



A P R I L 1 8 , 1 9 0 6  
S A N F R A N C I S C O

*The West's Most Colorful City was Just Beginning to Stir That Soft Spring Morning 50 Years Ago, When Suddenly the Earth Buckled Under It. As Shocked San Franciscans Swarmed Into the Streets, Buildings Collapsed, Pavings Gaped Open, Water Mains Broke - and One of History's Most Awful Fires Swept the Stunned and Reeling City. Here is a Brilliant Re-Creation of That Time of Trial and Triumph*

by  
*Robert O'Brien*

**T**HOSE who lived to tell the tale remembered that Wednesday, April 18, 1906, came in on the fairest of dawns. It was a dawn filled with tremendous, pale-green light and bird song, and quite lovely enough for the birth of a world, or the death of one.

Across the Far West and down the Pacific littoral, everything stood still, everything stood expectant, everything waited for the majestic sun to come rising up beyond the curve of the continent, the way it always does in this kind of daybreak, as if to a crescendo of triumphant golden trumpets.

By the shore of the Pacific, on the ranches, in the mountain cabins, beside the vineyards and orange groves, in the hamlets and towns and cities, the people slept, or drowsily picked up the tempo, the rhythm, of another day of living.

High in Paradise Valley, in the desolate buttes north of Winnemucca, Nevada, a rancher sat his horse and watered his cattle beside a dark, dawn-still pond. Four hundred miles west to the tumbling surf and still another 150 miles at sea, the schooner John A. Campbell heeled lazily before the fresh morning breeze, steering for the Golden Gate.

South of San Francisco, a cramming Stanford student scowled over his textbook in a dormitory room. In the telephone company office at Salinas, an operator chatted sleepily with her friend on the switchboard 180 miles down the coast at San Luis Obispo. Awake in his bunk in a Sierra shack 50 miles east of Bakersfield a mountaineer idly studied the tooling on the holster of the six-shooter that hung from a nail above his head.

Beside her peaceful bay and across her more than 40 hills, San Francisco also waited. To many she was many things—third-ranking commercial center in the United States, gateway to the Orient, skyscrapered metropolis of the Western shore. Others remembered her as a bad town, a bawdy town, a hell-raising boom camp and as rollicking and wild a port as any on the seven seas—a town with a past, a warmhearted hoyden of a town with spangles in her hair.

But as many more would never forget her because they had known her the way she was in April. She had filled their hearts with springtime light and laughter, with song and soft desires. She had cast her April spell and on such mornings as this had made them poets and adventurers and enchanted them forever.

