

Rescued

Di Tom Gidwitz

Perret was a complicated man. His academic writings are elegant, gentlemanly, and disciplined, and even his patent papers convey a soft, approachable tone. But his private correspondence is charged with feeling. Letters stretch for page after page, packed with single-spaced typescript that all but runs off the edge of the paper, by turns salutary, contrite, cajoling, suspicious, angry - heated outpourings sometimes touched with paranoia and self-pity, yet always clear in the ambitious goals he set for himself and his science.

Perret never married, never engaged, and spent most of his adult years in near-solitary labor, communing with mountains, watching smoke and lava, listening to explosions, living alone until the day he died. In his writings and letters there is never a hint of women in his life.

Instead he sought out the companionship of children. As an adult in New York until he was well into his fifties, he would unwind after work at a Brooklyn orphanage, playing games with some of the home's two hundred children until they were called to bed. Years later, when he heard that one of his ex-playmates had died, he was crippled with grief. His work with Italian children was the source of his greatest pride in World War I. And on Martinique, when the French honored him as a national hero on his seventieth birthday in 1937, the high point of the day was a party hosted, the newspapers said, by the island's kids.

Nowhere is there a hint of scandal or whisper of impropriety. Instead one sees a gifted, emotionally isolated man, trapped behind walls whose foundations,

at this distance, are impossible to discern, working until he collapsed.

And his transformation was startling. One day he was a man of adamant concentration and a fount of energy; the next he was immobilized at home in Brooklyn, listening to the ticking of the parlor clock as the city passed by outside. His paralysis endured for months. Then, in May, the daily papers brought news that changed his life.

On the morning of May 7, 1902, submarine telegraph cables in the Caribbean Sea began to fail. Contact between St Vincent and Martinique and later southward from St. Lucia suddenly ceased. Late afternoon on May 9, the British steamer Roddam limped into St. Lucia. The ship's rigging, deckhouse, and hull were charred, its shrouds and upper spars were torn away, its portholes and skylights were smashed. On deck lay eighteen dead bodies, eight crewmen writhing in agony, and tons of hot blue gray ash, piled in places two feet thick.



Early on the morning of May 8, the ship had anchored in the harbor at St. Pierre, a thriving city of more than twenty-six thousand people, nestled against the foot of Mt. Pelée volcano on the north end of Martinique. Just after eight, a horrific blast of ash and fire swept down the mountain, poured through the city and thundered across the water. Ships rolled like toys and exploded in fire. The morning was suddenly pitch dark, with light only from the glowing volcano, the burning ships, the blazing city, and the incandescent red dust that had rained on deck and shot into the ship. Scorched crewmen leapt overboard, and the badly burned

captain and surviving sailors fought for two hours to weigh anchor, free the steering, and escape.



Over the following days more ships arrived at surrounding islands, and the trickle of news turned into a torrent. After weeks of increasingly fretful activity, Mt. Pelée had obliterated St. Pierre. The Paris of the Caribbean, the quaint French town of pinafores and top hats, of sugar cane workers, rum distillers, Creole gentlemen and simple laborers, was gone. Within moments, twenty-seven thousand people in the city and hillside villages were dead. Hundreds more groaned in the ruins and staggered in the streets, their skin peeling,

eyes blind, hair gone, clothes burned from their bodies. Only two people directly in the blast zone lived, a cobbler and a jailed prisoner, who, in later years, toured with the Barnum and Bailey Circus, billed as the eruption's lone survivor.

The cathedral, the zoo, the opera house had disappeared. The volcano had melted barrels of nails and fused spoons into twisted masses. It baked palm trees and sent horses, carts, barrels, men, women, and babies tumbling through the streets. Its flood of blistering debris had perched a 5-ton boulder on a cliff high above the town, while another blast, two days later, swept a mountain village off the map and flattened almost all the city walls left standing.

