

## **The Voyage of the Sigismondo**

*by*  
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Today we grope to interpret the radiological emissions of the scattered stars and to unscramble the mathematical message of the gathered genome. We geologists know what it is to doubt, to quest and to be confused. I can sense the beauty and the grandeur of the part-seen splendors about me and yet I struggle in vain to frame the phrase which expresses my puny understanding, for I have not the words to match the wonder nor the wit to comprehend it.

Join my Father and I on a balmy island beach at midnight. The sand is black. The sea is black. The sheer mountain before us is black and looming. Cicadas sing from the tussocks to sweethearts they have never beheld, and yet seem assured are there for the courting. But my poor Father can no longer hear them, though he knows they must be there.

We are in a world of sound without sight and of sight without sound.

Far from the distant summit comes a fleeting glow of red reflected upon the flimsy awning of mist above. Occasionally silent white sparks describe their steep parabolas as if Vulcan himself were smiting a kindling flint as Aeolus blew his damp and salty tinder. Obliquely down the hillside process dancing lines of flashlights as the descending files of trekkers pick their paths across the scoria.

The bars of San Vincenzo have closed but close at hand a saffron garland of sodium lamps marks the jetty where the adze-hewn timbers of the motor ketch Sigismondo await to cradle our party across the warm and rocking sea. We board the little ship. I understand that she was built to star with Ingrid Bergman in the film "Stromboli". She now rides against the eponymous volcano. Often these filmic scenes flickered in the dark and were gone. Tonight we shall view other stars. Maybe an hour later our tired comrades straggle in silence across the gunwale. Like black vestiges of the gay Italian sunset they stand or sit or lie a charmed tableau.

I had earlier remarked to my Father how little livestock graced the Sicilian landscape and the previous Tuesday I was accordingly rather surprised to discover five sheep in the shade of the Southern cliff in a

remote ravine on Lipari. They must not have quite astonished me as the herd of pigs amazed Our Savior and the other good Jews who strode with Him along another slope above a different sea so long ago.

Matthew relates the unforgettable tale in these terms:-

**And when he was come to the other side into the country of the Gergesenes, there met him two possessed with devils, coming out of the tombs, exceeding fierce, so that no man might pass by that way. And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time? And there was a good way off from them an herd of many swine feeding. So the devils besought him, saying, If thou cast us out, suffer us to go away into the herd of swine. And he said unto them, Go. And when they were come out, they went into the herd of swine: and, behold, the whole herd of swine ran violently down a steep place into the sea, and perished in the waters.<sup>a</sup>**

What are we to make of this strange report and the weird stratagem described? No where else do The Gospels suggest that Christ was callous in his view of or actions towards animals: If anything somewhat the contrary:-

**Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father.<sup>b</sup>**

Fortunately Luke supplies a more complete and much more disturbing account of this famous episode:-

**And they arrived at the country of the Gadarenes, which is over against Galilee. And when he went forth to land, there met him out of the city a certain man, which had devils a long time, and ware no clothes, neither abode in any house, but in the tombs. When he saw Jesus, he cried out, and fell down before him, and with a loud voice said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God most high? I beseech thee, torment me not. ( For he had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For oftentimes it had caught him: and he was kept bound with chains and in fetters; and he brake the bands, and was driven of the devil into the wilderness. ) And Jesus asked him, saying, What is thy name? And he said, Legion: because many devils**

**were entered into him. And they besought him that he would not command them to go out into the deep. And there was there an herd of many swine feeding on the mountain: and they besought him that he would suffer them to enter into them. And he suffered them. Then went the devils out of the man, and entered into the swine: and the herd ran violently down a steep place into the lake, and were choked.<sup>c</sup>**

What are we to make of this strange report and the weird stratagem described? No where else do The Gospels suggest that Christ was cunning or insidious: If anything somewhat the contrary:-

**And in the fourth watch of the night Jesus went unto them, walking on the sea. And when the disciples saw him walking on the sea, they were troubled, saying, It is a spirit; and they cried out for fear. But straightway Jesus spake unto them, saying, Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid. And Peter answered him and said, Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water. And he said, Come. And when Peter was come down out of the ship, he walked on the water, to go to Jesus. But when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me. And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?<sup>d</sup>**

The Sigismondo rounds the dark and sleeping cone of Stromboli and points a ponent heading across the softly rippled surface. The throb of the diesels measures our passage as all other sounds subside on this soporific sea. Alice appears and stands in motionless silhouette beneath her broad-brimmed black hat like that caped caballero on the old wine bottles or like some tutelary genius of the helm. Strange dark creatures break surface forward the beam as like God-appointed pilots they guide us landward.

The constellations crowd the pellucid sky. The Milky Way appears as a great larboard pathway whilst a declined Plow lights our starboard beam. Still the ghostly white of the bowsprit points our plodding course against the sussurating breeze, as below amidst the white foam of the bow-wave soft electric blue circles of phosphorescent jellyfish pave the sea with sapphire. A friend exclaims in amazement but I am rapt in speechless wonder at our noctilucous world. Presently we discern fleeting sparks of barium and magnesium as littler creatures flush in alarm but I trust not trauma to the pressure of the prow. For these modest children have also

found safety in The Triumph of the Light. In the Northern sky a shooting star seeks to emulate a coelenterate with its evanescent streak of fire.

Sitting ahead in the atrament the faraglione of Basiluzzo and Lisca Bianca present the jagged backs of lava specters, their washed pastels of sunlit tricolore all the same in the silver starlight as they frame our homeward portal.

I wrestle for days with the awe and beauty of this experience pondering the nature and meaning of the Message advertised. Something, or maybe Someone, draws me back to those parallel passages about The Gadarene Swine.

Consider again that unique Lucan phrase:-

**And they besought him that he would not command them to go out into the deep.<sup>e</sup>**

What a world is lost in Matthew's careless omission!

Christ, Luke clarifies, agreed that the devils need not submerge. He acceded to their preference. But both Parties reckoned without the Will of the pigs. The swine voted with their feet and the devils won what they most feared after all. God made a mistake, and God could not retrieve it.

I do not believe that men can truly understand God. I do believe that it is fatuous to credit ( or blame ) God for providing our environment, because it is clear that He did not manufacture the firmament or install its physical genotypes in any of the vulgar senses of creation that we can understand. If God, in some metaphysical sense beyond our ken, primed the universe and sent it on its way then it is like the clockwork toy that a child wound and set a birling down a cobbled brae only to watch it bounce and saltate uncatchably to an unforeseen station.

God still however cares for the living creatures of His Realm and He will step in to Aid them when He can which is when we rightly ask Him. It is in this sense, locally and specially, yet out of time and space, that God and Man defy gravity.

### Readings

- a Matthew 8:28;32
- b Matthew 10:29
- c Luke 8:26;33
- d Matthew 14:25;31

e Luke 8:31