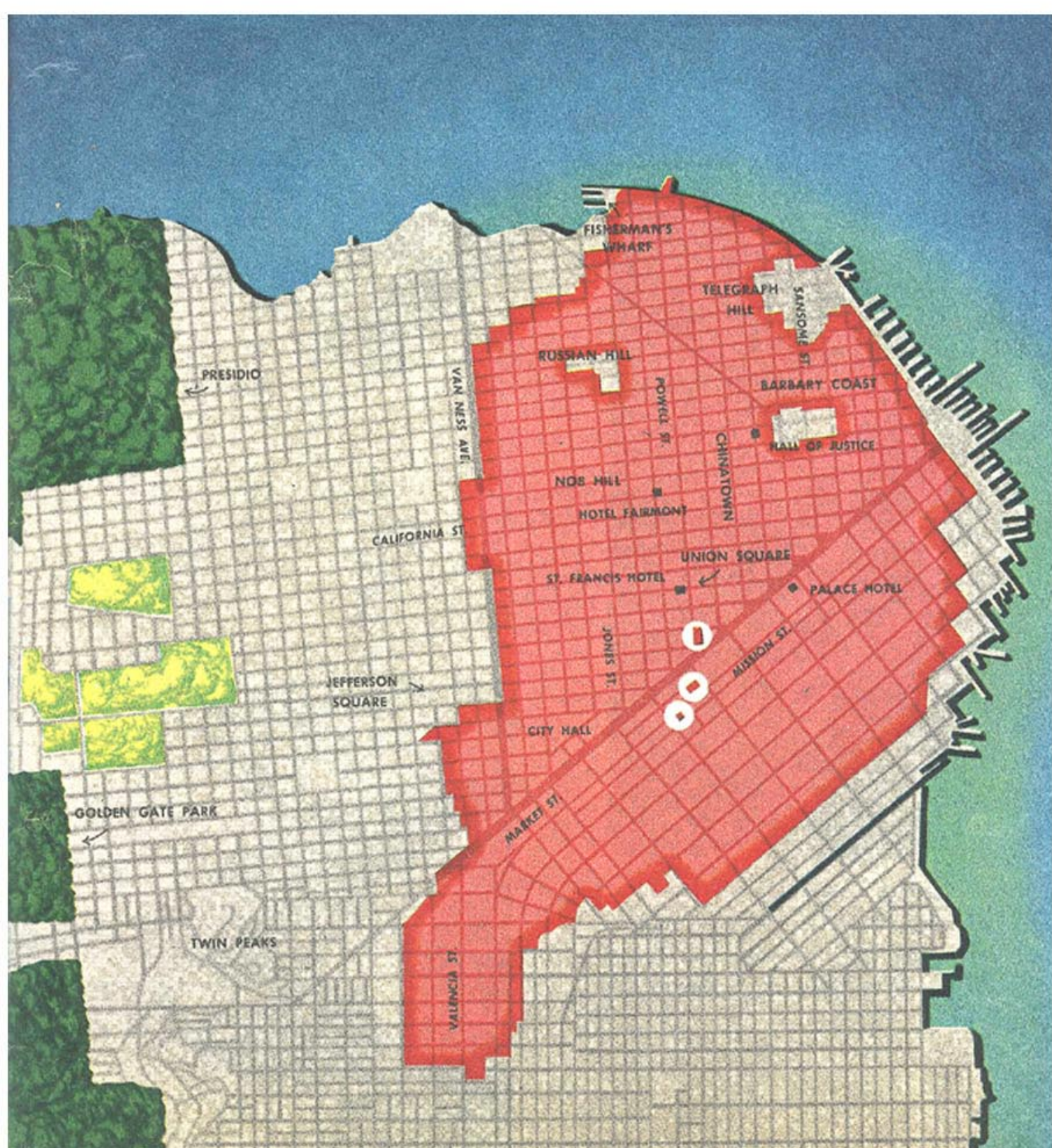
Graceful and touching rose her spires in the breathless air. The smoke drifted drowsily from her cottage breakfast fires. Milkmen's horses clip-clopped along the quiet streets. Here and there a cable car clattered through a crossing.

Four hundred thousand strong, her people were, and known the world around for their devotion to this blithe and bonny city, their bright-lipped Pacific queen.

In rose-covered shanties on Telegraph Hill, in reeking waterfront warrens, in the teeming tenements of Chinatown and the gilt-and-crystal splendor of Nob Hill mansions they slept, in tindery flats South of Market Street, in solid, bow-windowed homes of Russian Hill and Pacific Heights and Cow Hollow. On their bureaus, in downstairs halls, on living-room mantels and kitchen shelves, their clocks ticked on.

In a bedroom adjoining his wife's above Engine No. 1 in Bush Street, fifty-four-year-old fire chief Dennis T. Sullivan lay abed as if bodily felled. He had fought a three-alarm fire at Bay and Mason Streets that night, and had turned in without finishing his report.

In an airy, second-floor bedroom west of Van Ness Avenue, a novelist who had come from Carmel the day before to confer with her publisher's agent slept deeply, and without dreams.



On the southern slope of Nob Hill, Arnold Genthe, the talented portrait photographer, reposed amid his books and his collection of ancient Chinese porcelains. He had arrived home after midnight from the Metropolitan Opera Company's production of *Carmen*, and the last thing he remembered before dropping off was a confused composite—the lighted stage of Mission Street's Grand Opera House, tiers of diamond-bedecked ladies and their attentive escorts, the theater's high, glittering chandelier, and, superimposed against them all, the weaving mesmeric baton of conductor Arturo Vigna.