It was a sight of unprecedented horror and pain, of Biblical forces unleashed by the Devil. And to add to the astonishment, the papers reported that a second volcano, Soufriere on St. Vincent seventy-five miles to the south, had erupted as well. There more than fifteen hundred people died in a wave of horror that left a gray carpet of ash and ruin across the tropical island's green hills.



Perret watched the world respond. President Theodore Roosevelt appointed a national commission and designated all postmasters and presidents of all national banks as collection agents. Pittsburgh's Henry Clay Frick, Chicago's Marshall Field, Frederick Pabst of Milwaukee, and Adolph Busch of St. Louis opened their pockets. Congress voted \$500,000 for relief. Newspapers and Chambers of Commerce pitched in. Denmark's Princess Waldema and Italy's King Victor Emmanuel sent donations, and governments in Berlin and Paris, the Vatican, the Jamaican legislature, and the Canadian House of Commons offered aid. The Barnum and Bailey Circus, then on tour in France, turned over the receipts from its performance in Toulouse, while the French government pondered abandoning the island.



A week after the tragedies, letters mailed from Martinique in the days before the catastrophe began to reach their destinations. The fearful voices of the dead told of weeks of earthquakes and subterranean rumblings, of reports from picnickers that the summit's crater lake had turned dark black, of horses gasping for breath and dying of

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suffocation, of clouds of ash continuously rolling down the mountain, and the government's statements that the islanders had nothing to fear.

In San Juan, Puerto Rico, strange livid red sunsets drew throngs to the waterfront. Laborers refused to work, children stayed home from school, and religious cultists announced the end of world. But a flotilla from the New York Yacht Club set off for St. Pierre in high spirits. William P. Eno, millionaire inventor of the stop sign and a safe driving activist, set sail in his steam yacht Aquilo, and Frank J. Gould followed three days later in his new 185 foot Helentia. "The explorations of the ruins of St. Pierre in the immediate future is predicted to offer sensations of the most thrilling character," gushed the New York Times. And Frederick Thompson, theatrical producer and owner of 'A Trip to the Moon,' a popular Coney Island ride, embarked on a three month sojourn to photograph and sketch the catastrophes for his new play 'The Destruction of Martinique.' The \$30,000 drama, the Times said, would open in the fall with the eruption depicted "as nearly as possible in the natural colors."

The US Navy cruiser Dixie steamed toward Martinique with 2,500 tons of relief supplies and Army troops, medics, scientists, and journalists. They found Mt. Pelée still restive. From time to time ash blasted from the peak, and the frightened crews of relief ships moored in the harbor repeatedly raised anchor and dashed out to sea. Thomas Jaggar, a twenty-two year old geologist from Boston who would become one of the century's most prominent volcanologists, found that as he walked through the streets the thick ash beneath his feet would suddenly jet steam clouds that carried the fetid odor of bodies buried below.

The geologists were mystified. They collected specimens of every kind -- ash, stones, bits of china,



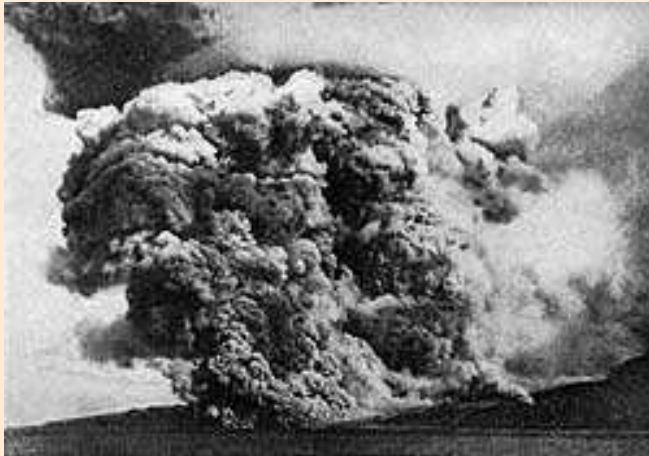
melted iron, and scraps of miraculously unburned paper. They quickly ran out of sample bags and stuffed items in their socks. They climbed the summit and were sprayed with mud and ash, and looking down they saw a cinder cone in the coughing crater and a crevasse five hundred feet long and one hundred-fifty feet wide. "We were assailed with noise," said Angelo Heilprin, President of the Philadelphia Geological Society. "Far below there was a hissing of steam like one thousand locomotives as well as violent detonations." But they found no lava.

