

# THE GRANDEUR OF VESUVIUS IN ACTION

L. A. SHAPER



Covering the rails with sand. On the right, the lava has already overflowed the railway



The Erema Hotel & Royal Vesuvian Observatory, up to this point the railroad remains intact



Lava descending from the mountain in the direction of the railway



From the burning mountain a gigantic serpent of molten stone all red with in and hissing steam at every pore crept forth upon its work of doom

BY FRANK A. PERRET.  
(Royal Observatory, Mount Vesuvius).

**V**ESUVIUS has been in continuous eruption since May of last year. For some months previous to that date the mountain had been throwing out enormous quantities of red hot stones, the greater portion of which, falling back into the crater, had formed within its walls a little cone shaped mountain, which finally grew to a height of many meters above the old summit level. This cone, having been built up in situ, fitted like the stopper of a bottle, contracting the volcano's vent to the dimensions of its own tiny crater, and as the dynamic activity increased and great explosions tore their way upward from the earth's interior it became evident that either the stopper would be blown into the air or the bottle itself be broken. On the afternoon of May 27 heavy detonations were heard, increasing in force as evening approached, when the great cone of the mountain split open on the north-west side and the long imprisoned lava burst forth in a cloud of steam and descended the mountain in three splendid rivers of fire.

At the foot of the cone two paths were open to the flowing streams, one leading into a desolate valley between the two summits and the other toward that part of the mountain over which a carriage road and the new electric railway wind upward to join the Funicular or cable lift, to the summit. The former path is the more direct and, excepting a day in September when, swerving suddenly, the lava overflowed a portion of the railway, it has until recently ran a harmless course over old lavas or accumulated in great heaps at the foot of the cone.

The beginning of the present year marked an increasing activity of the main crater, within which, by February 3, the lava had risen to a higher level. This converted the side openings, which had been silently pouring forth the molten

streams, into true craters of eruption, spouting the liquid fire to a height of many feet, with a hissing roar, and sending a fiercely glowing torrent in the direction of the fated railway. A day and a night it halted at the base of the cone, gathering force and volume; then out and hissing steam at every pore, crept forth upon its work of doom. Over the shedding rocky scales on every side. Baffled at one spot, the monster would rear

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The Lava advancing from its awful source

Photos by Frank A. Perret 1906  
Honorary Assistant Royal Observatory Vesuvius

its smoking crest, then turn with a crash and a lurid glare to seek another path-fateful, resistless, implacable.

At a certain place between the Hermitage and Funicular stations the railway makes a double turn not unlike a huge letter S. As this lies on sloping ground, an attack here would inevitably cut the line in three places at a single stroke, and toward this point the demon made its way.

Men hasten to the threatened section, cut down the poles to save the equipment, cover the roadbed with sand and stones and then stand helplessly aside while minutes undo the work of months and hours that of years. Let the American dollar sign represent the railway, the vertical lines showing the stream of lava; give to the latter a breadth of a hundred yards and you have a diagram of the disaster and an idea of the destruction wrought by the overflowing scourge.

Not content with this, the enemy was seen to dispatch a flanking column to attack our communications farther down the line, where it arrived on the morning of the 7th, and the eruption culminated in a scene of mingled beauty and terror. As is usual at such times, all the elements contributed to the general effect, rain, snow, hail and wind alternating with intervals of calm and sunshine, the fiery lava crashing on its way full ten feet to the minute and reeking with brimstone, the falling ashes, the roaring of the crater half hidden in bursting rolls of smoke—it seemed a return to those old time conditions when the classic mountain was wont to spread consternation through all the surrounding region. But this was not to be, and, having accomplished its work of destruction, the lava ceased for the time its flow in this direction, and the eruption subsided, leaving to man the opportunity and the obligation to make new proof of courage, resource and indomitable perseverance.

As far as the Erema Hotel and Royal Observatory the Vesuvian Railway remains intact and from this point to the Funicular station the trip made on foot or in a sedan chair offers the visitor an exceptional means of viewing at close range the workings of this most interesting, often terrible, always fascinating volcano.