The company's chief conductor, Alfred Hertz, slept soundly in a room on the sixth floor of the Palace Hotel, a few steps from the chamber of Enrico Caruso. The stocky tenor, who had thrilled the brilliant audience with his dashing Don José, was deep in abandoned sleep, head flung back on a sea of pillows, mouth open, sonorously snoring.

*The fire burned three days,  
reaching a temperature of 2,000  
degrees and casting enough  
light to read by 40 miles away*

On the fourth floor of a seven-story hotel not quite so elegant as the Palace slept a reporter for the *San Francisco Call*. Strwn on the floor, where he had dropped it before turning off his light, was a late edition of that morning's paper. A headline reported that San Franciscans had raised \$1,048 for the relief of sufferers in the recent eruption of Mount Vesuvius. The weather box said, "Fair and warmer. Light north wind."

The U.S. Weather Bureau forecaster who had filed this report was sound asleep, too. Neatly arranged on his bedside table were his astronomically timed watch, a pencil, a clean pad of paper and a small electric torch. Every night for 20 years he had placed them that way beside his bed, in case something should happen that he would need to record for science.

Six blocks north of Genthe's studio, on the northern ridge of Nob Hill, the home of Brigadier General Frederick Funston, acting commander of the Army's Pacific Division, was dim and quiet. General Funston had been studying a lengthy memorandum; he read until the type swam before his eyes, then snapped off his light and immediately fell into deep slumber. The hands of the night-stand clock stood at precisely eleven minutes after five.

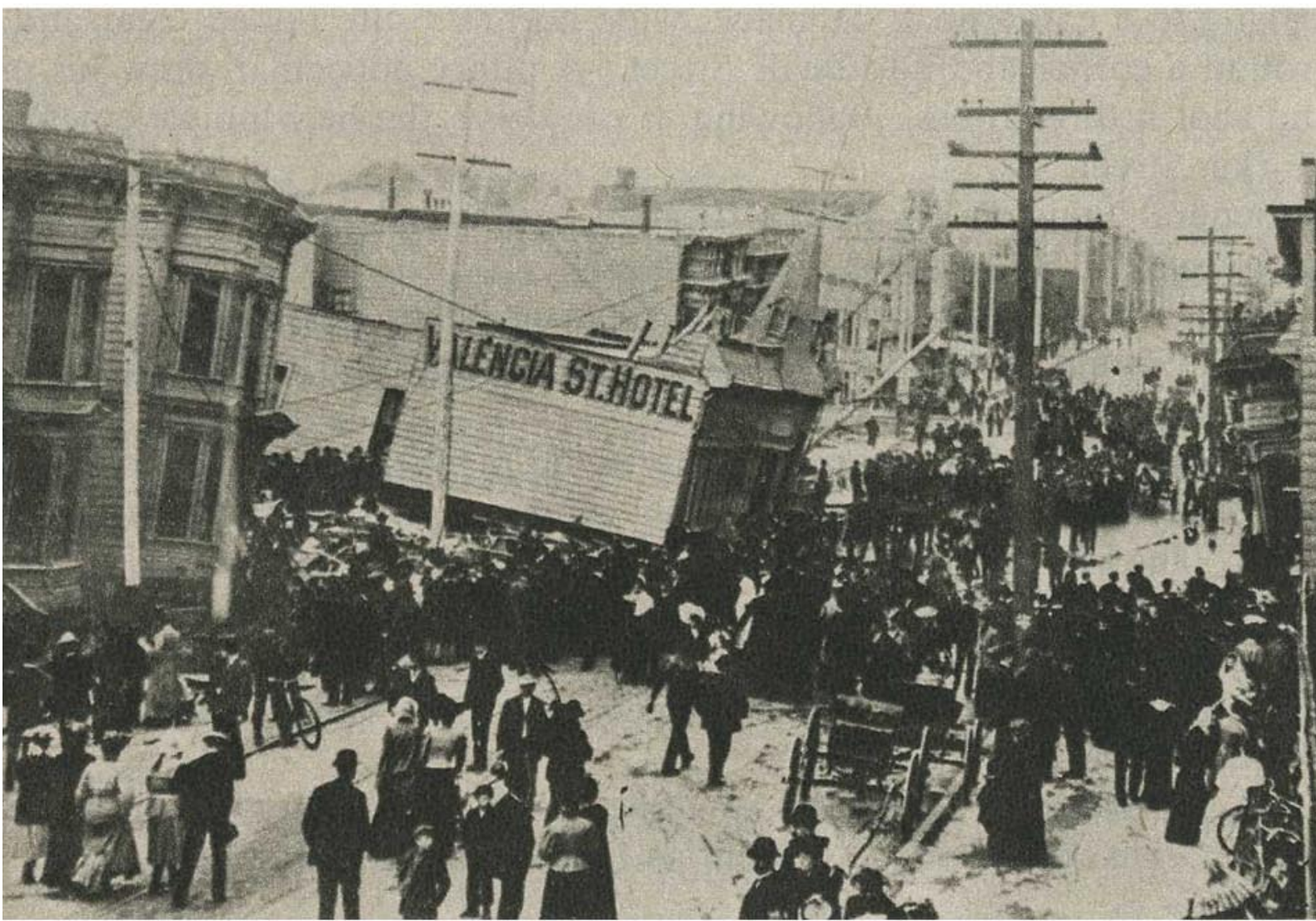
Down on Sansome Street two men unlocked a door and entered a type foundry. They put their lunch pails on a bench and took off their hats and coats and tied on grimy aprons.