Heilprin feared the volcanic islands of the West Indies were about to fall into gigantic hole left behind by erupting lava and ash. Geologist Robert T. Hill maintained that volcanoes across the globe, like Iceland's Hekla and Vesuvius, were linked together, and now the Caribbean islands' volcanoes were proven twinned with those of Latin America. "At the time of the explosion in St. Vincent - which was far more terrible than that of Mt. Pelée - other explosions either preceded or followed in Northern South America and Central America." Pelée was the climax of a chain of unusually severe eruptions and earthquakes in Mexico and Guatemala. He wrongly predicted that word from the "inaccessible interior" of Central America would also bring word of numerous explosions.

The scientists were not only unsure about what wiped out St. Pierre, but about what caused volcanoes in the first place. They agreed that volcanoes were an expression of heat rising from the earth's interior. But some theorized that sections of the earth were contracting, crushing thick subterranean strata and setting off chemical reactions that caused rock to melt and rise. Others said the earth's contracting crust cracked and relieved pressure, causing hot, water-laden rocks within the earth to explode. Still others, observing that volcanoes form on islands and sea coasts, asserted eruptions happened when ocean water percolated through crustal cracks, touched molten rock, flashed to steam, and blew up. Said geologist Hill, "Volcanism is still one of the most inexplicable and

profound problems which defy the power of geologists to explain."

Yet, slowly, they were inching toward an answer. One evening the scientists on Martinique watched a gigantic mushroom-shaped column of smoke and cinders rise from the side of the volcano in a roiling sheet that covered the starlit sky and drifted ten miles. Lightning bolts darted across the strange cloud, which Hill blamed on explosive gases. This was "a most important observation," he said, a phenomenon entirely new in volcanic history that partly explained the catastrophe. Some sort of heavy gas had blanketed the city and helped kill the inhabitants, he said.



French government volcanologist Alfred LaCroix arrived in June, saw similar clouds, and pinpointed them as the cause of the tragedy. He called them nuées ardentes - "glowing clouds" - blistering torrents of steam, ash, pumice, and red-hot rock that

were coughed from craters and charged down volcanic slopes, obliterating everything in their path.

But LaCroix did not publish his conclusions until 1904. For the time being, the catastrophe remained a scientific puzzle which jolted Perret out of his lethargy. He had no training in geology, but he understood energy, motion, and chemistry. He was gifted with extraordinary powers of observation and invention, as well as a deep-seated empathy for the innocent. He remembered when wind-blown ash from Krakatau turned Brooklyn sunsets into great red stains, and he recalled a brilliant colored chromolithograph on his father's office wall of Vesuvian fire destroying Pompeii. As he read the news accounts, he decided to become a volcanologist, a career for which he suddenly felt destined.

Perret did not know it, but he was one of a generation of young scientists who, coming of age in the wake of Krakatoa and the Martinique and St. Vincent eruptions, pledged themselves to what Thomas Jaggar, then in Martinique, later called "a missionary field."

And shortly thereafter, his fate was sealed. His doctor prescribed a complete change of scene and pace, someplace sunny warm and restful. In fact, a cure might be achieved at Naples, the doctor said, in the warm, soothing, Mediterranean air, among fragrant orange trees, pines, and palms. For almost two thousand years Naples had offered succor to those escaping illness or crowded cities. Poets, artists, writers, naturalists, Roman emperors, and European royalty had flocked to its soft light, its warm baths, and the glory of its sapphire bay. One wonders, though, whether the doctor's prescription for rest included visits to Naples's own volcano. It stood nine miles from the city, a steaming, smoking, sometime killer. In fact, it seems likely Vesuvius may not even have crossed the doctor's mind.

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