

When he was 18 years old, Pliny the Younger and his mother were living at his Uncle's villa in Misenum. They were there when Vesuvius began its 18-hour eruption on August 24, 79 A.D.

Years later, Pliny's friend - the historian, Cornelius Tacitus - asked Pliny to write a letter about the events. Those letters (6.16 and 6.20) provide the only surviving eyewitness account of the events which buried Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Here, translated into English, is part of Pliny's story (when he and his mother first realize something is wrong across the Bay):

My uncle was stationed at Misenum, in active command of the fleet. On 24 August, in the early afternoon, my mother drew his attention to a cloud of unusual size and appearance. He had been out in the sun, had taken a cold bath, and lunched while lying down, and was then working at his books. He called for his shoes and climbed up to a place which would give him the best view of the phenomenon.

It was not clear at that distance from which mountain the cloud was rising (it was afterwards known to be Vesuvius); its general appearance can best be expressed as being like an umbrella pine, for it rose to a great height on a sort of trunk and then split off into branches, I imagine because it was thrust upwards by the first blast and then left unsupported as the pressure subsided, or else it was borne down by its own weight so that it spread out and gradually dispersed. In places it looked white, elsewhere blotched and dirty, according to the amount of soil and ashes it carried with it.

My uncle's scholarly acumen saw at once that it was important enough for a closer inspection, and he ordered a boat to be made ready, telling me I could come with him if I wished. I replied that I preferred to go on with my studies, and as it happened he had himself given me some writing to do.

As he was leaving the house he was handed a message from Rectina, wife of Tascus whose house was at the foot of the mountain, so that escape was impossible except by boat. She was terrified by the danger threatening her and implored him to rescue her from her fate. He changed his plans, and what he had begun in a spirit of inquiry he completed as a hero. He gave orders for the warships to be launched and went on board himself with the intention of bringing help to many more people besides Rectina, for this lovely stretch of coast was thickly populated.

He hurried to the place which everyone else was hastily leaving, steering his course straight for the danger zone. He was entirely fearless, describing each new movement and phase of the portent to be noted down exactly as he observed them. Ashes were already falling, hotter and thicker as the ships drew near, followed by bits of pumice and blackened stones, charred and cracked by the flames: then suddenly they were in shallow water, and the shore was blocked by the debris from the mountain.

For a moment my uncle wondered whether to turn back, but when the helmsman advised this he refused, telling him that Fortune stood by the courageous and they must make for Pomponianus at Stabiae. He was cut off there by the breadth of the bay (for the shore gradually curves round a basin filled by the sea) so that he was not as yet in danger, though it was clear that this would come nearer as it spread. Pomponianus had therefore already put his belongings on board ship, intending to escape if the contrary wind fell.

This wind was of course full in my uncle's favour, and he was able to bring his ship in. He embraced his terrified friend, cheered and encouraged him, and thinking he could calm his fears by showing his own composure, gave orders that he was to be carried to the bathroom. After his bath he lay down and dined; he was quite cheerful, or at any rate he pretended he was, which was no less courageous.

Meanwhile on Mount Vesuvius broad sheets of fire and leaping flames blazed at several points, their bright glare emphasized by the darkness of night. My uncle tried to allay the fears of his companions by repeatedly declaring that these were nothing but bonfires left by the peasants in their terror, or else empty houses on fire in the districts they had abandoned. Then he went to rest and certainly slept, for as he was a stout man his breathing was rather loud and heavy and could be heard by people coming and going outside his door. By this time the courtyard giving access to his room was full of ashes mixed with pumice stones, so that its level had risen, and if he had stayed in the room any longer he would never have got out. He was wakened, came out and joined Pomponianus and the rest of the household who had sat up all night.

They debated whether to stay indoors or take their chance in the open, for the buildings were now

shaking with violent shocks, and seemed to be swaying to and fro as if they were torn from their foundations. Outside, on the other hand, there was the danger of falling pumice stones, even though these were light and porous; however, after comparing the risks they chose the latter. In my uncle's case one reason outweighed the other, but for the others it was a choice of fears. As a protection against falling objects they put pillows on their heads tied down with cloths.

Elsewhere there was daylight by this time, but they were still in darkness, blacker and denser than any ordinary night, which they relieved by lighting torches and various kinds of lamp. My uncle decided to go down to the shore and investigate on the spot the possibility of any escape by sea, but he found the waves still wild and dangerous. A sheet was spread on the ground for him to lie down, and he repeatedly asked for cold water to drink.

Then the flames and smell of sulphur which gave warning of the approaching fire drove the others to take flight and roused him to stand up. He stood leaning on two slaves and then suddenly collapsed, I imagine because the dense, fumes choked his breathing by blocking his windpipe which was constitutionally weak and narrow and often inflamed. When daylight returned on the 26th - two days after the last day he had been seen - his body was found intact and uninjured, still fully clothed and looking more like sleep than death. (From Pliny's First Letter, known as 6.16. See [Pliny's Letters](#), by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, beginning at [page 12](#).)

This clip - from *Pompeii: The Last Day*, is based - in large part - on Pliny the Younger's eyewitness accounts.

See, also:

People of Pompeii

Pompeii and Vesuvius

Pompeii - While Vesuvius Erupts

Final Moments of Pompeii

Death of People in Pompeii

Credits:

Clip from "Pompeii: The Last Day," a docudrama produced by the BBC (in association with TLC/NDR) and co-produced in association with France 2. Original air date, on BBC One, was October 20, 2003.

Copyright BBC, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the program.

The film is based, in part, on Pliny the Younger's letters about the Vesuvius eruption. It uses computer-generated images to recreate what the eruption must have been like for the residents of Pompeii. Online, via BBC's Channel at YouTube.

Written by:

Edward Canfor-Dumas

Director:

Peter Nicholson

Narrator:

Alisdair Simpson

Starring:

Tim Pigott-Smith (Pliny the Elder)

Alex Furguson (Pliny the Younger)
Katherine Whitburn (Julia)
Jim Carter (Polybius)

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Last-Day-of-Pompeii-Pliny-s-Letter>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/The-Last-Day-of-Pompeii-Pliny-s-Letter>