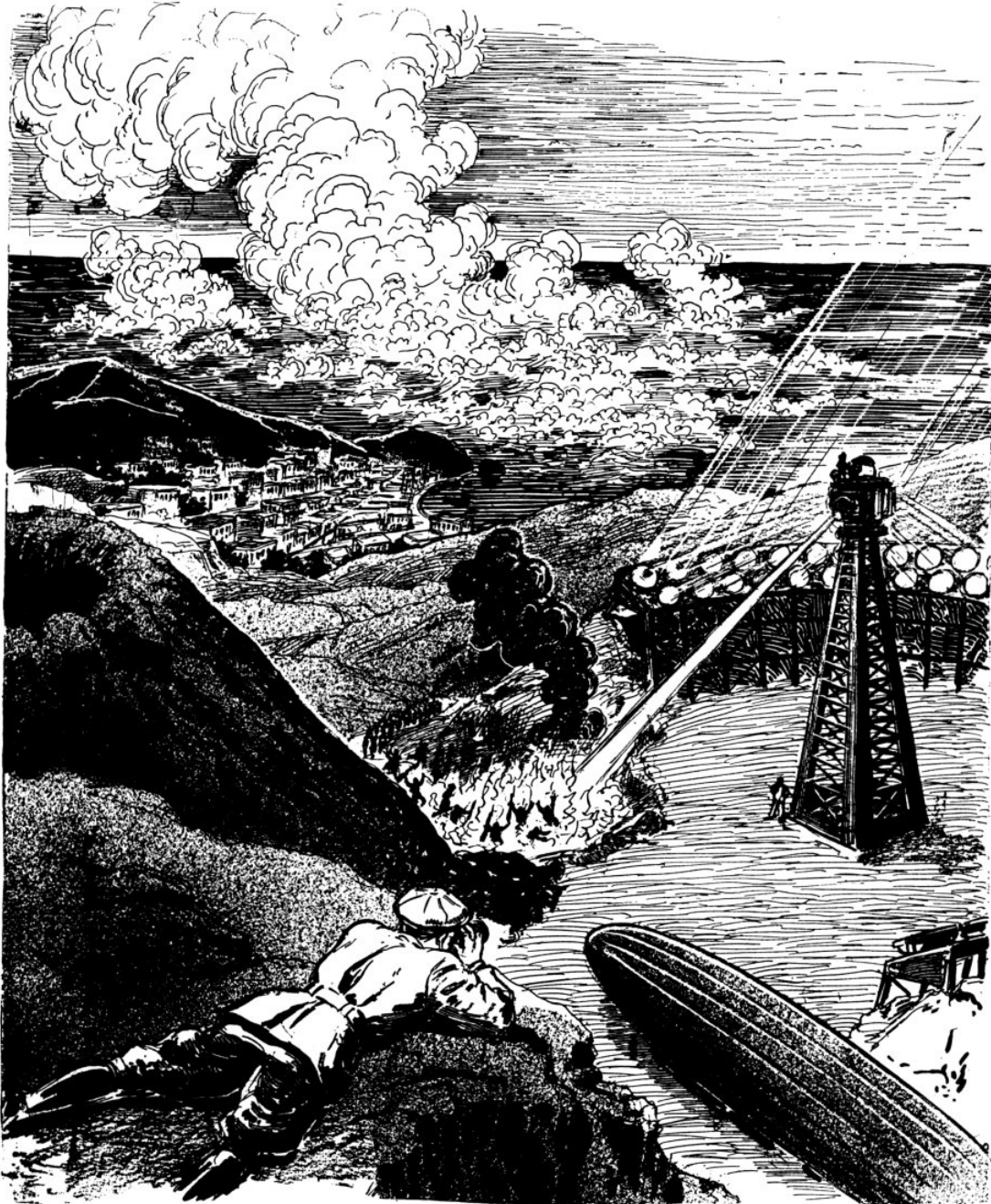


Lord of the Lightning

By ARTHUR K. BARNES



(Illustration by Paul)

The dazzling beam of light played over a uniform, and the man fell back a twisted, crumbling ash. With a horrible fascination the lone watcher saw the ray crawl over the slope.

THE first intimation of the terrible catastrophe which nearly destroyed a goodly portion of South America, and which threw the world into a panic, denuding the mountainous regions of their populations and crowding the lowland cities until they became veritable festers of disease, was in an innocent-appearing article on one of the inner pages of the *New York Globe*. This humble forerunner of news, which later occupied the headlines of the world's foremost newspapers to the exclusion of all else, ran as follows:

Ancud, Chile. AP. A sudden tropical storm of unprecedented violence recently wiped out the little fishing village of Santa Loma in southern Chile, according to reports by the few natives who survived. An unconfirmed report sets the loss of life and property as incredibly high. Subsequent volcanic activity from the long-dormant Mt. San Lorenzo completely destroyed the site of the town, rendering impossible any adequate investigation of the disaster.

Jack Darrell, star reporter for the *Globe*, was possessed of a highly-developed, sensitive instinct for locating incidents of particular value to the men of his profession; in short, Darrell had a "nose for news."

One pleasant morning in early summer, he strolled into the editorial rooms of his employers some two hours late, nodding to his acquaintances, exchanging unprintable remarks with his friends, glaring at the editors, and all the while industriously chewing a huge wad of gum. Snatching up a late edition, he dropped his six-foot bulk into his chair and proceeded to peruse it at his leisure, undisturbed by the noisy activity about him. Shortly, having complacently finished reading his own articles, he turned to the inner pages of the journal.

Less than a minute later he suddenly

sat up in his creaking chair, his face assuming a thoughtful expression, and carefully re-read a certain dispatch. Raising himself from his seat, he lazily threaded his way through the maze of desks and bustling employees to the city editor-in-chief. Calmly thrusting aside the litter of papers which by their very numbers, distinguished the editor's desk from those of less important individuals, Darrell perched himself on the edge and thrust the newspaper under his superior's nose. With one strong forefinger indicating the article with which we are already familiar, he spoke. "Boss, I have a hunch there's some good copy here, if I could run it down. Can't tell what it is right now, of course, but at the very least it will probably bring a couple of columns of 'scientific.' If it turns out poorly I can pick up something else to make the trip worth the expense, if you want to send me down."

The Great Man leaned back to consider the proposition. Darrell, besides being a newspaperman of unusual ability, was a highly educated person of considerable reputation in scientific circles. He had several scoops to his credit because of his intimate friendships among the notables of the scientific world. Hence, the editor replied,

"Well, as far as your hunches go I must admit that they have often been remarkably correct, except for that weird fluke you pulled when Dr. Borgman went away—now shut up, I know all about it—and I see no reason why I shouldn't trust you on the present occasion. You have a roving commission and I have no objections to your going south so long as you don't abuse your privileges. In any event, I think you're entitled to a little vacation of sorts."