"Looks like another scorcher, don't it, Ed?" one of them said.

"Yeah," Ed replied. He glanced out a window. The eastern sky was filled with promise. "Hot and hazy," he grinned, "and a day to be fishing off the heads."

The watch at the scientist's bedside and the clock on the general's night stand ticked away—ticked off another 60 seconds—and hung poised at twelve minutes after five.

At that moment it happened.



The Valencia Street Hotel collapsed so completely in the earthquake that the bewildered occupants of fourth-floor rooms found themselves at street level

**THE STRESSES, THE UNIMAGINABLE** tensions, had accumulated miles down, in earth drifts made millions of years ago. Now the hour struck, the instant arrived when the earth's crust could no longer bear the strain, and gave way and cracked along the San Andreas Fault.

It was an old break. Scientists knew it well. For years the tremors and stirrings along its vertical walls told them something big was building up. And now it was here. In one tectonic jolt, one wall slipped in one direction, the other wall moved in the opposite direction. The grinding thrusts, the agony, the tearing wrench split the earth open in a wound 270 miles long.

The rip came in from the sea, striking northwest to southeast and traveling at three miles a second. It hit first the rugged bulge of the Humboldt County coast, some 200 miles north of San Francisco. It crossed the red-wood country, the bleak mountain spurs, the black shale bluffs, and passed into the sea again.

Along the ocean floor it broke past the crescent Mendocino Beach and came ashore again at Point Arena. Down the lonely benchlands and along the leaning sandstone bluffs it slashed its gigantic plowshare furrow. It knifed through the sandspits of Bodega Head, and raced across pastures to the fishing village of Bolinas, where it vanished again into the sea. It emerged once more at the beetling cliffs above Mussel Rock, eight miles south of San Francisco. Then it struck across the peninsula uplands, down valleys and a chain of lakes and through the Coast Range notches to the old mission settlement of San Juan Bautista. There, in a marsh, the great wound ended.

The disturbance centered from 12 to 25 miles below the earth's surface and exploded with cosmic force. The earth quaked as if it had been struck a fantastic blow from outer space. Tremors radiated across mountains and under seas.

In a matter of minutes seismographs in distant lands—South Africa and Siberia, Japan and Argentina—would quiver and begin recording perhaps the most stupendous temblor ever experienced by man.

As if they had heard a shot, the cattle at the pond in Paradise Valley, north of Winnemucca, raised their heads. They stood frozen, ears up. Momentarily, the pond's glassy surface ruffled, as if a breeze passed by. But the air was quite still.

