CHAPTER III

THE CITY OVERWHELMED

Previous to the terrible eruption of 79, Vesuvius was considered an extinct volcano. "Above these places," says Strabo, writing in the time of Augustus, "lies Vesuvius, the sides of which are well cultivated, even to the summit. This is level, but quite unproductive. It has a cindery appearance; for the rock is porous and of a sooty color, the appearance suggesting that the whole summit may once have been on fire and have contained craters, the fires of which died out when there was no longer anything left to burn."

Earthquakes, however, were of common occurrence in Campania. An especially violent shock on the fifth of February, 63 A.D., gave warning of the reawakening of Vesuvius. Great damage was done throughout the region lying between Naples and Nuceria, but the shock was most severe at Pompeii, a large part of the buildings of the city being thrown down. The prosperous and enterprising inhabitants at once set about rebuilding. When the final catastrophe came, on the twenty-fourth of August, 79 A.D., most of the houses were in a good state of repair, and the rebuilding of at least two temples, those of Apollo and of Isis, had been completed. This renewing of the city, caused by the earthquake, may be looked upon as a fortunate circumstance for our studies.

Our chief source of information for the events of August 24–26, 79, is a couple of letters of the Younger Pliny to Tacitus, who purposed to make use of them in writing his history. Pliny was staying at Misenum with his uncle, the Elder Pliny, who was in command of the Roman fleet. In the first letter he tells of his uncle's fate. On the afternoon of the twenty-fourth, the admiral Pliny set out with ships to rescue from impending danger the people at the foot of Vesuvius, particularly in the vicinity
of Herculaneum. He came too late; it was no longer possible to effect a landing. So he directed his course to Stabiae, where he spent the night; and there on the following morning he died, suffocated by the fumes that were exhaled from the earth. The second letter gives an account of the writer's own experiences at Misenum.

To this testimony little is added by the narrative of Dion Cassius, which was written a century and a half later and is known to us only in abstract; Dion dwells at greater length on the powerful impression which the terrible convulsion of nature left upon those who were living at that time. With the help of the letters of Pliny, in connection with the facts established by the excavations, it is possible to picture to ourselves the progress of the eruption with a fair degree of clearness.

The subterranean fires of Vesuvius pressed upward to find an outlet. The accumulations of volcanic dust and pumice stone that had been heaped up on the mountain by former eruptions were again hurled to a great height, and came down upon the surrounding country. On the west side of Vesuvius they mingled with torrents of rain, and flowed as a vast stream of mud down over Herculaneum. On the south side, driven by a northwest wind as they descended from the upper air, they spread out into a thick cloud, which covered Pompeii and the plain of the Sarno. Out of this cloud first broken fragments of pumice stone—the average size not larger than a walnut—rained down to the depth of eight to ten feet; then followed volcanic dust, wet as it fell by a downpour of water, to the depth of six or seven feet. With the storm of dust came successive shocks of earthquake.

Such was, in outline, the course of the eruption. It must have begun early in the morning of the twenty-fourth, and the stream of mud must have commenced immediately to move in the direction of Herculaneum; for shortly after one o'clock on that day the admiral Pliny at Misenum received letters from the region threatened, saying that the danger was imminent, and that escape was possible only by sea. Even then the Younger Pliny saw, high above Vesuvius, the cloud, shaped like an umbrella pine, which was to rain down destruction on Pompeii.

Toward evening, the ships off Herculaneum ran into the hail of pumice stone, which, during the night, reached Stabiae and so increased in violence that the admiral Pliny was obliged to leave his sleeping room from fear that the door would be blocked up by the falling masses.

Early in the morning of the twenty-fifth there was a severe shock of earthquake, which was felt as far as Misenum. Then the dust began to fall, and a cloud of fearful blackness, pierced through and through with flashes of lightning, settled down over land and sea. At Misenum, even, it became dark; "not," says Pliny, "as on a cloudy night when there is no moon, but as in a room which has been completely closed."