"Oke," smiled Darrell, and hurried off to pack his typewriter and clamp on an ancient hat.

"See you next month," he bellowed over his shoulder to his envious friends, and

sauntered down the stairs whistling through his teeth and several sticks of gum.

While packing his bag in his apartment, he again reviewed the circumstances of the departure of the famous Dr. Borgman and of his (Darrell's) hunch concerning the potential news value of the incident. Borgman, probably the world's greatest authority on meteorology, and with a considerable reputation in the allied sciences, had retired to an unapproachable retreat in the Rockies, and had commenced work on a gigantic structure about which nothing was known or could be discovered.

Strange rumors made their way to the outside crediting Borgman with everything from black magic to death rays and space-cars. Darrell, his curiosity piqued, had chartered an airplane to carry him over the site of Borgman's activity. Hovering over the tiny valley, he had been able to make out a small group of buildings at one side with a huge structure resembling a large hangar, occupying the center of the rather restricted area.

Just as he was about to signal his pilot to fly closer, several figures had rushed from the buildings, rifles in their hands, and had taken a number of well-directed shots at the plane. The latter made a hasty departure. Some hours later Borgman himself had arrived at the mountain town at which Darrell was staying. According to the government officials, the famous man had been in a terrible rage and had threatened all sorts of dire punishments if any more unprintable busybodies were allowed to violate the sanctity of his abode.

Having swept all before him in the blast of his fury, he had again returned to obscurity. Darrell, highly incensed at the doctor's remarks, racked his brains to find means of retaliation, but his efforts were set at naught by the report that Borgman had gone, bag and baggage, without a trace. A few smoldering ruins were all that remained

to mark the site of his former activity. The reporter had lost the trail completely, and was forced to come home empty-handed. Weeks later he had again been startled into activity by the report that Dr. Borgman was leaving for Europe on a vacation trip. Hastening down to the ship, he had been met personally by a most affable man. The latter apologized handsomely for his untimely epithets at the time of the Rocky Mountain incident, explained that disappointment over the failure of the experiment decided him to take the trip, and even gave the reporter his itinerary. In short, Borgman was very nice about the whole affair and Darrell, although he had a good interview, was a bit downcast, since his hunch had apparently "gone flooey."

It was not until the boat had left the harbor that two remarkable facts struck him. In the first place, he still knew nothing whatsoever about the nature of the experiment that failed. Secondly, and what was even stranger, the vessel on which Borgman had sailed was not Europe-bound; it was a South American coaster. However, that, as he was wont to say, was that, and the reporter dismissed the matter from his mind for the time.

Now, as he prepared to journey into the very country where, as he had reason to believe, Borgman was staying, he resolved in case he met the scientist again to extract some information from him no matter what the cost. Finished with his packing, he hurried to town, made reservations for a stateroom on the first steamer to South America, then dashed off a letter to a friend in California. Two days later he was safely ensconced on board the boat, heading for the Panama Canal.

LAWRENCE THORNTON, professor of geology at one of the large California universities, wearily cast aside the last of a set of final examination papers and lit his

pipe. A powerful intellect and a thorough knowledge of his chosen work had enabled this man to secure for himself this position of responsibility while yet a comparatively young man. Now, having worked long and hard during the past year, he was looking forward with anticipation to a well-earned vacation. Idly allowing his fancy to play over the high spots of the coming summer, a trip to northern California, steelhead from the Rogue River, some tuna fishing at Catalina Island, he absently opened a few letters that had arrived by the morning mail. Turning to the signatures first, he cast them impatiently aside one by one, until he picked up the last of the lot.

As he opened this envelope, a tiny slip of paper fluttered out, a newspaper clipping. Curiosity aroused, he picked it up and read—the Chilean dispatch with which we are already familiar. He hastily searched for the signature, which caused him to sit upright with a grin slowly overspreading his face. After reading the message through, he regretfully said goodbye to his former plans, and prepared for a trip to South America. Because the closing sentences had caught his eye.

“... At the very least this should furnish you with some dope for that silly monograph of yours on volcanic activity. At best, I think this trip will bring some exciting moments, if I err not. I'll see you in Panama, I hope. Yours, Jack D.”

Thornton, being one of Darrell's most intimate friends, knew very well the extent of the reporter's intuitive powers, and with such a broad hint of interesting times ahead, he would not have missed the trip for anything. Hence, he followed his friend's example and packed his bag. Then, having chartered an airplane to take him to Panama where he intended to catch the same boat on which Darrell was traveling, he finished up his affairs with the university and waited for the appointed hour.

Some days later, Thornton and Darrell disembarked at Valparaiso. By frequent application of the proverbial power of the press, they managed to secure a thirty-foot motor launch, in which they hastened down the coast to Ancud, the southernmost town of any size. Here, to their surprise, they found the population in a state of agitated apprehension, due to two more reports of terrific storms with tremendous destructive power. In each case the deluge had occurred within fifty to a hundred miles nearer Ancud, and it was perfectly obvious to the excited populace that if the storm continued moving up the coast, their turn would come soon. As a result of this perfectly logical reasoning, great numbers of people had already left northward, while everyone who remained was in readiness for instant flight. Again, in each case, and this phase of the tragedies interested Thornton most, the storms had been followed by tremendous eruptions from neighboring volcanic peaks, resulting in the complete destruction of the sites of the disasters.

Another interesting phase of the situation was found in the great number of rumors that were rife concerning the cause and the meaning of the catastrophes. The unusual circumstances gave rise to the revival of a number of ancient legends and predictions, and the trouble was ascribed to any of a half dozen native gods and devils.

The weird tales given out by the few shivering wretches who had managed to escape the full fury of the storm were even more startling than the others. Stories of awful faces leering down from the black heavens, of the gods themselves descending, even of the moon itself coming to the earth, were common at the time, and Darrell, scenting good copy, sent back a long and interesting article on the subject. Thornton, however, impatient to get to the scene of the mishaps, hastened the provisioning of the boat and soon, in spite of the reporter's wails

bemoaning the loss of such good material, the two were on their way to Mt. San Lorenzo.

The actual site of the first disaster was, to Darrell at least, disappointing. Sheer cliffs loomed heavily over a miniature tidal plain, barren and lonely. No sign of life was evident beyond the calling of the gulls sounding above the muted murmur of the sea. A wide, fanlike belt of fresh lava ran from the nearest mountain to the shore; a few faint wisps of vapor still clung to the peak. That was all.