Far at sea, the John A. Campbell shuddered. Her crew piled out of their bunks in alarm; undoubtedly she had rammed a derelict, perhaps even a whale. They ran to the rail and stared at the sea. Nothing. Her keel dragged, her stern trembled for an instant, then she sailed on as serenely as before.



Another Genthe picture, showing families camping out on the sidewalk. Note the fireplace in the gutter and the primitive living quarters at far right

*The quake drained four inches from  
San Francisco Bay and felled 1,200  
chimneys in one suburb*

In Medford, Oregon, an unlatched door in a dawn-dim house creaked slowly open, then just as slowly closed. In a house on the coast at Coquille a ceiling lamp cord swung a few times east to west, then stopped. In ghost-town cabins in the Mother Lode foothills, rocking chairs spectrally rocked, and at that moment, with a rumble as of distant thunder, great falls of rock and shale detached themselves from the False Cape cliffs of Humboldt County and fell a thousand feet into the sea.

In San Luis Obispo the telephone operator heard a scream and the Salinas connection went dead in her headset. The pistol holster swung back and forth from its nail in Isabella, church bells pealed in Pescadero, and deep in their Coast Range canyons 500-year-old redwoods lashed furiously at the windless sky and split asunder and crashed to earth.

In a museum in San Francisco, the mummies of Egyptian princes, inviolate for 60 centuries, crumbled in a twinkling to dust. Bay Area seismograph pens covered their plates with a frenzy of scrawls, or left the plates entirely. Fire Chief Sullivan, awakening to the sound of avalanching bricks, leaped from bed and burst through the door to Mrs. Sullivan's room. The turret of the hotel next door had punched through the roof and carried away part of her bedroom floor. Blinded by mortar dust, Sullivan lost his balance and pitched into the blackness.



ARNOLD GENTHE

Photographer Arnold Genthe ran from his lurching apartment, borrowed a cheap snapshot camera, and made some of the memorable disaster photos of all time. The top one shows householders amid wreckage, watching the fire creep toward them along Sacramento Street. Right, two women pose against burning city



Right, two women pose against burning city



BROWN BROTHERS

Indomitable townspeople like this woman made huts out of rescued possessions and set up housekeeping outdoors. In many cases they had to move again as fire advanced

On its remote and rocky headland where it had stood since 1870, the 110-foot Point Arena lighthouse cracked in the middle. High in its lantern room its massive lenses and reflectors crashed to the floor.

As a schoolteacher watched openmouthed from her window, a 10-foot wave formed on Tomales Bay and rolled shoreward, and a two-story hotel and its stables at the bay's edge tilted and slid gently into the water. In a Marin County dairy corral the earth opened beneath a cow, then closed again, leaving only her hind hoofs and tail sticking out.

The conductor of the Point Reyes local train sang out, "All aboard!" to the empty station, swung aboard a coach and yanked the signal cord, and at that moment his train—locomotive and all—flipped like a hooked trout, and suddenly lay on its side among the right-of-way poppies.

Genthe awoke to the smashing of his Chinese porcelains. Books cascaded from their shelves. His bed shook violently, as if a lunatic poltergeist were intent on spilling him to the floor.

The scientist who had waited 20 years to record a phenomenon for science groped for his watch and pencil to note the minute, but they rocked out of reach. The precious precise seconds ticked into chaos.

A cataract of bricks crushed the Stanford student at his desk. A landslide engulfed a Santa Cruz mountain sawmill, and buried alive nine men and a mastiff.

In the marshy lowlands south of San Francisco, the great iron pipes carrying the city's water supply from its peninsula reservoirs buckled and snapped and were twisted and crushed and even telescoped. White fountains plumed from the breaks into the morning air.

In her airy, second-floor bedroom the lady author awoke to see her marble-topped bureau lunging across the room; it rose first on one caster, then on another, then wagged its top, "like a table at a séance," she thought.