How long the fall of dust lasted we can only infer from this, that when it ceased the sun had not yet set. In Misenum, which the shower of pumice stone had not reached, everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. Although the earthquake shocks continued, the inhabitants went back into their houses. But Pompeii and Stabiae had been covered so deep that only the roofs of the houses, where these had not fallen in, projected above the surface; and Herculaneum had wholly disappeared.

All the plain of the Sarno was buried, as were also the slopes of the mountains on the south. Stabiae, as we have seen, lay at the foot of the mountains, on the coast. It had been destroyed by Sulla in the Social War; its inhabitants, forced to scatter, settled in the surrounding country. In the years 1749–82 numerous buildings were excavated in the vicinity, in part luxurious country seats, in part plain farm buildings; but the excavations were afterward filled up again. The covering of Stabiae was like that of Pompeii, only not so deep.

Herculaneum was covered with the same materials; they were not, however, deposited in regular strata, but were mixed together, and being drenched with water, hardened into a kind of tufa which in places reaches a depth of sixty-five feet. Excavating at Herculaneum is in consequence extremely difficult; and the difficulty is further increased by the fact that a modern city, Resina, extends over the greater part of the ancient site. The excavations thus far attempted have in most cases been
conducted by means of underground passageways. The statement that Herculaneum was overflowed by a stream of lava, though frequently repeated, is erroneous.

The woodwork of buildings in Pompeii has in many cases been preserved, but in a completely charred condition. Frequently where walls were painted with yellow ochre it has turned red, especially when brought immediately into contact with the stratum of dust—a change which this color undergoes when it is exposed to heat. Nevertheless, the inference would be unwarranted that the products of the eruption fell upon the city red-hot and caused a general conflagration. The fragments of pumice stone could scarcely have retained a great degree of heat after having been so long in the air; it is evident from Pliny’s narrative that they were not hot.

With the dust a copious rain must have fallen; for the bodies of those who perished in the storm of dust left perfect moulds, into a number of which soft plaster of Paris has been poured, making those casts of human figures which lend a melancholy interest to the collections in the little Museum at Pompeii (Fig. 7). The extraordinary freshness of these figures, without any suggestion of the wasting away after death, is explicable only on the supposition that the enveloping dust was damp, and so commenced immediately to harden into a permanent shape. If the dust had been dry and had packed down and hardened afterwards, we should be able to trace at least the beginnings of decay.

Neither the pumice stone nor the dust, then, could have set wood on fire. The woodwork must have become charred gradually from the effect of moisture, as in the case of coal, and the change in the color of the yellow ochre must be due to some other cause than the presence of heat. This is all the more evident from the fact that vestiges of local conflagrations, confined within narrow limits, can here and there be traced, kindled by the masses of glowing slag which fell at the same time with the pumice stone, or by the fires left burning in the houses.

From the number of skeletons discovered in the past few decades, since an accurate record has been kept, it has been estimated that in Pompeii itself, about two thousand persons perished. As the city contained a population of twenty thousand or more, it is evident that the majority of the inhabitants fled; since the eruption commenced in the morning, while the hail of pumice stone did not begin till afternoon, those who appreciated the greatness of the danger had time to escape. It is, however, impossible to say how many fled when it was already too late, and lost their lives outside the city. Mention has already been made of some who perished at the harbor; others who went out earlier to the Sarno may have made good their escape. Of those who remained in the city part were buried in the houses—so with twenty persons whose skeletons were found in the cellar of the villa of Diomedes; others, as the hail of pumice stone ceased, ventured out into the streets, where they soon succumbed to the shower of dust that immediately followed. As the bodies wasted away little except the bones was left in the hollows formed by the dust that hardened around them, and the casts already referred to, which have been made from time to time since 1863, give in some cases a remarkably clear and sharp representation of the victims.

The Emperor Titus sent a commission of senators into Campania to report in what way help could best be rendered. A plan was formed to rebuild the cities that had been destroyed, and the property of those who died without heirs was set aside.
for this purpose. Nothing came of it, however, so far as our knowledge goes. Pompeii is indeed mentioned in the Peutinger Table, a map for travellers made in the third century, but the name was apparently given to a post station in memory of the former city. Conclusive evidence against the existence of a new city is the absence of any inscriptions referring to it.