CHAPTER II

A Lecture on Volcanoes

THORNTON, however, insisted on stopping to make a more thorough inspection so the two men anchored in the now lava-filled little bay. Next morning the geologist, radiating energy, dragged Darrell into the small boat and examined the shoreline foot by foot. Scattered all along were numerous dead fish and sea-plants. Finally beaching the boat, the men clambered ashore and, while Thornton carefully pecked away at a few specimens, the reporter moodily strolled around with his hands in his pockets. The former eventually turned to Darrell.

“Jack,” he called, “did you ever stop to wonder why there should be so many dead fish cast up here?”

“Huh-uh. I never was interested in fish—except on Fridays.”

“Well, perhaps you could tell me why all these particular fish happen to be boiled.” Thornton smiled faintly.

Jack stared a moment. “What the hell do you expect with a whole mess of red-hot rock dumped into the pond all at once? Or did you want them fried?” He thrust another stick of gum into his mouth.

Thornton shook his head pityingly.

“My dear friend, the point is that the lava wasn’t dumped in here all at once—it flowed in gradually. The fish had plenty of time to get out into deeper waters. Yet hundreds were caught and literally boiled alive. Why?”

Darrell shrugged. “Search me. I never could understand the psychology of a fish. What’s the answer?”

“I don’t know,” Thornton answered thoughtfully, “but I’d certainly like to. It looks fishy to me.” He ducked the wad of sea-weed that his friend threw at him.

“Yeah, and my nose tells me there’s something rotten in Santa Loma, too, or where Santa Loma once was.” He sobered suddenly. “Let’s go, if you’ve finished your prowling. This place gives me the ‘willies’ when I think of all those poor devils caught both in flame and flood.”

The two friends moved up the coast in the wake of the storm and found similar conditions at each point of destruction. An occasional bedraggled and half-starved native confirmed previous impressions of the sequence of events: a violent storm and then, from ten to forty hours later, a terrible eruption from a nearby peak, long considered dormant or extinct. Thornton continued to puzzle over the dead plant and animal life, while Darrell railed at his friend continuously over his interest in boiled fish. Ten days passed, and the two men had almost worked their way back to Ancud. They were smoking one evening before their camp-fire on the beach.

“Have you noticed,” asked Darrell, “that there have been very few traces of the storm itself in between the points of heaviest destruction?”

“Yes.” Thornton seemed lost in thought.

“Well, hasn’t that struck you as curious?”

“Not nearly so curious as this matter of the boiled fish. It probably means simply

that the storm is moving in a looping course to the north, spending itself largely on the open sea, occasionally touching the land."

Darrell sneered. "If you'd keep your mind off your piscatory problems, you'd soon enough realize that it's the most remarkable coincidence in scientific history if this storm is moving north over the sea and striking land only at points where there happens to be a village that is backed by a volcanic peak! And the matter is made no less curious by the fact that these ancient craters each erupt immediately after this rather choosy storm passes by."

Thornton grinned at the reporter. "Your point about the exclusiveness of the tempest is well taken, but the connection between the volcanic eruptions and the storm should be obvious. If you'll get out your little notebook and pencil I'll give you a lecture on the whys and wherefores of volcanoes that should be illuminating even to one of your rather limited intelligence."

"Yes, teacher." Darrell produced his copy book and settled back.

"Well," Larry Thornton refilled his pipe and lit it, "first of all there should be no question that the earth is highly heated inside. Measurements made in deep borings show that the temperature increases downward at the rate of about one degree Fahrenheit for each fifty to seventy-five feet to depths at least somewhat greater than a mile."

"Check," murmured Jack, scribbling furiously.

"The temperature must, therefore, be several thousand degrees at depths of twenty-five to forty miles. This is sufficiently high to cause all ordinary rocks to melt at the earth's surface. At great depths, however, the downward pressure on the rocks is so tremendous that their melting points are notably raised, so that there is every reason to believe that the rocks twenty-five to forty miles down are in

general, though incredibly heated, not molten.

"If, then, highly heated, solid rocks at reasonable distances down in any part of the earth are subjected to relief of pressure by an earth movement, such as upward crumbling of the crust, or by readjustment of large fault blocks, those heated, solid rocks would become locally, and suddenly, molten, develop steam and gas pressure, and seek an outlet. This outlet will naturally occur at some weak spot in the earth's crust, and an old volcanic cone, if present nearby, would be the most likely scene of the new eruption."

THORNTON relit his pipe which had gone out while he talked.

"The delicate balance of all Nature's forces is well known; every school-boy understands that the slightest disarrangement of this balance will result in serious consequences before it is readjusted. Likewise with volcanic activity; the smallest movement or shift of pressure is liable to bring about an eruption. Now where is the point of greatest pressure on the earth's surface?"

Darrell looked up guiltily from his writing. "We-ell, I..."

"Of course." Thornton smiled. "The ocean floor, with the vast bulk of the sea constantly pressing down upon it. Assume that a few thousand tons of this water were suddenly removed from a comparatively localized point. Even such a small change of pressure would probably result in the process I have just described as resulting in a volcanic eruption nearby.

"The fact that the two greatest volcanic belts in the world—one extending from Hawaii through Central America, the West Indies, the Azores, and so on through the Mediterranean region and Asia Minor to Eastern India, the other nearly encircling the Pacific from New Zealand up through the

Aleutian Islands and down the western coast of the Americas—are closely related to the sea seems to bear this out.

“Applying this to the case in question, it seems perfectly plain that this rather unique storm has been caused by atmospheric conditions which enable it to gather up large quantities of ocean water at a time. The resulting shift in pressure...” Thornton made an expressive gesture with his hands.

“Very lucid, professor,” said Jack, “but it doesn’t explain why this queer storm strikes only at inhabited portions of the coast. Today while you were making lunch, I ran across a tiny native village set away back from shore, and they haven’t even seen a cloud for months, though they had heard of the trouble from survivors.”

“Yes, I know. Neither does it explain about the boiled fish.”

Darrell snorted. “You’re nuts, Larry. If the storm was so severe as you suggest, it probably killed the fish when it first struck, and the bodies drifted in to be boiled afterward by the lava from the eruption. They probably figured you’d bring your own tartar sauce,” he added sarcastically.

“Ingenious, but unconvincing. I never yet heard of any storm that could destroy sea life in any such quantities as we’ve seen these last few days.” Thornton poked at the dying fire.

“Well, here’s another answer—take your choice. Suppose there was another rift—on the ocean floor—and the molten magma burst through and trapped all the sea animals between it and the shore. Thus they’d be caught between two fires, no pun intended.”

