

## The eruption. Phase 3

Di Tom Gibwitz

Tourists began to arrive by boat and train. Robert Underwood Johnson of the Century magazine came from Rome. He wrote of the terrifying thrill of the journey, rattling along past the ghostly torches of the railway guards beneath the churning plume which canted toward Capri



over the track like a solid mass in the intense moonlight. Leaving the train, his party hiked past the Torre Annunziata's cemetery, climbed a wall of cooling lava, and watched the sun rise over a desolate smoking landscape that had been deluged with stone. Bosco Trecase's church and a few houses poked above the surface like stumps in a swamp.



As war ships evacuated refugees from Naples, the 306-foot American steam yacht Nahma arrived at Palermo. Its owner, Harriet Goelet, wife of a New York financier, told the Times she had watched the eruption with a party of friends.

On the twelfth, soldiers arrived at the Observatory and shoveled six tons of ash off of a single portion of the roof. The following day Matteucci telegraphed to the city that activity had diminished and that "I predict

with reserve that in two or three days calm will reign."

The dispatch was greeted with joy, and worshippers crammed Good Friday services, offering prayers of thanksgiving. A wind shift took the ash to the east, and although Vesuvius hid itself from view, the sun shone down over the dusty city, the blue sea sparkled, and the Neapolitans shed their hats and goggles and once more went about in open carriages. The king, queen, and government ministers supervising the relief work returned to Rome, after the queen donated \$10,000 worth of linen to the cause.

"Everything was coated with a thin white powder," the Times said. "The crowds at the stations resembled millers, their clothing covered with powder. Like a Dakota prairie after a blizzard, except that everything is gray instead of white. The ashes lie in drifts knee deep. Villas, trees, and churches have been beaten with gray mud on the sides exposed to the volcanic storm." Ten miles north of Naples the plume was so thick that telegraph poles twenty feet away were lost in the gloom, breathing was difficult, and eyes watered.

On April 14, the royal palace in Rome announced that the king was awarding Matteucci the rank of Commander of the Order of the Crown. Relief contributions began to pour in from around the world. New Yorkers sent \$10,000, and proceeds were promised from a benefit concert at the Metropolitan Opera House featuring the top talents then in the city. Frank Farrell, owner of the fledgling New York Yankees, offered his share of the gate receipts from a game with the Boston Red Sox. More money came from the president of Cuba and the mayors of Indianapolis and Jersey City.

On Easter Sunday, April 15, Vesuvius's column began to shrink. And like a sign of heaven and hope, rescuers discovered two elderly women buried alive at Ottaviano. Their house had crumbled around them; protected by fallen rafters, they had survived on food which, by chance, they had in their pockets.



At the Observatory the seismometers were quiet, and all seemed peaceful yet eerie. "During this gray day there prevailed a presentation of negativity that is impossible to describe," Perret wrote. "As far as the eye could reach, there was not one note of color; all was of one uniform neutral tint. There were immense spaces of absolute silence, broken only by the distant tolling of a bell or the siren wail of some steamer seeking its way across the dust-enshrouded bay. The only visible outlines were the nearly formless details of ash-bedecked lava-flows in the immediate vicinity, and the Vesuvian landscape showed in almost imperceptible relief against the gray boundaries of our little world."

Over the next three days the sky remained clear, the weather calm and warm. The volcano's plume rose steadily, but the earthquakes and explosions had all but ended. It seemed as if peace, at last, had returned to the damaged land. The refugees began to trickle back to their mountain villages to dig out their homes. Near the Observatory about fifty people - dozens of men, children, one woman - had come home. With the sound of shovels there was also voices and laughter; movement and color had returned. But Vesuvius was not quite finished.

April 18 dawned bright and clear. But at noon, the wind freshened, turned, and began to blow across the peak toward the Observatory. Soon the sun was gone, for the now gale-force wind was strong enough to bend the ash cloud to the earth, plunging the hillside into darkness.

