

# Phlegraean Fields of the Sea of Sicily, or Ferdinandea

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • [michaelbettencourt@outlook.com](mailto:michaelbettencourt@outlook.com)

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt

Offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## DESCRIPTION

Giuseppe Trentino sits in a boat in the Mediterranean between Tunisia and Sicily, in 1863, waiting for the underwater volcanos, known as the Phlegraean Fields of the Sea of Sicily, to rise above sea level so that he can claim the islands for the new kingdom of Italy. They had erupted 32 years before, in 1831, but before sovereignty could be claimed, they sank back into the sea. Not this time—the newly united kingdom of Italy deserves better. His only companion on this vigil is an albatross who has lost his bearings.

## CHARACTERS

- Giuseppe Trentino
- Albatross [can be played by male or female]

## SET

- A bench can serve as the boat
- An overdone admiral-like uniform for GIUSEPPE—absurd amounts of braid, for instance
- Boxes of stuff under the bench: food, navigation instruments, flags, ledger, etc.
- A plaque
- Albatross, being played by a human, acts like a human playing an albatross

\* \* \* \* \*

*GIUSEPPE TRENTINO sits in a very proper manner in a boat in the Mediterranean.*

SOUND: \_\_\_\_\_ Sun, wind, loneliness—this plays throughout as an underscoring.

*ALBATROSS sails in and sits at the opposite end of the boat.*

*The two look at each other.*

GIUSEPPE

You're an albatross.

ALBATROSS

I know.

GIUSEPPE

There are no albatrosses in the Mediterranean Sea.

ALBATROSS

I'm finding that out! Albatross equals zero. But how do you know?

GIUSEPPE

I'm a scientist.

ALBATROSS

Logic and order, right? But then again, you're talking to an albatross.

GIUSEPPE

Because it has been a lonely—a lonely vigil. The mind—even the logical and orderly—wanders.

*ALBATROSS shrugs.*

ALBATROSS

Yeah. Well. High winds—that's how I got lost. High winds. Blew me, yon and hither. High winds blow you, too?

GIUSEPPE

In a manner of speaking.

ALBATROSS

Hmm.

GIUSEPPE

Sorry, such filthy—I mean, it is an honor, don't get me wrong—to be sent out here on this mission. Let me tell you, it is a real honor to serve the new kingdom of Italy, the newly unified greatness of Italy, to serve Victor Emmanuel the Second—a very real honor, yes.

*ALBATROSS mulls this over, mulls GIUSEPPE over.*

GIUSEPPE

Sounds like they kicked you to the curb to get rid of you.

GIUSEPPE

No! No! Not at all!

ALBATROSS

I have to say it sounds like that.

GIUSEPPE

You're wrong!

ALBATROSS

Well—

GIUSEPPE

You're completely, completely wrong—completely!

*ALBATROSS mutters.*

ALBATROSS

Doth protest too much—

GIUSEPPE

Do you know what happened in this very spot thirty-two years ago, in the year of our Lord 1831, under the blessed, blessed, blessed reign of Ferdinand the Second, the King of the Two Sicilies—such a time then, such—elegance, such a kiss of courtesy to everything—you can't imagine what we have lost since those rats Garibaldi and Mazzini—liberals! traitors! rebels! democrats!—now we are “unified,” Italy is “unified,” and—

*GIUSEPPE catches himself.*

ALBATROSS

Go on—I won't tell anybody. Nobody'd believe me anyways, even if they could hear me, so rock on. Were you, like, someone important, and then you weren't?

GIUSEPPE

I'm talking to an albatross.

ALBATROSS

Not stupid, you know.

GIUSEPPE

I am talking to an albatross.

*They fall into a silence. ALBATROSS shifts his position, settles his feathers. They mark some time.*

SOUND: Sea, wind, loneliness continues.

ALBATROSS

You were, um, telling me about this 1831 thing. “This very spot.”

GIUSEPPE

It is not important.

ALBATROSS

Yeah. Well. Just trying to keep it going, you know.

*ALBATROSS picks up the plaque.*

ALBATROSS

What does this say?

GIUSEPPE

Put it down.

ALBATROSS

After you tell me what it says.

*GIUSEPPE grabs the plaque away, cradles it.*

GIUSEPPE

It says, “This piece of land, once Ferdinandea, belongs and shall always belong to the Sicilian people.”

