



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Earthquakes

Jean-Henri Fabre

Early in the morning all the neighbors were talking, from door to door, on the same subject. It seemed they had had a narrow escape during the night. Jacques said that about two o'clock he had been awakened by the bellowing of his cattle, repeated two or three times. Even Azor himself, the good Azor, so peaceful in his stall when there was nothing serious to disturb him, had bellowed mournfully. Jacques had risen and lighted his lantern, but had been unable to discover what caused the trouble with the animals.

Mother Ambrosine, who slept with one eye open, told a longer tale. She had heard the dishes rattling on the kitchen dresser; some plates had even rolled off and broken in falling to the ground. Mother Ambrosine was thinking it was perhaps some misdeed of the cat's, when it seemed to her that strong arms seized the bed and shook it twice from head to foot and from foot to head. It was over in the twinkling of an eye. The worthy woman was so frightened that, throwing the covers over her head, she stayed there all night.

Mathieu and his son were away at the time: they were returning home from the fair, and were making the journey by night. The weather was fine—no wind, and bright moonlight. They were chatting about their affairs when a dull, deep noise was heard, coming from under the ground. It sounded like the roar of the big mill-dam. At the same moment they staggered as if the ground had been giving way under them. Then nothing more. The moon continued to shine, the night was calm and serene. It was so soon over that Mathieu and his son wondered whether they had not dreamed it.

These were among the more serious incidents related. Meanwhile there was passing from mouth to mouth, moving some to incredulous smiles and others to grave reflections, the terrible word "earthquake."

In the evening Uncle Paul was surrounded by his nephews and nieces, eager for some explanation of the great news of the day.

"Is it true, Uncle," asked Jules, "that the earth sometimes trembles?"

"Nothing is truer, my dear child. Sometimes here, sometimes elsewhere, suddenly there is a movement of the ground. In our country it doesn't happen often. If once in a while a slight trembling is felt, it is talked of for days as a curiosity; then it is forgotten. Many tell today of the events of the past night

without attaching much importance to them, not knowing that the force revealed to us by a light movement of the earth can, in its brutal power, bring about frightful disasters. Jacques has told you of the bellowing of the cattle and Azor's outcry. Mother Ambrosine has described to you her fright when her bed was shaken twice. In all that there is nothing very terrifying; but earthquakes are not always harmless."

"Is an earthquake, then, very serious?" Jules again inquired. "For my part, I thought it only meant a few plates broken and some furniture displaced."

"It seems to me," said Claire, "that if the movement were strong enough houses would fall down. But Uncle is going to tell us about a violent earthquake."

"Earthquakes are often preceded by subterranean noises, a dull rumbling that swells, abates, swells again, as if a storm were bursting in the depths of the earth. At this rumbling, full of menacing mysteries, every creature becomes quiet, mute with fear, and every one turns pale. Warned by instinct, animals are struck with stupor. Suddenly the earth shivers, bulges up, subsides again, whirls, cracks open, and discloses a yawning gulf."

"Oh, my goodness!" Claire exclaimed. "And what becomes of the people?"



"You will see what becomes of them in these terrible catastrophes. Of all the earthquakes felt in Europe, the most terrible was that which ravaged Lisbon in 1775, on All Saints' Day. No danger appeared to menace the festal town, when suddenly there burst from under-ground a rumbling like continuous thunder. Then the ground, shaken violently several times, rose up, sank down, and in a moment the populous capital of Portugal was nothing but a heap of ruins and dead bodies. The people that were still left, seeking refuge from the fall of the ruins, had retired to a large quay on the seashore. All at once the quay was swallowed up in the waters, dragging with it the crowd and the boats and ships moored there. Not a victim, not a piece of wreck came back to float on the surface. An abyss had opened, swallowing up waters, quay, ships, people, and, closing up again, kept them for ever. In six minutes sixty thousand persons perished.

"While that was happening at Lisbon and the high mountains of Portugal were shaking on their bases, several towns of Africa—Morocco, Fez, Mequinez—were

overthrown. A village of ten thousand souls was swallowed up with its entire population in an abyss suddenly opened and suddenly closed."

"Never, Uncle, have I heard of such terrible things," declared Jules.

"And I laughed," said Emile, "when Mother Ambrosine told us of her fright. It was nothing to laugh at. Our village could have disappeared from the earth with us all, as did that one in Africa."

"Listen to this, too," Uncle Paul continued. "In February, 1783, in Southern Italy, convulsions began that lasted four years. During the first year alone nine hundred and forty-nine were counted. The surface of the ground was wrinkled in moving waves like the surface of a stormy sea, and on this unstable ground people felt nauseated as if on the deck of a vessel. Sea-sickness reigned on land. At every undulation, the clouds, really immobile, seemed to move brusquely, just as they do at sea when we are on a vessel tossed by the winds. Trees bowed in the terrestrial wave and swept the earth with their tops.

"In two minutes the first shock overthrew the greater part of towns, villages, and small boroughs of Southern Italy, as well as of Sicily. The whole surface of the country was thrown into confusion. In several places the ground was creviced with fissures, resembling on a large scale the cracks in a pane of broken glass. Vast tracts of ground, with their cultivated fields, their dwellings, vines, olive-trees, slid down the mountain-sides and went considerable distances, to settle finally on other sites. Here, hills split in two; there, they were torn from their places and transported to some other part. Elsewhere, there was nothing to uphold the ground, and it was engulfed in yawning abysses, taking with it dwellings, trees, and animals, which were never seen again; in still other places, deep funnels full of moving sand opened, forming presently vast cavities that were soon converted into lakes by the inrush of subterranean waters. It is estimated that more than two hundred lakes, ponds, and marshes were thus suddenly produced.

"In certain places the ground, softened by waters turned from their channels or brought from the interior by the crevices, was converted into torrents of mud that covered the plains or filled the valleys. The tops of trees and the roofs of ruined farm buildings were the only things to be seen above this sea of mud.

"At intervals sudden quakes shook the ground to a great depth. The shocks were so violent that street pavements were torn from their beds and leaped into the air. The masonry of wells flew out from below the surface in one piece, like a small tower thrown up from the earth. When the ground rose and split open, houses, people, and animals were instantly swallowed up; then, the ground subsiding again, the crevice closed once more, and, without leaving a vestige, everything disappeared, crushed between the two walls of the abyss as they

drew together. Some time afterward, when, after the disaster, excavations were made in order to recover valuable lost objects, the workmen observed that the buried buildings and all that they contained were one compact mass, so violent had been the pressure of this sort of vise formed by the two edges of the closed-up crevice.

“The number of persons who perished in these terrible circumstances is estimated at eighty thousand.

“Most of these victims were buried alive under the ruins of their houses; others were consumed by fires that sprang up in these ruins after each shock; others, fleeing across the country, were swallowed up in the abysses that opened under their feet.

“The sight of such calamities ought to have awakened pity in the hearts of barbarians. And yet—who would believe it?—except for a very few acts of heroism, the conduct of the people was most infamous. The Calabrian peasants ran to the towns, not to give help, but to pillage. Without any concern about the danger, they traversed the streets in the midst of burning walls and clouds of dust, kicking and robbing the victims even before the breath had left their bodies.”

“Miserable creatures!” cried Jules. “Horrid rascals! Ah, if I had only been there!”

“If you had been there, what would you have done, my poor child? There were plenty there with as good hearts and better fists than yours, but they could do nothing.”

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