

## The eruption. Phase 2

Di Tom Gidwitz

He found chaos. A hundred thousand people had fled Naples since the eruption began, while refugees from the countryside poured into the city by train, street car, army caravan, and steamship. Tourists, fearing tidal waves, abandoned the seafront hotels, and residents of nearby neighborhoods headed for high ground. Falling ash painted the city a desolate gray. Rioting convicts from mountainside jails had been brought to the city's holding pens; their fears infected local prisoners who threatened to rebel.



In the countryside, ash was everywhere, choking livestock and trapping carts piled with belongings and those too weak to walk. Carabinieri struggled to free the living and to dig out the dead, to shovel paths for those who fled carrying all they owned.

"All the roads were full," wrote the New York Times' Riggs,

and fugitives by the hundreds trudged warily through the still blinding rain of ashes, going they knew not whither. With daylight a few trains began to run, and every railway station along the line was packed. Tired mothers gave their peevish babies the breast, sitting on the track, while grimy, heavy-eyed fathers and husbands looked gloomily on, too depressed even to talk. Children sank exhausted on platform or rails, crying and munching at great hunks of pasty-looking bread.

Soldiers were everywhere doing police duty; infantry in heavy marching order, with heavy goatskin haversacks; artillerymen, with huge pistols and clanking sabers and spurs; royal engineers in full kit, wearing mattocks, entrenching spades, axes and crowbars fastened to heavy waist belts. Class distinction was forgotten, and ragged peasants crowded into first-class compartments on the trains and in the stations without hindrance, regular passengers forgetting to protest.

All that was left of Bosco Trecase was its church, an island in a sea of steaming stone. The guardian statue of Saint Anne at Torre dell Annunziata was buried, Torre del Greco had been evacuated. To the northwest, San Sebastiano's mayor telegraphed for help; lava was descending rapidly. But red hot stones dropped from the sky, hammered the railroad, delaying aid.

Back in Naples, Perret tersely cabled "Safe. In no danger" to his mother in Brooklyn, the message arriving only hours before the New York Times reported that the Observatory had been destroyed. In Harlem's Little Italy flags flew at half mast, black mourning crepe hung from doors and windows, and benevolent societies and church groups convened meetings to dispense information and raise money for the victims.





Sunrise on the morning of April 9 revealed that a new act in the drama had begun. Vesuvius's plume was now thick, black, and rising much more slowly; the gas pressure which drove the eruption from below was much diminished.

Perret hired a hackney cab and worked his way back toward the Observatory, against the current of peasants seeking sanctuary in the city. They drove their carts and donkeys and trudged on foot with a patient stoicism that owed much to exhaustion: Perret noticed that the children had taken over the evacuation, for they were the ones directing traffic, giving advice, and offering words of encouragement.

The ash cloud's steam rose, cooled, condensed, and fell upon the city as a glutinous rain, turning the inch-deep layer of black sand and powder into a slippery coating of mud. As Perret neared the mountain and climbed the slopes, the rain turned the airborne ash into pisolites -- balls of mud, some as large as hens eggs - that pummeled him with an ever-thickening hail.

Soon it became impossible for the cab's horse to continue. Perret set off on foot. At Pugliano, a village at the mountain's base, Perret met Mormile, the town's railroad stationmaster. A swarthy



man with heavy lidded eyes and upturned moustache, he

volunteered to act as a telegrapher, and the two men trudged uphill along the buried bed of the Vesuvian railway.

"Here were enacted scenes like those which Pompeii must have witnessed," Perret wrote. In the gloom "faces peered from doorways, from under wagons, and from every place of shelter from the volcanic storm." That day, in the village church at San Giuseppe on Vesuvius's east side, two hundred people had been attending mass, praying for salvation, when the roof collapsed under a heavy load of ash. Fifty-four died, scores were injured.

At the Observatory, Matteucci eagerly welcomed him, for he had not expected Perret to return. They repaired the seismometers, checked the telegraph, and noted another astonishing volcanic sight -- falling with the now dry ash was a rain of countless squirming caterpillars. 6

Once more in their hermitage, Perret, Matteucci, Mormile, Brigadier Migliardi and the six carabinieri maintained watch. That evening Matteucci telegraphed to the city that the ash was thick, the windows broken, the instruments askew, that Vesuvius was silently spitting balls of fire, but explosive activity was much diminished. This dispatch, like all the others, was printed and posted in the city and surrounding towns, was a message that "If men could live on the mountain itself," Perret wrote later, "life was surely possible elsewhere."

But life in the Observatory was difficult. Abrasive grit was everywhere, rubbing their eyes raw, plugging their noses, working its way into their ears and clothes, chafing their skin, coating their throats. As they ate their grim diet of



bread, cheese, and onions, it ground against their teeth.

They spent endless hours in sunless dust clouds, in an obscurity as black as night that could be felt when they passed their hands through the air. When the clouds cleared they looked out on a colorless landscape, slopes blanketed with white ash and five-story beds of still-blistering rock. Poised precariously and infused with volcanic gas, they were extremely fragile, and with each jolt of the mountain an enormous avalanche swept downhill in stately, ghostly, silence. The avalanches carved the mountain, lacing the peak with gullies full of dry scalding quicksand.