“Again very ingenious, but still not very convincing. An intense heat was applied very suddenly in this case, it is true, but I believe it occurred at the surface, because few if any of the specimens I’ve studied along the coast here were deep-sea

fish. Most of them were shallow-water creatures and surface feeders. Besides, it seems unlikely that an incipient eruption would choose a path other than the well-defined one of the nearby volcano. Still further than that, it’s a bit too much to expect that every volcanic peak along this coast would have a corresponding rift in the ocean floor. No, there’s some other explanation, but it eludes me at the moment.”

“You amaze me,” muttered Darrell. “At least, though, since I’ve offered you two explanations for your fish problem, you might give me one as to the peculiarities of the storm that I’ve pointed out to you.”

Thornton knocked out his pipe-heel into the fire. “The only thing that seems to fit the case is that it is a man-made storm. Which is impossible, I grant... What’s the matter?”

Jack Darrell was sitting bolt upright on his blanket, fingers rigidly outstretched, staring into the fire. A strange pringle ran up his spine. “By Jove, Larry, I’ve got a hunch! A man-made storm... boiled fish ... it doesn’t all fit right, but I feel we’re on the right track...”

Thornton frowned, puzzled. He held a tremendous respect for his friend’s hunches, but man-made storms on the South American coast was a bit thick. He shrugged and bent over to pull off his boots.

“Sleep on it,” he suggested. “Maybe things will seem clearer in the morning.” Thornton reached for a stick to scatter the fire, but his hand stopped in mid-air. From the beach came the sound of slowly shuffling footsteps. Darrell quickly rolled over beyond the range of the firelight while his friend rose to his feet, hand on gun.

A vaguely wavering white figure toward the shore resolved itself into a lone man. In the last stages of exhaustion, with blackened tongue hanging hideously from his mouth, he staggered to the fire and pitched forward on his face. Though he was

covered with dirt and sweat and hair, yet the man was white, and that strange bond which unites all men of the race in the farthest corners of the earth prompted Darrell and Thornton to hasten to the poor fellow's assistance. After working over him for some minutes with water and stimulants, he regained consciousness. He sat up suddenly.

"Are you the two fellows w'at's studyin' these volcanoes?"

Thornton nodded. "Yes. What's up?"

The stranger gasped for breath and said, "Ancud's wiped out, that's what's up!"

"Ancud!" burst out Darrell. "Why, that town's got several thousand people in it."

"Did have, you mean. They ain't there now." The man made a significant gesture with a grimy forefinger. "And I seen it all."

DARRELL and Thornton looked at each other, their eyes glittering feverishly. The former grabbed for his notebook while the other administered another stimulant. "Do you think you can tell us the story—from the beginning, I mean?"

"Sure. That's what I come these fifty miles for—so's you c'n catch the dirty devils."

Again Darrell felt a thrill run up his back as he glanced at his friend.

"Go ahead. And take your time."

"Well, about three days ago, or maybe it was four, somethin' funny began to happen in the ocean just outside the port. From shore it looked like it was beginning to boil, and all the fishing smacks that came in reported alike—the sea was a-boilin'. O' course, all the people got in a big sweat about that, especially the natives, but when a huge cloud-bank began to gather over the town everybody went wild.

"Hundreds of 'em left; hundreds more figgered to leave as quick as possible. But a day an' a night passed an' still no rain,

so things began to quiet down a bit. Folks even began to go about their business, though a bit cautious-like yet. But that night, 'long about one o'clock in the morning, I woke up. Over toward the mountains I could hear a faint humming noise, rather like an airplane, only more muffled. I went outside to look around. You know the mountains ain't more 'n half a mile or so from the sea right there around Ancud. Well, that great black cloud-bank had sunk lower and lower till it stretched from the peaks to the fog at sea and closed the town in like a trap. It sorta stifled me ... like I could feel unseen hands ..."

The stranger's voice faded away to a whisper and his eyelids fluttered. Thornton worked a hypodermic syringe and in a minute the man raised up again and continued.

"That humming noise kept growing more and more distinct till it seemed to be right over the town, an' then I saw a sight I'll never forget as long as I live. Right outa the middle of that bunch o' clouds a big blunt-nosed thing began to push through. At first it looked like a sixteen-inch shell magnified a thousand times. But more and more of it kept comin' till I thought I was havin' the D. T.'s. I looked away for a second, then back again, and there was the whole thing, hanging silent against the storm clouds—the most gigantic dirigible I've ever seen in all my life!

"I'd almost take oath that it was more 'n a mile long, and as it lay up there without a sound, without a light, and with occasionally a puff of queer-looking smoke coming from the sides, you c'd actually feel the—menace—of it."

The man stumbled awkwardly over the unaccustomed word, but none of the chilling effect of the story was lost on his listeners. They helped him to another drink.

"Pretty soon the humming noise began again and the big ship just dissolved

up into the mist. Then the rain came. First a few heavy drops, then more, until it suddenly seemed as though the whole bottom of the sky had dropped right out. Man and boy, I've been about the world and seen some mighty terrible storms, but nothin' I ever been in c'd equal this. No wind—just the awful, crushing weight of tons of water pouring down.

"I tried to run for the hills, but the water simply beat me flat to the ground every few yards. Buildings along the streets began to sag, and people ran out into the rain only to be thrown down. Pretty soon the run-off from the mountain swirled into the streets and carried off everything before its rush. I managed to crawl out of the town and into the heavy undergrowth back a ways from shore. This sheltered me from the rain so's I could walk upright, anyway, and I finally got away from the worst of it."

Again the stranger sagged back, exhausted by the strain of living over again those terrible hours. Careful administration of a further stimulant brought him round, and he continued.

"By morning the rain had stopped and most of the clouds had been carried away by a little breeze from sea. But there was still trouble ahead, plain enough. You know what stands behind Ancud—the Hornopiren Volcano. Well, that old hole ain't done anything but let off a little steam now an' then for the last hundred years. But yesterday morning she was sure poppin'.

"There was a mushroom of dirty smoke comin' from the peak that went a mile into the air. Even from where I was, hidin' like a scared rat, I guess, I c'd hear her rumbling and roaring every few minutes, and the earthquake shocks made me stagger worse after each one. Like a fool, though, I was set on goin' back to the town and see if anything was left or if I could help any. It was useless. Nothing was left but a few broken-up cement buildings; everything that

had been made of wood had been washed out.

"A few bodies I found, but not a sign of any living thing. Then I went to the remains of the bank building." The fellow quirked his lips into a thin smile. "Someone had beat me to it! The vaults had been blown open and everything taken. That pretty near laid me out. I looked for tracks, and they were plain enough to see in the new mud. I followed them—a party of six or seven as far as I could make out. They had gone to every store left standing and had robbed them thoroughly. In one place I found a man who had evidently escaped the flood. He was shot between the eyes.