Inside, the scientists and carabinieri began to have trouble breathing. Their legs felt oddly warm, their bodies weak, and an odd sense of mental depression overcame them. Carbon dioxide gas, invisible and heavier than air, was pouring down upon them, flowing along the slope and into the building, threatening them

with suffocation. Their thoughts turned to the refugees outside. A disaster was in the making.

Outside, as the wind-whipped ash scoured the skin from their faces, Perret, Matteucci, and the carabinieri tried to herd the people into some nearby workers' barracks. But the buildings were too small. They were trapped. The road was buried. And when they dared open their eyes against the coarse ash blizzard, the visibility was mere inches. The Observatory, lost in the gloom, might as well have been sixty miles, not sixty yards, away.

Then someone found a rope. All fifty members of the party grabbed it. One man gripped the barracks door while the rope was tied around his waist. Another, who knew the area, took hold of the rope's free end and set out up the hill. The rope was paid out, and the party snaked after him as he swept back and forth, gasping, groping through the gloom. When he stumbled on a telegraph pole, he recognized it as one that brought the telegraph line to the observatory. The word passed down the rope. The man at the end let go the barracks door, and the group followed the rope to the telegraph pole. The leader set out again, fumbling forward into the darkness, weaving back and forth until he touched another recognizable landmark. Again the rope was drawn up, and again he moved forward. Like a giant inch worm, the head feeling its way forward, the tail drawing in behind, the party finally found the Observatory.

They crowded into the basement. Even here the ash was so thick that a lantern only dimly lit the room. The band felt as if they were sitting in black soup - they could feel the darkness. They sat for hours, coughing and wheezing, rousing each other when they lapsed into unconsciousness, spitting ash, wiping their eyes.

At midnight the wind stopped. The plume rose. Air returned to the mountaintop. And one member of the party, a bronchitic young man of nineteen, lay dead.

By April 22, the eruption was finally over. The seismometers were quiet, their needles sleeping. At

night, the once glowing crater was finally dark, and its cloud was white - water vapor, no ash.

In Naples, six thousand men shoveled ashes into alleys and narrow byways, clogging the streets and sidewalks. Carriages and skittish horses struggled in the streets, but the sun had returned and there was a festive, celebratory air.

Vesuvius still towered over Naples, but now its graceful cone was a baked, burned sore. The top of its cone had been blasted away; the crater bored out to 700 yards wide. Vesuvius had coughed out an estimated 275 million cubic yards of ash, and spat out more than 15 million cubic yards of lava on its southeast flank. Ash had drifted as far as Croatia. Over 500 were dead, 800 wounded, and 80 thousand people were driven from their homes.



For many, the trouble was just beginning. For months, rain would turn the ash into lethal torrents of mud, boulders, and lava blocks that roared through villages carrying people and houses away. In May, a mudslide chased even Matteucci from the Observatory.



But in those sunny April days, Perret still watched the mountain as the first of a parade of distinguished visitors trudged up the narrow paths dug through the ash to pay their respects to the scientists who had braved Vesuvius's wrath.

It is interesting to note how Perret later listed them in his book on the Vesuvius eruption. He begins with the Duke and Duchess of Aosta, who he lauds

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for helping the local citizens, then he lists the volcanologists who had witnessed the eruption from afar and now came up to shake his hand -- Alfred LaCroix who established a classification system for volcanic eruptions and whose detailed description of the Mount Pelee eruption broke new ground; Henry Johnston-Lavis who had made the first detailed Vesuvius map and collected thousands of specimens; MIT's Thomas Jaggar who was establishing new guidelines for volcanic exploration; Swiss pharmacist Albert Brun who had speculated on the make-up of magma on volcanic gasses; and Tempest Anderson who had spent years studying volcanoes in the Caribbean, Europe and Asia. And, as if by afterthought, he mentions, at the end of the list, Edward VII and Alexandra, King and Queen of England, ex-Empress Eugenie, tea tycoon Sir Thomas Lipton, and other notables left unnamed.

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