ALBATROSS

I don’t see any land—I don’t know much, not like some scientists, but I know I know squid, I know krill, and I know land. And there is not—

*GIUSEPPE points downward, into the water.*

GIUSEPPE

Eight meters down.

*ALBATROSS looks over.*

ALBATROSS

That's twenty-five feet, right?

GIUSEPPE

If you want to be English about it.

ALBATROSS

Have to always convert—kinda hard to see in this crappy water—

GIUSEPPE

It is there, believe me. The top of a volcano. In 1831, it rose 63 meters high, out of the splendid sea, and my precious Ferdinand—

ALBATROSS

Like 200 feet, right?

GIUSEPPE

And my precious Ferdinand claimed it for the Two Sicilies!—Ferdinanda, it was called!—expanding his glory, our glory, until those fils-de-pute French and son-of-a-bitch British and hijo-de-puta Spanish came along to steal it for themselves! Bastards in three tongues!

ALBATROSS

Yeah, I've noticed you humans get into that muck a lot. So, where is it?

GIUSEPPE

The land—

ALBATROSS

Well?

GIUSEPPE

It sank.

*ALBATROSS laughs.*

ALBATROSS

Like one of those orbicular things you guys fly so you can go up to where I go—bal-loon!!

*ALBATROSS makes the sounds and motions of a balloon losing its air, laughing all the while.*

ALBATROSS

You guys fight over hot air all the time! So tell me again why they booted you out here.

GIUSEPPE

Not booted—chose—

*GIUSEPPE's voice breaks. Hugging the plaque, he rocks as if mourning—perhaps even keening a little, though not much and not loud and a little bit nasal.*

ALBATROSS

Oh stop it! At least they didn't assassinate you right off! Humane and civilized that they let their useless ones continue to see the light of day.

*GIUSEPPE gives ALBATROSS a look that is both hurt and full of hatred and surprised that he's making such trenchant statements.*

ALBATROSS

Well, look at that uniform, really, which you probably think is magnificent—courtly—and look at the equipment they give you—more rust than anything else—

GIUSEPPE

I have a mission. I have been given a mission.

*ALBATROSS stops baiting him.*

GIUSEPPE

I have a reason for being here.

ALBATROSS

So—what is your reason?

*GIUSEPPE stands—sways because the boat sways under his shifting weight. He has the plaque gripped in his hands.*

GIUSEPPE

Ferdinanda will rise again, it will, it is in the nature of volcanoes to rise, and when it does, I shall claim it, once and for all, with this, affixed to its summit—

ALBATROSS

But you hate this new Italy.

*GIUSEPPE laughs—just a touch of madness, the merest hint.*

GIUSEPPE

Not for them—for my precious Ferdinand, for his memory—they can think it's theirs, but it will be his, finally. Ours, finally.

ALBATROSS

I don't think, though, volcanoes explode when you tell them to—

*GIUSEPPE scrambles down, pulls out a box from under the bench.*

GIUSEPPE

I have been trying to—convince the geology—

*GIUSEPPE pulls out a round object with a fuse on it.*

GIUSEPPE

My own invention—I call it a depth-charge. A bomb, a water-proof fuse, I light it—

*GIUSEPPE makes the gesture of throwing it overboard.*

GIUSEPPE

Fire calling forth fire.

ALBATROSS

Has it worked?

GIUSEPPE

I don't know. It's been difficult to know if the timing is right—the rate of descent measured against the burn rate of the fuse—if the explosive force is enough—maybe it's just like a flea bite rather than, you know, a goad to glorious action—not enough time to do the proper experiments—

ALBATROSS

What else?

GIUSEPPE

I send a plumb-bob down to measure any depths changes—and, no, there haven't been any, I can see the question on your face.

ALBATROSS

Which is pretty good, given how this beak stiffens up everything.

*GIUSEPPE pulls out a ledger.*

GIUSEPPE

I keep a log of everything—

ALBATROSS

Stained with salt tears.

GIUSEPPE

—so there will be a record for history.

ALBATROSS

You mean, my friend, a record of your failure.

GIUSEPPE

I keep watch, I keep the [flame]—

ALBATROSS

You are a failure, you know—you must know—not even a magnificent one, to light up the sky—not even a failure much past the ordinary kind.

