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### **The Works of George Lord Lyttleton**

**Lyttelton, George <Lord>**

**London, 1774**

VII. Pliny The Elder - Pliny The Younger.

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## DIALOGUE VII.

PLINY THE ELDER.—PLINY THE YOUNGER.

PLINY THE ELDER.

V. C. Plinii  
Epist. l. vi.  
ep. 20.

THE account that you give me, nephew, of your behaviour, amidst the terrors and perils that accompanied the first eruption of Vesuvius, does not please me much. There was more of vanity in it than of true magnanimity. Nothing is great that is unnatural and affected. When the earth was shaking beneath you, when the whole heaven was darkened with sulphureous clouds; when all nature seemed falling into its final destruction, to be *reading* Livy, and *making extracts*, was an absurd affectation. To meet danger with courage, is manly; but to be insensible of it, is brutal stupidity; and to pretend insensibility, where it cannot be supposed, is ridiculous falleness. When you afterwards refused to leave your aged mother, and save yourself without her, you indeed acted nobly. It was also becoming a Roman to keep up her spirits, amidst all the horrors of that tremendous scene, by shewing yourself undismayed. But the real merit and glory of this part of your behaviour is sunk by the other, which gives an air of ostentation and vanity to the whole.

PLINY THE YOUNGER.

That vulgar minds should consider my attention to my studies in such a conjuncture as unnatural and affected, I should not much wonder. But that you would blame it as such, I did not apprehend; you, whom no business could separate from the Muses; you, who approached nearer to the fiery storm, and died by the suffocating heat of the vapour.

PLINY



PLINY THE ELDER.

I died in doing my duty. Let me recall to your remembrance all the particulars, and then you shall judge yourself on the difference of your behaviour and mine. I was the præfect of the Roman fleet which then lay at Misenum. On the first account I received of the very unusual cloud that appeared in the air, I ordered a vessel to carry me out, to some distance from the shore, that I might the better observe the phenomenon, and endeavour to discover its nature and cause. This I did, as a philosopher; and it was a curiosity proper and natural to an inquisitive mind. I offered to take you with me, and surely you should have gone; for Livy might have been read at any other time, and such spectacles are not frequent. When I came out from my house, I found all the inhabitants of Misenum flying to the sea. That I might assist them, and all others who dwelt on the coast, I immediately commanded the whole fleet to put out, and sailed with it all round the bay of Naples, steering particularly to those parts of the shore where the danger was greatest, and from whence the affrighted people were endeavouring to escape with the most trepidation. Thus I happily preserved some thousands of lives; noting at the same time, with an unshaken composure and freedom of mind, the several phenomena of the eruption. Towards night, as we approached to the foot of Mount Vesuvius, our gallies were covered with ashes, the showers of which grew continually hotter and hotter; then pumice stones, and burnt and broken *pyrites*, began to fall on our heads; and we were stoppt by the obstacles which the ruins of the vulcano had suddenly formed, by falling into the sea, and almost filling it up, on that part of the coast. I then commanded my pilot to steer to the villa of my friend Pomponianus, which, you know, was situated in the inmost recess of the bay. The wind was very favourable to carry me thither, but would not allow him to put off from  
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V. Epist. 16.  
l. vi.



the shore, as he was desirous to have done. We were therefore constrained to pass the night in his house. The family watched, and I slept; till the heaps of pumice stones, which incessantly fell from the clouds, that had by this time been impelled to that side of the bay, rose so high in the area of the apartment I lay in, that, if I had staid any longer, I could not have got out; and the earthquakes were so violent, as to threaten every moment the fall of the house. We therefore thought it more safe to go into the open air, guarding our heads, as well as we were able, with pillows tied upon them. The wind continuing contrary, and the sea very rough, we all remained on the shore, till the descent of a sulphureous and fiery vapour suddenly oppressed my weak lungs, and put an end to my life. In all this I hope that I acted as the duty of my station required, and with true magnanimity. But on this occasion, and in many other parts of your conduct, I must say, my dear nephew, there was a mixture of vanity blended with your virtue, which impaired and disgraced it. Without that, you would have been one of the worthiest men whom Rome has ever produced: for none excelled you in sincere integrity of heart and greatness of sentiments. Why would you lose the substance of glory, by seeking the shadow?—Your eloquence had, I think, the same fault as your manners: it was generally too *affected*. You professed to make Cicero your guide and pattern. But when one reads his panegyric upon Julius Cæsar, in his oration for Marcellus, and your's upon Trajan; the first seems the genuine language of truth and nature, raised and dignified with all the majesty of the most sublime oratory: the latter appears the harangue of a florid *rhétorician*, more desirous to *shine*, and to set off his own wit, than to extol the great man whose virtues he was praising.

PLINY.



PLINY THE YOUNGER.

I will not question your judgement either of my life or my writings. They might both have been better, if I had not been too solicitous to render them perfect. It is perhaps some excuse for the affectation of my style, that it was the fashion of the age in which I wrote. Even the eloquence of Tacitus, however nervous and sublime, was not unaffected. Mine indeed was more diffuse, and the ornaments of it were more tawdry; but his laboured conciseness, the constant *glow* of his diction, and pointed *brilliancy* of his sentences, were no less unnatural. One principal cause of this I suppose to have been, that as we despaired of excelling the two great masters of oratory, Cicero and Livy, in their own manner, we took up another, which, to many, appeared more shining, and gave our compositions a more original air. But it is mortifying to me to say much on this subject. Permit me therefore to resume the contemplation of that on which our conversation turned before. What a direful calamity was the eruption of Vesuvius, which you have been describing! Don't you remember the beauty of that fine coast, and of the mountain itself, before it was torn with the violence of those internal fires, that forced their way through its surface. The foot of it was covered with corn fields and rich meadows, interspersed with splendid villas, and magnificent towns: the sides of it were cloathed with the best vines in Italy. How quick, how unexpected, how terrible was the change! All was at once overwhelmed, with ashes, cinders, broken rocks, and fiery torrents, presenting to the eye the most dismal scene of horror and desolation!

PLINY THE ELDER.

You paint it very truly.—But has it never occurred to your philosophical mind, that this change is a striking emblem of that which must happen, by the natural course of things, to

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every rich, luxurious state! While the inhabitants of it are sunk in voluptuousness, while all is smiling around them, and they imagine that no evil, no danger is nigh, the latent seeds of destruction are fermenting within; till, breaking out on a sudden, they lay waste all their opulence, all their boasted delights; and leave them a sad monument of the fatal effects of internal tempests and convulsions.

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### DIALOGUE VIII.

FERNANDO CORTEZ—WILLIAM PENN.

CORTEZ.

**I**S it possible, William Penn, that you should seriously compare your glory with mine! the planter of a small colony in North-America presume to vie with the conqueror of the great Mexican empire!

PENN.

Friend, I pretend to no glory,—the LORD preserve me from it!—All glory is *his*;—but this I say, that I was *his instrument* in a more glorious work than that performed by thee: incomparably more glorious.

CORTEZ.

Dost thou not know, William Penn, that with less than six hundred Spanish foot, eighteen horse, and a few small pieces of cannon, I fought and defeated innumerable armies of very brave men, dethroned an emperor who had been raised to the throne by his valour, and excelled all his countrymen in the science of war, as much as they excelled all the rest of the West Indian nations? that I made him my prisoner in his own capital;