"Any sap would 'a' known by then that the storm 'an' everything was a put-up job. I don't pretend to savvy how such a thing could be done—them powers are way above my head—but I figgered you fellows might. But I also wanted to see who it was done it, so I followed those tracks right out of town till I came to where they stopped. And all around was a space where the grass and brush had been crushed down. A hundred yards away there was another of those patches. Havin' seen what I'd seen, I know'd it was the basket-like things on the bottom of that dirigible that had made 'em.

"Then the volcano broke loose for fair, and I ran for my life. I didn't get quite all clear—" he held up the sole of his right foot and showed it to be horribly seared and torn, "—but I made it at last and set off to tell you fellows what's investigatin' this matter all about it." His voice died away and Thornton eased him back on a blanket.

CHAPTER III

Chaos

THORNTON led his friend off into the darkness.

“What do you think of it all, Jack?”

The reporter smirked. “Looks like the old hunch was pretty good, eh?” He fell silent for a long moment, envisioning to himself the sudden rush and swirl of the waters, the buildings tottering, crumbling, and swallowed up in the flood, the dying screams of those trapped....

“God, Larry, they’re devils... And it’s up to us to stop them.”

Thornton nodded slowly. “I was going to suggest that we leave at once, but that poor fellow deserves a respite, and I think it will be some time before we get another rest ourselves.”

“Correct. By the way, could you clear up one small point for me?”

“Probably.” Thornton grinned in the darkness. “What is it?”

“What was the method used to precipitate the storm so suddenly and completely—because there’s no doubt now, of course, that it was artificially induced.”

“Well, you remember our new friend’s reference to ‘queer-looking smoke’ coming from the sides of the monster. You will also remember that quite a number of years ago experiments were made in the direction of producing rainfall by spraying the clouds with electrified sand. You begin to see light, eh? In all likelihood the gentleman with whom we are dealing has so developed this line of research that he is now able to use a very small grain of sand, perhaps even a dust mote, that will carry a very high charge of electricity.

“It may even be that he can scatter his dust throughout the cloud mass and then apply his charge suddenly, sending down the rainfall all at once. I don’t pretend to know anything about it at all; this is merely theory. But it’s the only theory that will fit all of this particular group of facts, and I have no doubt that it will prove to be sound.

“What puzzles me now, aside from the boiled fish, is the fact that it would take

an incredibly brilliant man to do all this, a master of meteorology, and I can think of no one who... Well, what’s biting you?”

Darrell had jumped as though stung from behind. “Meteorology! By God, Larry, I’ve got it! I’ve got it!”

“Well, scratch it if it itches.”

“No, no, I mean I know what it is ... it’s Dr. Borgman ... did I ever tell you about the time I went to the Rockies looking for him? ... of course I did. Well, that’s who it is, all right. Lord, what a sap I am not to have guessed sooner; I knew he was in South America, and I might have known that it was a dirigible he’s been building back home.” He stopped for breath and Thornton’s cool voice broke in.

“That helps some, but our real trouble is going to be in finding him. We’ve got to anticipate his next job. Which reminds me, why should he practice his trade so far south—on these dinky villages?”

“Oh, that’s easy. It isn’t generally known, but most of these small coastal towns are unbelievably rich. Mineral deposits all along here, and there’s a good deal of development, too. There’s plenty of pickings to attract the buzzards.”

“I see. Well, where do you think his next job will be? You seem to know the coast pretty well.”

“Yeah. I don’t think he’ll dare try any place as large as Santiago or Concepcion—yet—so the next best is a tiny nitrate port called Port Llico. There’s a volcanic peak not far from there, too, I believe, named El Descabezado. That’s the easiest spot for Borgman to strike at within several hundred miles.”

“All right. Let’s get some sleep and be on our way early tomorrow morning.”

Together they arranged the stranger before the fire in three of their blankets. But the care they took proved useless in the end, for he died during the night, without a sound. The weakened condition of his body and the

natural reaction from the over-use of stimulants while telling his story brought on the inevitable. They buried him back a way from the beach before sunrise the next morning while Thornton said a brief prayer. Then they hurriedly packed their duffle into the boat and headed north for Port Llico. Both men were as eager as hounds on leash; they scented action and begrudged every minute of delay.

At Concepcion, a city of some size, Thornton and Darrell stopped for a day to lay plans and to get some necessary information. Two hours spent with the military governor and the city officials succeeded in getting things moving. It was learned that there was already a small detachment of troops waiting at Port Llico to guard and assist the loading of and payment for a large and valuable shipment of nitrate products. It was also learned that the great dirigible had actually been seen, pointing to the north, in the interior. It was further learned that the two men would be able to have the use of a seaplane and pilot if they so desired. All this was accomplished in comparative secrecy, and no hint of the nearness of the terrible danger that was riving the South American coast from its very foundations was allowed to escape.

DARRELL seized the opportunity to dispatch a long report to his paper in New York, intended to reassure the people of the country, if any reassurance were necessary. Unfortunately, however, the paper seized the chance for a great scoop and played the story up. The morning after Jack telegraphed his copy in, the *Globe* was on the streets with six-inch screaming headlines:

SOUTH AMERICAN CONTINENT DESTROYED!

Madman Invokes Volcanoes to Raze Western Coast—Thousands Die.

According to an exclusive report by our special correspondent

in South America, the Chilean coast is being systematically shattered by some mad genius who, having apparently solved the secret of volcanic activity, controls and hurls these fiery horrors at will upon the heads of the unsuspecting and defenseless native populations. The forces of utter annihilation and obliteration are at work in Chile... etc., etc.

Live news being scarce at that time, all the other papers played the disasters up full. Each new edition saw the death total mounting higher and higher. The news spread like wildfire over America, then to England and the continent. The peoples of the world awaited the next act of the drama of death with an uneasy apprehension. Governments debated hesitantly the advisability of interfering but withdrew in face of the possible complications. All this came as a result of a report which was little more than a rumor, unsubstantiated, concerning a state far removed from the normal interests of most men and women.

At this delicate moment, due probably to some sort of sympathetic influence from the unusual volcanic activity going on in South America, no less than five semi-active volcanic peaks erupted in different parts of the world—Kilauea in the Hawaiian Islands, Mt. Vesuvius in Italy, Lassen Peak in California, the Katmai Volcano in southern Alaska, and Mt. Pelee in the West Indies.

