wasting your time,' Victor said.

'It's worth it while it lasts,' the scientist replied.

'Are you ready to die?' Flora asked.

'I ignore that question.'

'You're scared to answer?' Victor said.

'No. The question doesn't compute in my brain,' he replied.

'What sort of brain do you have?' Victor asked.

'I live day by day. I do my job, and go to bed; then next day, I take up where I left off.'

'Don't you ever get messed up inside you? Flora asked.

'I've organized my life on a rational basis.'

'You amaze me, - you're either loony or phoney,' Victor said.

'Why don't you sit down and relax?' Flora asked. 'Take off your clothes and have a smoke.'

'I have all the smoke I can take. I just wait, but I hate to waste my time. Maybe it's a false alarm,' he added.

'When will we know?' Victor asked.

'Never. There's always a threat of an explosion or an eruption somewhere sometime. You just sit tight and go about your business.'

'You've ceased to be human,' Flora remarked.

'I've learned to live with death; when it comes, it will be like closing my lab to go to bed.'

'Except that you won't wake up the next day,' Victor said.

'Someone else will go on with my work.'

'Your life doesn't make sense,' Victor said.

'I put all the sense I want into it. Excuse me, I must go on with my tests.'

'What are you made of, man?' Victor asked. But the scientist had already walked away.

'I can't take it much longer, Vic.' She huddled close to him. 'Now that I care, the anxiety kills me.'

'When we begin to care, we begin to live; but when we begin to live, we also begin to die.'

'I begin to understand,' Flora whispered. 'Every day is a burden; but every moment carries the burden of all our days. And we wait, day after day until we don't have to wait any longer. Now that the end is near, I wish it were still far away. I don't want to die, but I'd be afraid to live either. I'm scared I'd mess it up all over.'

'I know, my love; we yearn to live and yet we lie and wait for death.'

'Perhaps now we are less scared of death than of life,' Flora remarked.

'I can't take it any longer!' The tramp grumbled as he returned. 'I'm drunk, yet I can't stand waiting for death, like I was waiting for my turn to be put to trial.'

'Why don't you lie down and try to sleep.'

'I don't want to die.'

'Grab a satellite then, and go to the moon.' Victor was sarcastic.

'That's not funny - man. Don't you see - this is the end. The

end of everything that ever meant anything to me, or to you.'

'We still have ourselves,' Flora remarked.

'Have you nobody who cares for you?'

'I thought I did. I had lots of girls, I thought. I wasted time and money on them. I ask you – Is life worth living?'

'You can ask that question for ever,' Flora replied, 'but you'll never find the right answer.'

'Your question is your answer; you wouldn't ask the question if the answer wasn't obvious,' Victor remarked.

'I can't live like this – with death chasing me all the way,' the tramp said.

'Suppose you had a bad ticker – you could drop dead any minute.'

'What do you expect me to do – lie down and wait for the end?' he asked.

'You can go about your business like the scientist; till the end reaches the end; or you can accept to love and care and share your anxiety,' Victor explained.

'Or go and get screwed,' the tramp said.

'Whatever you do, you'd have to wait,' Victor added.

'I shan't wait. This waiting kills me. It's like taking a lifetime to die.'

'That's exactly the way it is,' Vic insisted.

'I can't stand a slow death. I don't mind a big bang. I've been under fire before; but I can't stand waiting to melt in this damn heat. I have to do something about it. Life's a big swindle.' He went away again.

All over the valley people were running away from the volcano; but wherever they went, they found another volcano ready to erupt. Still, they kept running hoping to find some deserted spot, where no volcano had ever raised its peak of flame and smoke.

The scientist was still checking his measurements, while Flora and Victor were still making love. The tramp was back, reeling and shaking his bottle, his back pouring with sweat.

'Won't you two have a drink with me – kind of farewell toast? Mind you, it's not the best booze, but tonight anything goes.'

'Why don't you dry up?' Victor asked.

'I'm all dry inside; so I wet my whistle from time to time.'

'How's the mass evacuation going on?'

'They've stopped it. It's of no use,' he explained. 'Whatever you

are, some monster is going to eat you up. It's a waste of good gas. Save it for the journey to the other world — that's what I say. Why don't you laugh? Don't you like my jokes? They're supposed to be good. I tried them at a variety show a moment ago. They roared.'

'How can people sit on a variety show on a night like this?' Flora asked.

'What do you expect? Some are in church beating their chest flat with remorse to make God change his mind about the explosion. But God doesn't give a damn,' the tramp said. 'What's the use of prayer?'

'What are you trying to prove?' Victor asked.

'I'm not trying to prove anything. I'm talking, man, so I don't have to think. I can't face myself and know I'm going to end up in bits. I just can't take the suspense any longer,' the tramp complained. 'If only I could relax and watch the blow-up on the telly — I'd see myself going to pieces, and I wouldn't bat an eyelid. Pity! The cameras are dripping with sweat. I bet the fireworks will beat any Thanksgiving celebration. Hardly worth thanking for — don't you think?'

'Why don't you shut up, man?' Victor asked.

'Because I can't stand this waiting to die. Why do we have to have volcanoes, anyway? They sure are an expendable luxury, and the world's a mess with all these volcanoes ready to blow up any minute. You must excuse me. I need more booze.' Then he vanished with a leap.

Deep down the earth was bubbling and gurgling; the soil quivered and the leaves of the chestnut tree were dried up. The smoke on the crater was curling up like a mushroom, as the scientist came back.

'You're wasting your time,' Victor said. 'It wouldn't matter if somebody could take over where you left off; but we are all going to die. It doesn't make sense.'

'Maybe you're right, but I won't quit.' The scientist walked away into the smoke up the folds of the volcano.

Then the tramp was back with a huge long pipe which he held in his mouth. 'Say, you care for a draught of beer? I found a huge barrel of beer in a deserted bar. Too heavy to move; so I hit upon this device to have a drink handy any time.'

'How long does it take you to get drunk?'

'I'm getting drunk for all the teetotallers in the world.'

'What's the latest on the eruption?' Victor asked.

'Everything is following on schedule. The world is going to pieces bit by bit – a little here, a little there; a chip gets broken in the south, a spark goes off in the north.'

'What's everything doing?' Flora asked.

'They like to blab out what they feel like waiting for the big bang, or they just complain. Why should their life be cut short because of these bloody volcanoes? They have no one to blame, so they blame the good God. We shouldn't have been born in the first place, if we had to end up this way – that's what they say. Or they just don't care, because they don't realize it's inevitable. Man is a big mistake or a joke. That's what I say.'

'What are you going to do?' Flora asked.

'I don't give a damn, either way. I didn't care to be born. I don't mind dying; but I can't stand the waiting. Hell, you make me think and I don't want to think. I get scared of my thinking.'

'What are the odds that our volcano blows up first?' Victor asked.

'Fifty-fifty.'

'It might never blow up,' Victor suggested.

'It will blow up; but nobody can tell when. If you don't mind, I'm going to lie down and drink myself to sleep.'

'It's your funeral, mister,' Flora said.

'It's your funeral too. You'd better get ready.'

'All our life is one long dress rehearsal for our funeral,' Victor replied.

The tramp lay down and began to snore. Flora and Victor embraced and made love as they had never before; the people down in the valley went on talking and laughing, so they wouldn't have to think, while the volcano rumbled and thundered.

Next morning the sun rose again, and everybody went about his business, but Flora and Victor still heard the volcano rumble; so even in their old age, they still made love as best as they could, for they were not sure whether that day would be their last.