Six million dollars' worth of stone and brickwork shook off the San Francisco city hall and left its frame standing amid the shattered columns like a monstrous bird cage. Conductor Hertz's Palace Hotel room tossed like a ship's cabin in a line squall. Hertz sprang to the protection of the door-frame and cocked an ear to the orchestration of the temblor. It was, he concluded, a *mezzo forte* roll on a gong or cymbal.

He pulled on some clothes and ran downstairs into the wild hubbub of the lobby and the great Palm Court. In one corner a Chinese houseboy calmly dusted the lobby chairs. Caruso, in a fur coat, a bath towel around his golden throat, embraced Hertz. The tenor was sobbing.

"Alfredo!" he cried. "We are lost!"

The two men clung to each other, and waited for the end of the world.

At the Angel Island Light Station in San Francisco Bay it sounded as though an express train had left the rails and was charging at full speed down the ties. Twelve hundred chimneys toppled simultaneously in San Rafael. The Presidio tide gauge began to drop and kept dropping until four inches of water drained out through the Golden Gate from the 450 square miles of San Francisco Bay. In San Jose the heavy brass pendulum of a Western Union clock beat frantically back and forth against the walls of its wooden prison.

THERE WERE TWO GREAT SHOCKS in San Francisco, the first starting (as accurately as could be determined) at 5:12 A.M. The quaking sharpened in intensity for 30 seconds, held its peak for more than 10 seconds, then abruptly ceased. A lull of about 10 seconds followed. Then came a devastating second shock of equal intensity. This lasted for 15 seconds, then passed off in shuddering aftertremors that would occur at an average rate of one an hour for the next 24 hours.

The two shocks ripped with satanic power and purpose into the sandy artificial lands reclaimed from Yerba Buena Cove, and from the swamps.

tideflats, creek beds and reeded lagoons in the South of Market and Mission districts.

In terms of people, these two districts represented the warm, the vital, the happy and humble heart of San Francisco. Their tumble-down tenements and flimsily anchored cottages were the homes of mill hands and factory workers, shipwrights and foundrymen and printers—the Irish and the Scotch, the Swedes and the Poles and the sons and daughters of a dozen other countries. This is where they lived, they and their patient, strong-backed wives and their many children.

Their bare bedrooms and calico-curtained parlors came crashing down about their heads in the vast clattering immemorial collapse of the earthquake. Scores of them lay pinned and broken-limbed and helpless in the basement debris, and the rest ran numbly into the alleys and streets, leaving their flaring gas jets, their broken flues and breakfast fires behind them.

In this soft insubstantial earth, the temblor waves tore apart the gridiron pipes of the water system. Gas mains ruptured and exploded. Steel street-car tracks writhed like wounded snakes. Asphalt buckled. Cobbled streets caved in and sank 10 feet below their grades. In Valencia Street, along the filled-in bed of the old Mission creek, a score of roomers perished as the rickety underpinnings of the Valencia Street Hotel gave way. The hotel collapsed like a telescope. Survivors stepped out of fourth-floor windows at street level.

The roof peaks of buildings fell in and spread their rafters and the rafters in turn kicked out the walls. Without their walls the roofs kept on falling and the buildings simply flattened out.

This was the way it was at the type foundry in Sansome Street, and the foundryman named Ed and the other one were trapped between two upright type racks. They began to shout long-drawn calls for help.

A warehouse in lower Mission Street also collapsed in this manner and one of its brick walls rained down upon a herd of steers that cowboys were driving to a cattle boat. A black, wide-horned brute bolted clear and ran around a corner and into Beale Street. A jittery policeman drew his pistol and shot it three times. Bellowing, it ran down the heaving pavement into Market Street.

General Funston awoke clearheaded and aware that a catastrophe was taking place. He began swiftly to dress.

In his downtown hotel room the reporter heard the earthquake coming with the sound of tearing silk. A blasting concussion shook the building. Plaster showered down.

He staggered to the window, and as he reached it the window and its sash and the fire escape outside the window fell silently away from the room. The sky beyond was the pale, tender green of dawn.

A shadow swooped down the side of the building and vanished into the roofs of a row of wooden houses, and ragged holes appeared in the roofs. He looked up. The shadow had been the brick wall of the upper three stories of his hotel.