Because most people had been more or less fearful and even expectant of such an occurrence, loss of life was not particularly heavy. There were a number of lives lost, however, and property destruction was appalling, and exaggerated reports filled the columns of the press to the exclusion of all else.

The effect upon the population was astounding: in all mountainous regions, and even in sections which boasted only a few

low-lying hills, people abandoned their mines, farms, homes in which they had spent their lives, even their very children in some instances, and stampeded for the lowlands. Incredible tales of cruelty and fear were on every tongue. Disease and hunger entered the cities in the wake of the fugitives. Stark panic had the world by the throat.

Back in Concepcion, totally unaware of the sensation they had created at home, Thornton and Darrell with their pilot took off for Port Llico in an ancient plane with governmental orders for the port authorities and a grim determination to put a stop to the carnage that had already nearly decimated the coast population and bade fair to continue until the destruction was complete.

They traveled up the coast for two hours before sighting the tiny landing-field which distinguished Port Llico from most other Chilean coastal towns; then, after swooping low to drop off a packet of official-looking documents, they turned abruptly inland toward the mountains. Within five minutes, by the aid of powerful field glasses, Thornton located the massive dirigible and, nearby, Dr. Borgman's camp. Signs of furious activity were evident, and the geologist signaled to the pilot to cut off the motor and fly over. Only the rushing of the wind could be heard as the two friends peered eagerly over the side of the ship at the scene below.

A tall structure, something like a number of trestles, and which appeared to be practically completed already, occupied a miniature plateau on the side of the mountain El Descabezado itself. It stood in the shape of a semi-circle and apparently from tip to tip, covered almost a quarter of a mile. Fastened at various points all over the superstructure were myriad steel reflectors, slightly concave, and all aimed at the same point. This point was occupied by what looked like a large black box with some sort of glorified shutter on the front much as a

camera has. From their great height in the airplane, the whole affair looked to the three men like the skeleton of one half of an enormous funnel.

By this time the plane was losing altitude rapidly, so Thornton signaled to the pilot to use the motor again and circle out over the sea for a while.

Darrell twisted around in his seat and shouted above the roar of the engine. "What the hell's it all about?"

Thornton smiled thinly. He held up the end of the speaking tube and motioned to the reporter to put on the head-phones.

"It's all pretty plain now, Jack. That devilish contraption we just passed over enables Borgman to gather together the rays of the sun and increase their power a thousandfold by concentration. With that shutter-like business he can spread them fanwise over a given stretch of the sea and 'turn on the power,' so to speak, at any moment. And that, my dear friend, is why so many hundreds of fish were killed instantly by the sudden application of such terrible heat, a heat which doubtless penetrated quite a distance into the water before its force was nullified. With such a power at his command, the Doctor easily evaporates tremendous quantities of water, which form the 'storm' with which we are familiar. The use of electrified dust, and the subsequent volcanic eruption, need no further explanation."

Darrell spoke. "Several years ago there was an invention something like that, only smaller, in which the inventor has a series of mirrors focused to a point and was able to melt a brick in a few seconds..."

"Of course ... yes, I recall it. Borgman has developed his—brainchild—from that basis."

DARRELL broke in again. "How on earth does he manage to handle such a huge weight of metal?"

"It's not such a huge weight as it

looks. Probably a beryllium compound of some sort. I have no doubt that the whole thing is extraordinarily light.”

Again Darrell looked up from his notebook in which he was trying to scrawl some notes. “Do you mean to tell me that it’s simply the increase in heat that takes up such masses of water as we know are taken up? That sounds a bit thin to me, especially when you consider that Borgman’s camp is miles from the ocean itself.”

Thornton fell silent, and only the monotonous beat of the engine was heard for some minutes. Then he cleared his throat.

“Well, it has long been accepted that the physics of evaporation, briefly, is this: the molecules of water, which are constantly in motion, naturally leap out of the water and return, and many are carried away by the air moving across the surface. Heat stirs the molecules into increased activity and as a result more of them are removed as they leap out of the water. After what we have observed these last few days, however, I am not inclined to accept much of anything any more. It’s not utterly impossible that there may be a hitherto unidentified ray, emanating from the sun, which has much to do with evaporation. It is just possible that Borgman has discovered such a ray and, in that black box-like affair of his, segregates and intensifies it before turning it upon the sea. This sounds fantastic, I know, but it affords an explanation for the presence of the otherwise unexplainable box, and it also satisfactorily explains a phenomenon that, in your own words, seems a ‘little thin’ when considered in terms of everyday scientific knowledge...”

“It fits the facts, all right. I suppose Borgman studied the upper air currents pretty carefully before each job to insure his ‘storm’ going to the right place.”

“Oh, yes. A meteorologist of his abilities would have little trouble there.”

The pilot turned around to the two

friends and by gestures indicated that the gasoline was beginning to run low. Thornton pointed to his parachute, then to the mountains just behind El Descabezado. The pilot’s eyes widened and he shook his head. There followed a fierce argument in dumb show, after which the pilot reluctantly turned back toward the land. Thornton turned to his friend again.

“Is there anything else you’d like to know before we drop in on our friends?” He smiled a bit grimly.

Darrell laughed aloud, eyes gleaming. “Just to keep the conversation going,” he said, “you might tell me whether or not there’s quite an element of luck in Borgman’s having started off a volcano every time he struck.”

“Well, perhaps. But he minimized the chances of failure by choosing a volcanic region and he probably knows as well as you or I how little it really takes to disturb the delicate balance of hell fire and brimstone below. Of course, in time he would be bound to work at some place where the sum total of the forces beneath the earth’s surface happened not to be so correlated as to produce an eruption even when the good Doctor played havoc with the pressure in his inimitable manner. Or the eruption might happen at a spot other than he had selected. But of course we don’t intend that Borgman keep playing this game till nature defeats him; it is up to us to stop him, and soon.”

Darrell opened his mouth to reply when the engine suddenly coughed and began to wheeze. The pilot quickly fumbled with something in his cockpit, and the motor began to throb regularly again. The pilot’s face was drawn when he turned around. Momentarily switching off the ignition, he shouted above the rush of the plane, “We’re running on the reserve tank now, and it won’t last long. If we don’t get out of the mountains before that gas is gone...”

The scientist nodded quickly and

pointed to a rather barren peak to the left of and slightly behind El Descabezado. The sun was a huge red globe slithering through a low-lying cloud bank on the western horizon as the plane flew slowly over the chosen spot. Thornton clambered over the edge of the cockpit and leaped off into space. Darrell, chewing vigorously, followed. Two white splashes glimmered in the gathering dusk of the canyon as the two men floated to earth. The pilot, after circling till the men were lost to sight, turned his plane round and headed for Port Llico.