*GIUSEPPE is stunned at the truth of the matter.*

ALBATROSS

Look, maybe it's not my business to interfere in the affairs of men, but why don't you just dive down there, nail that thing to the stone, come up, go home, and call the mission accomplished? And if the sea vomits forth Ferdinanda again—the stamp of approval is already there, planted by you. And if it doesn't—sit at home in your pee-stained underwear drinking wine and know that either way you've done your duty.



*GIUSEPPE makes a sudden violent move at ALBATROSS, as if he wants to catch and throttle him. ALBATROSS easily moves away, and the boat rocks violently. GIUSEPPE still tries to get to him, but ALBATROSS is not to be caught. They square off.*

ALBATROSS

I was wondering when you'd get around to that.

GIUSEPPE

My mission is to wait—to keep faith with the future. How could you ever understand—

ALBATROSS

They kicked you out because they needed a laugh. You sit out here, sweat-soaked in your braid, shitting and peeing over gunwales, convinced you have a purpose—all the while, the ones who sent you here lick the sugar off dates, read telegrams out loud in anapestic cadences, find new sensual uses for olives—and tell tales of a man somewhere, I don't know, out there—out there, out there, have you heard anything about the poor figlio di puttana out there?—dedicated to a sentence with no verb, to an absurd geology. You are a government-funded joke.

*It is not as if this possibility hasn't crossed GIUSEPPE's mind, which takes the air right out of his balloon.*

ALBATROSS

Another possibility is that you take the plaque down there, nail it home, and then—and then just hold onto it until your lungs empty and heaven enters and the long trail of pain which has been your miniscule life resolves itself. When Ferdinanda ascends, your bones will be the first to fertilize its air-borne majesty, and fame of a sort will be yours. If not—what have you really lost? Your bones are already dissolving, why not let them—

*GIUSEPPE picks up the journal and opens it, pulls out a pencil from a pocket, and writes in it. As he writes, he begins to laugh and laugh and laugh.*

ALBATROSS

What are you writing?

GIUSEPPE

They say that the albatross carries the souls of the dead.

ALBATROSS

I am stuffed with the souls of the dead.

GIUSEPPE

Sent to drive people mad.

ALBATROSS

Sent to make them realize what they know and won't admit.

GIUSEPPE

No no no—you're just feathers and guts, stringy muscle, sadness that shits—

*GIUSEPPE taps his head, touches his heart.*

GIUSEPPE

No no, those souls are up here, in here—this madness is all my own, and being my own, I embrace it, I suckle it, I couple with the uselessness I am and breed ever-more absurdity, knowing that I have kept faith with myself, been honest where the world has been a fraud—

*GIUSEPPE dips his hand into what would be the sea, then hovers it over the journal, letting it drip onto the page.*

GIUSEPPE

My salt signature.

*GIUSEPPE closes the journal and puts it down. He picks up the plaque, embraces it.*

ALBATROSS

A most excellence performance.

GIUSEPPE

No performance—but excellent, yes.

*GIUSEPPE balances himself on what would be the edge of the boat, a man ready to leap into the heart of his fate.*

SOUND: Boiling seas, a solar-plexus shaking rumble, the coming volcano.

GIUSEPPE

No no no no—not now!

ALBATROSS

Too late! Too bad! Ferdinanda arises!

GIUSEPPE

No!

ALBATROSS

You're being sucked back into the real! No glorious exit for you.

GIUSEPPE

I can't go back to them! I can't! The waiting was the mission, I see that now—to finish the mission—to have success—to go to them and say, "Behold what I have done"—what a joke! A joke! A joke! A joke!

SOUND: Even louder now, the island rising.

*GIUSEPPE throws down the plaque, turns to ALBATROSS.*

GIUSEPPE

Save me.

ALBATROSS

Are you sure?

GIUSEPPE

You know I am. The mission is accomplished.

*GIUSEPPE throws open his arms, throws back his head. ALBATROSS comes to him amid the crush of the rising volcano and embraces him—and absorbs his soul.*

GIUSEPPE

Ah!

*GIUSEPPE's body collapses into a grateful heap.*

SOUND: The tumult continues for a little bit longer, then subsides into sun, wind, loneliness.

*ALBATROSS looks around him.*

ALBATROSS

With this new weight, I need to find the high winds to carry me. I need to let his soul go in bits, scatter him in bits, so that he does not come back together and suffer being alive again. I owe him that.

*ALBATROSS stands on the boat, spreads his arms, rises, and disappears.*

*In its own light a small rain of salt sifts down, then blackness.*