He got dressed. The lobby was filled with staring, gray-faced men and women. He shouldered past them and went out into the street. . . .

**OUT IN THE RESIDENTIAL DISTRICTS**, the rooftops of houses on the hills still saw-toothed firmly against the daybreak sky line, but on the "made-ground" in the swales between the hills they had shaken down entirely or sagged in one direction or another like drunken slatterns.

People fled into their suddenly Humpty Dumpty world, and stood shivering in their nightclothes in the dawn. The earthquake had aimed its blind, malevolent force at each one of them. It had seized each one and rattled his bones as if it meant to kill him in a maniacal frenzy. Standing there, they looked around and listened and tried to relate what they saw and heard to the sane, solid, dependable world they had lived in all their lives.

Across the street was a lodginghouse without a front wall, its abandoned rooms and halls exposed in cross section like the chambers of a biology-class ant colony. In the square was a dowager in nightgown and spangled opera cloak, with a silver teapot in her hand.

Here was the old lady from down the street holding a bird cage with four kittens in it. There was a man hurrying along the sidewalk with coat, hat, suitcase and no trousers.

"Quite a rocker, wasn't it?"

"She'll have to shake harder 'n that to bring this town down!"

"'Twarn't nothin' to the quake in '68."

Teeth chattering, shaking in sudden bursts of chills, they uttered the platitudes and giggled as if it had been nothing, really, at all; but the lady two houses down had got up 10 minutes ago to put out the milk can and now her bed was buried under three tons of bricks that would have crushed her to jelly if it hadn't been for the milk can, and she was laughing about it and no one could make her stop.

Stocky, bearded General Funston, in civilian clothes, ran down his front steps. The streets were filling with people, but there were no cable cars on the hills. The ropes in the slots were silent. The tracks stretched empty as far as he could see.

He hastened down Jones Street to California, past the towered and turreted mansions of the Central Pacific railroad barons and Comstock silver kings—the \$450,000 redwood chateau of the Crocker, the brownstone palace of the Floods, the gabled villa of the Townes, the \$2,500,000, 35-room Gothic castle that housed the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art. Beside the Fairmont Hotel, that rose in a white citadel above the streets and squares of the old Gold Rush town, the general stopped to catch his breath.

Below him, Market Street, 120 feet wide and three miles long, cut straight across the city from the waterfront to Twin Peaks. Beyond Market and south to the ship channels and the stockyards stretched the factories, and lodginghouses, churches, saloons and corner groceries, the grimy parks, clapboard schools and tinderbox homes of the workers. Two or three miles south and east, the streets trailed off into cow pastures along the rolling spurs of Twin Peaks.

The general himself, there on Nob Hill, stood roughly in the center of the city's second great division, north of Market Street. Compact, closely built since pioneer days, it encompassed the financial and shopping districts, the theaters and hotels, Chinatown, the waterfront warehouses and wharves, the steep streets and hillside houses of Nob, Russian and Telegraph Hills, the dives, cribs and rat-ridden gin mills of the Barbary Coast, the North Beach shacks and tenements of the Mexican, Spanish and Italian quarters, the piers, lateen-rigged fishing boats and net-festooned bulkheads of Fisherman's Wharf.

The section north of Market extended on his left to the bay, and, behind him, to Van Ness Avenue. This was a residential boulevard, 125 feet wide, that left Market Street halfway to the Peaks, and struck north for two miles to the bay at Fort Mason.

Beyond Van Ness, to the seaside dunes and the palm-shaded barracks of the Presidio, ranged San Francisco's third general area: the long, quiet streets of the Western Addition, the modest homes of the inner Richmond and Sunset districts, the green lawns and stately pavilions of Golden Gate Park.

The general had indeed been swift; it was five twenty-nine o'clock; far across the hills the sun was coming up in a blaze of red and gold. But fire was swifter still. Here and there, in a dozen different places across the lower city and South of Market, he saw the young scarlet forkings of flame playing above the roofs and cottagetops. Black smoke drifted languidly into the lovely morning air.