Jack Darrell struck the sloping side of the canyon wall with a crash and was dragged roughly through brush and over rocks for several feet before coming to a halt. Disentangling himself from his parachute, he scrambled to his feet and listened. A few night birds called; he could hear the rushing of the stream in the canyon below; occasional strange rustlings in the tall grass startled him. He shouted loudly for his friend, but no one answered. He clambered along the slope for some distance calling Thornton's name at intervals, but in vain. The utter blackness of night descended upon him, and he shivered. Darrell groped his way back to his abandoned parachute, carried it down to the stream, and rolled up for the night. And in spite of the weirdness of his surroundings, he slumbered heavily till dawn.

CHAPTER IV

The Struggle on the Crater

AFTER a brief plunge in the creek the next morning, Darrell turned his steps upstream in his efforts to find his friend. For three miles he battered his way up through weeds and bushes, but he found not a trace of Thornton, nor were there any replies to his shouts. The rays of the sun began to filter into the

canyon, and Darrell realized that he must abandon the search and turn his attention to fighting Dr. Borgman. The hundreds of people had more right to his efforts than one man who might already be beyond aid... The reporter resolutely turned his mind to the task ahead.

Slowly and painfully he climbed from the steep walls of the canyon up to the long and rugged slope of El Descabezado. He was on the side opposite to that on which Borgman's camp was located, so he had no fear of discovery. The climb was not dangerous, but it was long and tiring. A good deal of shale and loose rubble covered the mountainside, causing Darrell to slip frequently.

As the morning passed, he stumbled more often, and his legs began to wobble badly. Sweat dripped constantly into his eyes. His head whirled. In spite of this, however, he kept plodding upward and about noon was rewarded by sight of his goal. With a last effort he ran the final hundred yards to the brow of the mountain and, heart pounding and spots dancing before his eyes, he burst over the rim to gaze upon a sight more utterly astounding than anything he had ever before witnessed in all his life. His breath went out of him in a sob and he slumped to the ground.

Perhaps four or five miles away Port Llico nestled in a tiny cove, and little specks could be seen running frantically to and fro. Some hundreds of yards out from shore the whole sea was literally seething; huge clouds of steam were rising from the surface, and already clouds, heavy and gray, were forming and drifting slowly in over the town. Between Darrell and the Borgman camp there stood the crater of the volcano, and the reporter could see nothing of what was happening there, but his vivid imagination pictured it all clearly enough.

A moving figure suddenly caught Darrell's eye; a man was slowly moving up

the lower slope of the mountain, evidently just having left a little ribbon of road that wound up a few thousand feet and then vanished. Could it be Thornton? The reporter strained his eyes eagerly. No, the figure wore a uniform. Then another figure, and another, and still others came into view. The port guard was coming to the attack! Darrell thrilled as he watched them climb laboriously up in a fan-shaped formation. From a vantage point on a rock somewhat behind the skirmish line an officer directed the advance.

The lone spectator felt a desire to see the other actors in this drama, so he cautiously wormed his way to the very top of the crater-edge and looked across. There was the mighty dirigible; there was the strange contrivance of steel that wrought such terrible havoc; and there, a tiny figure in white with a heavily bearded face, stood Dr. Borgman, apparently calm and unworried. Darrell felt a sudden apprehension as he understood Borgman's confident attitude.

His eyes turned to the shutter and the black box. A small ladder leaned against the side, and a man sat at the top manipulating two small wheels that had been unnoticeable from the airplane. At a sign from the leader, this man whirled one of the discs, then leaned carefully over and peered into the open face of the shutter. Instantly Darrell grasped the meaning of this. He groaned softly. They were regulating the rays as they passed through the shutter so as to produce a single thin stream of terribly concentrated heat. Darrell writhed in his helplessness.

A sudden tremor of the ground attracted his attention for the moment. A rumbling noise came from the depths of the volcano and tiny wisps of vapor rose upwards. Already El Descabezado was beginning to "feel her oats," thought Darrell. When he turned back to the scene before him, the focusing apparatus was being swung downward to bear on the soldiers

toiling up the hill.

Borgman struck. The dazzling beam of light played over a uniform, there was a burst of smoke and flame, and the man fell backward, a twisted, crumbling ash. With a horrible fascination the lone watcher saw the terrible ray crawl over the slope, burning up brush, melting stones, and destroying those gallant men in a puff of smoke.

The officer frantically called for a retreat and took refuge behind his boulder. No one obeyed. While they were still almost half a mile from the top, the soldiers began firing raggedly and dashed courageously up the slope toward the camp. Before they had progressed fifty yards all that remained to mark their passing were a number of scattered heaps of charred bones and half burnt flesh. Darrell sickened suddenly and turned away.

Many long minutes passed before he began to recover from his nausea. Eventually he sat up and became conscious of another earthquake shock, slightly more noticeable than the former one. Darrell rose and looked out at the sea. Already it was boiling furiously again, and the heavy clouds had accumulated so that they began to interfere with the heat rays from the trestle on the mountain. The reporter sat down again to wait for darkness. Borgman and his crew would have to use the dirigible at night to project the electrified dust throughout the cloud-mass. The camp would be deserted; perhaps he could strike tonight. He drew out his heavy automatic and examined it carefully, almost lovingly. Several times during the long, dragging afternoon his eyes scanned the neighboring mountain slopes for some sign of Thornton, but could find none. Perhaps his friend was badly hurt or even already dead in some obscure hole in those endless mountains. Darrell swallowed heavily.

NIGHT came at last, with damp cloud

streamers crawling slowly over the slope and filling the canyon below. The rumbling of the volcano, which had increased perceptibly throughout the afternoon, now merged with a series of sharp earthquakes at irregular intervals. Smoke and gas issued from the crater in a steady stream.

Above the muffled booming in the pit Darrell heard the hum of motors. He crawled cautiously to the lip of the huge cavity and looked across. The dirigible was just taking off, rising smoothly and quietly from its resting place on the plateau; in a moment it was lost to view in the clouds. The reporter quivered as he sprang to his feet and began the half-mile walk around the crater to reach the camp on the other side. Curious, he climbed over the rough border of the crater itself and looked in.

Far down in the depths the molten magma was bubbling and heaving redly. Darrell was conscious of terrific heat, and the roar of the volcano emphasized the prolonged trembling of the ground beneath his feet. He drew back hastily and continued his walk toward the camp, now invisible in the darkness. As he drew nearer, he again chose to walk along the rocky border of the pit where the dimly reflected light from below enabled him to see.

