

A TALE OF TWO CITIES
INDIANOLA
AND
POMPEII

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By Mark Hain

Indianola is a defunct city on Matagorda Bay on the Texas Coast.
The hurricane struck on August 29, 1942. At that time the Army had an anti-aircraft training ground there. *INDIANOLA*

Now the Captain in a jeep with a furious roar
In the first of maneuvers at the sands on the shore,
Near the site of the camp ~~where~~ the soldiers were taught,
To each post of command had shouted to "Halt!"

Not a rising of wind nor a cloud in the sky,--
So the order to march was unduly awry!
By the hour of four, with a frothy exchange,
Both the wind and the sea were extending their range.

To the bivouac we rushed to assemble our arms,
While the wind and the water expanded alarms.
At the hour of six, with equipment on truck,
We began our march as the hurricane struck!

Not a halt nor ~~occasion for catching our breath--~~
So we trudged through the dark, contending with death,
While the wind was arising to vicious degree
To admix the water of the rain with the sea.

But the Captain refused to permit us to slow,
And the ambulance retrieved the disabled to go.
Not a man did we lose--not any was hurt!
Though exhausted, we soon were strongly alert!

INDIANOLA

Lo, beyond the impacted levee we advance

Where the dangerous causeway has threatened our chance;

And at midnight the truckers arrive to convey

Our exhausted remains up Victoria way.

All the buildings at the camp were carried away--

It was only the tank that was able to stay;

And the rifles that were left were buried in the mud;--

But nowhere was there seen a spilling of blood!

With such an excursion and a breather or two,

I began to explore the beaches anew:

And I found that only the cisterns remained

With the name of Indianola yet claimed.

I continued to canvass my thoughts on the place

That were gived by tradition and the facts in the case;

It appeared that there were shadows--a mystic voice
disastrous

That was warning of hurricanes'/choice!

"It is doubtless that you were divinely apprised

And shielded from being so fatally surprised

By the furies that destroyed the city before:--

It was twice that she was drowned in the days of yore!

INDIANOLA

"In seventy-five the hapless town
Was engulfed by the ocean to struggle and drown;
But the sturdy inhabitants rebuilt the place
And prospered a while in the years of their grace.

"But another upheaval, more cruel than the first,
Then destroyed ten thousand folks at a burst!
There was nothing left but the cisterns and the name:--
No one had the heart to rebuild her again!

So the busiest port to the west of New Orleans
Is like to the dreams of most wishful of teens!
'Tis the way of the sea to dismember and kill,
To confuse the mind and to shatter the will.

VESUVIUS Historical notes

The first eruption of Vesuvius in this poem took place on March 18, 1944, when our battalion was bivouaced at Santa Maria, near Naples, and only twenty miles from Vesuvius, with the mountain in full view. The conversation detailed was between one of my associates and me two days before the eruption--and afterward. Several other eruptions occurred at different times after the eruption of seventy-nine A.D.. The only major reruption, however, was in 1631 when the scoriae (dead porous chunks of lava) killed, according to some accounts, eighteen thousand people over a vast densely populated area of many square miles. But in the 1631 eruption little of consequence was buried.

The dramatic and tragic eruption of seventy-nine A.D. was preceded sixteen years by a devastating earthquake, which wrecked many buildings in Pompeii. Following the earthquake there was an extensive building program about to be completed. The city was more luxurious than ever before. It was not only the home of about twenty thousand regular inhabitants, but the playground for many rich and powerful politicians from many parts of the world, especially from the ends of the Roman Empire.

Founded about 600 B.C. by the Oscans, a tribe of indigenous Italic people, the city was unique from the beginning. It drew designs and customs from Egypt, Asia, Greece and Rome. The Romans conquered it in eighty B.C., and made it one of their chief seaports and trading centers. Mainly, however, it became a sheltered playground for the Roman elite. Then it was protected by the Roman Army. The city had every convenience known to man, including running water and a sewage system. There was a large reservoir on the north side of the city, but the source of the water supply is unknown. Perhaps the water was diverted from the nearby Sarnus River. We may repeat, the the city had everything that a totally heathen city could have, except a library and writing. Pompeii left no writing

of any kind, except brief advertising on the fronts of the places of businesses, their cave canem in mosaics at the doorsills and numerous obscene graffiti on their walls. (The instruction of their children seems to have been completely oral.) The interiors of their houses were decorated with the rarest works of art. Then, too, exquisite sculpture was everywhere, outdoors and indoors. Some of the art, buried for centuries, is in a perfect state of preservation. Pompeii reveals to the world the true nature of Roman living.