On Tuesday, April 10, the eruption entered its second week. Much of the great gas jet was spent, but enough



magma and vapor remained in the volcano to send the ash soaring heavenward from the crater like a thing alive, a tumultuous trunk of hot dust two thousand feet wide. The lightning had ceased, but the column was still so highly charged that, when blown by the wind, it dove to the earth like iron filings drawn to a magnet. On one excursion the exploring scientists crossed this electrified dust cloud. The blue white glow of St. Elmo's fire danced virtually everywhere. The

metal stars on the caps of the carabinieri hissed and crackled; their hair stood on end, and when they lifted their fingers or raised their walking sticks they could hear a mechanical humming, what Perret called an "electrical wind." Their bodies sucked ash grains toward their faces with such abrasive force that their lips bled. "And there were moments when we were not cheered by Matteucci's remarking, 'This is how Pliny died.'" Perret later termed this the most dangerous moment of his career, for an electrical discharge could have blown them to pieces

The towns around the volcano were all but cut off. Those who remained waded slowly through the dark streets, their clothing and hair coated with dust, choking, coughing, eyes tearing, rags pressed tight over their noses and mouths. The sun, when visible, was little more than a dim disk in a sick yellow sky. The massive snakes of lava shimmered with heat, shedding clouds of steam and wisps of greenish, sulfurous



vapors. The broken bodies of the dead were dug free from fallen walls and roofs, rubble-filled basements, and church confessionals. Some clutched rosaries and pictures of saints, others jewels and gold. There were violent storms of stinging black rain, steaming fields of rough black stone, charred tree trunks, and the disconsolate cries of the lost, hurt, and grieving.

A rescue party of soldiers fought their way through the darkness and rain toward Ottoviano with a train of four-horse carts laden with supplies. On arrival they unloaded the cars and invited as many children and aged to climb on board, then turned toward safety. But after a few hundred feet, the horses, in ash to their flanks, could no longer pull their loads. The children panicked, leapt from the carts and scattered in the darkness. They were never found.

When the sun rose on April 11, lava had coated much of Vesuvius's western flank with a great swathe of dull brown stone. Windblown ash had dropped mostly east of the volcano in an oval ten miles long and thirty miles wide. It was thought that five thousand houses were destroyed or uninhabitable and fifty thousand were homeless. Property damage was in the tens of millions, crops and vineyards had vanished, and tens of thousand of refugees were still on the move, swarming out of the districts where the ash lay thick and swamping

[www.vesuvioweb.com](http://www.vesuvioweb.com) [www.tomgidwitz.com](http://www.tomgidwitz.com)

neighboring towns, looking for shelter and begging for food.

It was thought the effort demanded 100,000 men, a situation so dire and chaotic, newspapers said, that only General Antonio Baldissera, ex-commander of Italy's Ethiopian forces, could set things right. Soldiers doled out free meals, built temporary shelters, and shoveled cinders from house tops into heaps six feet deep. Firemen and ambulance crews from Rome and Palermo arrived. In some deserted mountain towns, looting began.



The sky over Naples was a chocolate brown, and grey dust covered everything, a choking powder so fine that its grains were almost invisible, yet so dense that it formed a solid curtain one hundred yards ahead. It swallowed all

sounds like a snowstorm, save for the incessant scraping shovels. "Even voices seem muffled," said the New York Times, "but that may be due to the utter depression which now lies upon what is generally the noisiest of cities."

Shops and factories, theaters and cafes, banks and restaurants were closed. The many glass-covered galleries around city were locked tight, for fear their arching roofs would fall. The prisoners in the Naples city jail finally snapped; they broke open doors and rushed out into the corridors until they were beaten back by guards. Candles burned before every sacred statue on the city streets, and despairing penitents wandered about with more icons in their arms until they set them down in the open air where candles were almost immediately placed around them. Now and again street

cars rumbled by in the fog, the friction of their wheels igniting sulfur in the ashes, sparking tiny flames along buried trolley rails. And if the Naples roads were horrible, elsewhere they were impassable.



Engineers halted train service from the city because even at noon it was too dark to drive.

King Victor Emmanuel and Queen Elena, hurrying to the city from Rome, opened the royal palaces of San Fernandino and Capodimonti for injured refugees. They visited hospitals, then set out for Ottaviano by car. When the ash became too thick to drive through, the king continued on horseback, while Queen Elena turned back, the New York Times

reported, "because the task was not one suitable for a woman." The king pushed on through four feet of ash. At Ottaviano, the king saw 129 bodies that had been pulled from ruins of the church. A near-riot took place at Torre dell'Annunziata when the church, deemed unsafe, was ordered closed. In San Giuseppe, soldiers set up a tent camp in the town square, near the linen shrouded bodies, laid out and awaiting burial.

Despite the rescue efforts, the residents seemed at their breaking point. Some said that the city was doomed and blamed the authorities for so many deaths. Yet even as the newspapers continued to report the Observatory's destruction, a timely dispatch was tapped over the telegraph wires. "If my words could influence the population," Matteucci cabled, "they would be words of encouragement and sympathy, for I am most confident that Vesuvius will soon return to its normal conditions." And, he added, the mountain's topmost 820 feet had disappeared.