Darrell realized with a sense of shock that there was another man ahead of him, squatting on the brink of the crater, looking over. The reporter crouched behind a rock spur to watch. The other figure was dressed in white and wore a beard... Darrell felt only a mild surprise when he recognized Dr. Borgman before him. The crew had gone without its leader to continue its work of destruction; Borgman was awaiting their return—alone. Darrell smiled grimly as his hand gripped tightly around the butt of his gun. He crept closer.

Dr. Borgman leaned further out over the pit and peered at the fury below. He began to smile and wave his arms slowly

around. He nodded and muttered to himself, but the sounds were drowned out by the ever-increasing thunder of the volcano. Noises like gigantic bubbles bursting and slopping the walls with fiery liquid filled Darrell's ears to the exclusion of all else, but his eyes were riveted on Borgman's strange actions. The latter chuckled again and again, showing his teeth, and as the flames cast a hideous reddish glare over the leering face it seemed as though man, devil, and volcano were all of a piece. Gradually it was born in upon the watching man that Borgman was mad—utterly insane, and actually believed himself to be master of the volcano.

For the second time that day Darrell felt sick, and he turned away.

A sudden violent earthquake shock threw him against the stone behind which he was hiding, and he became immediately aware of his own peril. He stood up... There were two figures now, and the second was that of Larry Thornton! With a shout of relief the reporter started toward his friend, then halted with foot in midair. The roar of the volcano deafened him to all other sounds, but the scene before his eyes was all too understandable even in pantomime. Thornton's lips moved and Borgman whirled about, drooling, glaring savagely at the scientist who stood quietly with revolver in hand. With the speed of a striking snake the man in white lunged forward and seized the gun.

Thornton fired once, but it had no effect, and in a moment the two men were locked in a terrible grip, wrestling mightily on the lip of the crater. With the strength of an insane fury Borgman soon rushed Thornton back toward the pit, and the latter began battering with both hands at his opponent's face. In a moment it was turned to red ruin, and Borgman, blinded by his own blood, heaved Thornton off his feet and flung him away. He fell less than a foot from the edge and lay stunned. Borgman, dashing

his hands at his eyes, stepped forward to finish the fight. Another violent tremor shook the ground, causing him to stumble and lurch forward. As he staggered momentarily, Darrell raised his gun and fired. Borgman jerked upright, plucked feebly at his back, sagged, and pitched headfirst over the cliff into the maw of the volcano.

Thornton was on his feet before Darrell reached him. "Let's get the hell outa here!" shouted the reporter. Thornton grinned. "Very appropriate," he bellowed, as they both turned and ran down hill as fast as they dared in the darkness. The roar of the volcano had now become almost intolerable, and shock after shock so shook the ground they ran on that they stumbled and fell several times. The glimmer of tall, thin metal poles loomed up ahead and flashed past as the two men careened on.

"Is there anyone else in the camp?" cried Darrell. "There were two other men," came the answer, "but not now."

Darrell went sprawling but bobbed up again in a moment. "Can you find your way down from here in the dark? It looks to me like this old smoke-hole is going to pop off ahead of schedule."

Thornton was gasping and began to lag a little. The camp tents appeared out of the darkness ahead. "Yes... It's going to erupt... tonight, I'm sure. They won't have time to loot the town... though they've probably wrecked it ... with the storm by now." They stopped for breath beside one of the tents. Several yards away Darrell made out a dim shape lying stretched out on the ground. Thornton continued. "Borgman didn't count on such a quick reaction from..."

The faint but unmistakable hum of motors could be heard above the reverberation of the volcano. The two men stared at each other.

"We've got to get away from here,

quick." Thornton moved off as he spoke, but Darrell caught his arm.

"Look!" His choked voice lost in the roaring, but Thornton understood the pointing gesture. Out of the mass of smoke and cloud that pressed down on the top of the mountain, the long, blunt nose of the dirigible poked itself like a pale ghost. It wavered hesitantly, then turned directly toward the volcano. Already a good portion was in sight, but the first gondola had not yet emerged from the cloud.

Darrell turned. "He's driving blind and is going right over the crater," he shrieked. Another violent quake opened a long crack down the side of the mountain, from which tiny rivulets of smoking lava began to seep. The heat was almost unbearable. Thornton nodded, eyes fixed on the slowly moving dirigible with a terrible fascination.

"Yes," he shouted, "they have a searchlight to guide the return but there's nobody to work it now."

A SUDDEN upheaval in the depths of the pit sent the clouds and vapors swirling away in all directions and revealed the entire scene; the great airship hovered over the edge of the cavity, slowly drifting ahead, and the panic-stricken crew on board, in spite of reversed motors, could not halt its progress. Then El Descabezado erupted in real earnest. There was a vast roaring as the seething lake of lava boiled over the rim and spurted hundreds of feet into the air. The front portion of the dirigible was showered with red-hot magma, and in an instant, with a smashing concussion, it split open in mid-air in a single blasting sheet of flame. Darrell, who had grabbed Thornton and dashed away as soon as he realized what was about to happen, felt a crushing weight upon him, pressing blackly at his head, and he fell. He fought off the threatening faint, however, dragged the other to his feet, and continued

their wild flight down the mountainside. As they plunged on, volcanic “bombs” whistled viciously through the air and thudded into the earth around them. Gradually these ceased, and only the terrible roaring from far above pursued them.

After passing from the upper reaches of the mountain, they felt rain falling around them. This refreshed Thornton and cleared his head somewhat. He immediately began to pull their headlong course to the left considerably. After ten more minutes running through the ragged edge of the already spent storm, the two men slowed to a walk. The path of the lava flow was far away; the storm had passed. They threw themselves wearily on the ground and slept till dawn.

Early next morning Darrell and Thornton picked their way down the slope to the remains of the tiny town. Already the natives who, forewarned, had escaped the danger, were clearing up the wreckage left by the tumultuous waters of the night before and preparing to rebuild their homes.

After being overwhelmed by the

thanks of the town officials and admiring populace, the two went to watch the work of reconstruction.

Darrell, after looking around vaguely, asked, “What happened to the lava flow?”

“Turned to the right and spilled down into the canyon where we landed yesterday, five miles away. Missed the town entirely.”

“Yesterday! Good Lord, it seems ages. Well, it’s all over but the shoutin’ now.”

“Yes. That puts ‘finis’ to the case of the boiled fish that ended with boiled...” Thornton’s voice trailed off into silence.

“Yeah.” Darrell inserted gum between his lips.

The drone of an airplane came to them from the south. Their pilot had returned. As the sun burst over the mountains they took off again for Concepcion where Darrell sent the dispatch which loosed the bonds of panic from the world and sent it spinning again in its accustomed groove of peace and freedom.