Strangely, the seventy-nine eruption of Vesuvius was the first in recorded history. Its damage was confined almost exclusively to the area about Pompeii and her environs. There was no flow of lava, but there were present ^{only} the ingredients necessary to bury the city and her civilization until the modern era. The sea even receded from the shore, suggesting that Vesuvius had filled herself with it. After a few years in which there was some vandalism and thievery, the city and her way of life were forgotten by all the world until about 1700 A.D. when some people drilling a well discovered the sleeping curiosity.

Aside from what excavation has revealed to us, the only real information about the eruption is given by the eyewitness Pliny the Younger, a prominent Roman statesman and writer. In his two letters to Tacitus shortly after the great tragedy, he tells in detail the things that happened in and around the city at that time. His uncle, Pliny the Elder, captain of the Roman fleet, anchored not far away, went ashore to see what assistance he might render. Unfortunately, he was overcome by the sulfurous fumes and choked to death.

A column of smoke on the mountain in light
And an intermittent flame in the night
To salute the valleys and the ships on the main
Made the noble Vesuvius a knot to explain.

It was puzzling, too, in the highest degree
When the smoke and the flame we no longer could see!
So a soldier in amazement and wonder exclaimed,
"The fiery inhaling of the mountain is maimed!

"Let us go to the top and examine her throat!
It may be that a tiny impertinent mote
In her sulfurous trachea's heated breath
May condemn Vesuvius to smother to death."

"I will answer your query with 'No--oh, no, no!'
To the summit we can't adventure to go!
That drowsy volcano perchance will explode
And deport us to torment in haste a la mode!"

On the morrow in the middle of the night she blew
And awakened the valleys and hills not a few.
So the whole of the country had thunders and light,
Since the mountain determined to exhibit her might.

And the flashing and roaring continued to increase
Till the flowing of lava she began to release
When it flowed in a river of fire to the plain,
And her ashes descended like showers of rain.

The excited and trembling soldier exclaimed,
"What a show of mighty power proclaimed!
With her rumbling and trembling and flashing of light
She is demonstrating the majesty of might."

"This is only a sample of Vesuvius' play!
It was after her hundreds of years when she lay
In benignly expectant but silent repose
That Vesuvius in fiendish activity arose.

"It was anno Domini seventy-nine
That Vesuvius inflicted her deadliest line
On the cities of her luscious alluvial plain
And forbade their life to revive again.

"At her feet the voluptuous Pompeii lay
With the richest of patrician society at play
In the wealthiest of villas with fanciest of fare
And completely hedonic forgetfulness of care.

"In her homes was the best that the ages could supply;
In her games, in her living, the world could defy.
And the tutors instructed the children at home
In their heathen religions and their journeys to roam.

"But the slaves performed the total of work
And provided the means that their masters might lurk
In the brothels, the wineries and houses of chance
Where they burned their living by asking advance.

"On the morrow, November the twenty-third,
Vesuvius proclaimed her mightiest word,
When she rained her venom and missiles of death
On the unsuspecting achoking for breath.

"There came the sulfurous green and the blue
With theflashing of lights of every hue;
And the ashes descended in the fiercest of squalls
Commingled with scoriae as heavy as balls.

"With ~~the~~ torrents of boiling water and steam
She began to empty her muddiest stream
To level the vacancies with boiling ~~water~~ and slush
Till the city was choked with congealing of mush.

"The potent explosion lasted for days
To disgorge the seething slop in the ways
To the depth of several meters and more
Till the settling of goo had completed its chore.

"And to this there was added the whiteness of ash
Till the whole was oppressed by the foulest of mash.
So the houses and people with jewels and gold
Were together compacted till their story was told.

"But the sentries of the Romans were ever alert
To present to the vandals and thieves their desert;
At each of the entries, of which there were eight,
A soldier on duty was entombed at the gate!

VESUVIUS

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"Just a few of the people escaped with their wealth,
And some thieves absconded with their loot and their health--
They maneuvered beyond the choking and gloom
To avoid the confines of a sulfurous tomb.

"The unspeakable mass was cemented for the time
Of a millennium and a half in a petrified slime,--
Was ignored and forgotten to sleep in its place
Till the latest of years have uncovered its face."

In our retrospect we may calmly presume
As to why that Nature will duly consume
The wealthiest and vilest in aptness of time
And conceal for aeons environs of crime.

It is doubtless a clear and a logical truth
That superlative events, deserving no ruth,
Can never evolve by unfolding of chance,
But are wrought by the Master of circumstance!

Mark Lowry
December 4, 1980