The general stared, appalled. The tongues licked greedily higher. The insolent smoke bloomed like an evil flower in the sky. The general broke into a run down the steep California Street grade.

A bank was burning at Sansome Street. An engine company was already there, its hoses down in the street. But the hoses were flat, the gleaming nozzles dry. The firemen ran from one hydrant to another.

"Where's your water?" the general asked.

"The quake broke all the mains."

The general was of well-tempered steel. But keen and resilient as he was, it took a second to recover. For what the fireman had said was that San Francisco was doomed.

For an instant, he felt a fleeting admiration. An enemy general, bent on wiping the city from the face of the earth, would have been a genius to conceive a plan so classic, so stunningly simple, as coldly beautiful as an ending in chess.

General Funston found a policeman and identified himself. "Where is Mayor Schmitz? I must telephone him at once."

The policeman shook his head. "All lines are dead, sir."

"Then find him. Tell him General Funston is turning out 1,700 armed Regulars. They will report to the Hall of Justice by seven forty-five o'clock. They will be at his complete disposal."

The general raised his arm in a brusque salute, then quickly made his way back up the hill. . . .

JANGLE OF AMBULANCE BELLS, clatter of galloping fire horses, rumble of engine wheels on cobblestones, shouts of rallying men rose in strident medley over the South of Market streets.

Wagons, carts and here and there a high-wheeled, brass-lamped Franklin or Pope-Hartford automobile with goggled driver jounced along the littered pavements with earthquake victims for the already hard-pressed nurses and doctors of the emergency hospital in Mechanics Pavilion, across the square from the ruins of city hall.

In Southern Pacific Hospital, fire chief Sullivan, unconscious and dying from injuries received in his fall, would never know how his men broke their hearts for him in the bitter and hopeless battle, and down in the South of Market alleys the flames raced with a ravenous snarl into the flimsy dwellings, the rows of splintered kindling. The unfortunates trapped and at their mercy screamed, or stoically waited, or closed their eyes and prayed.

Photographer Arnold Genthe, in riding habit, walked along Powell Street to Union Square. It presented a reassuring sight. The palms rustled pleasantly in the light air. The familiar, 13-story façade of the Hotel St. Francis loomed sheer and solid, like a Yosemite cliff.

People in makeshift garb milled across the square's two acres, many of them refugees from the Palace who found it comforting to stand free of tall buildings and overhanging cornices. Members of the opera company were there: Sembrich and Fremstad, Hertz, the great Scotti, Caruso in his fur coat, scowling and trilling to test his voice, and carrying under his arm a large, autographed portrait of President Theodore Roosevelt. Twenty-four-year-old John Barrymore, in town with Richard Harding Davis's *The Dictator*, strolled about in flawless full dress and told amusingly how the quake had interrupted his dawn-tender love scene with the fiancée of a Venetian glass collector.

Nine separate conflagrations, each one of which would ordinarily have been rated a general-alarm fire, blazed south of Market Street. Toward the waterfront three others crackled along narrow streets.

Here and there, by freak of fortune, a hydrant still functioned, or water

Below him, Market Street, 120 feet wide and three miles long, cut straight across the city from the waterfront to Twin Peaks. Beyond Market and south to the ship channels and the stockyards stretched the factories, and lodginghouses, churches, saloons and corner groceries, the grimy parks, clapboard schools and tinderbox homes of the workers. Two or three miles south and east, the streets trailed off into cow pastures along the rolling spurs of Twin Peaks.

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from broken mains formed a sump, or there was an artesian well or cistern. Firemen tapped any source they could find. It was bitter going. Time after time a company seemed on the verge of winning. Then its water supply went dry, and the blaze roared higher than before.

A Western Union operator, probing and testing for a live wire in the Bay Area's communication system, found one atop a telegraph pole in West Oakland. It was open to Sacramento. As the smoke mounted the sky above San Francisco like a volcanic cloud, he perched there and tapped out his message to the world.

Mayor Eugene E. Schmitz, with rich black beard and snapping black eyes and the sword of a graft investigation hanging over his impressive head, paced the lobby of the Hall of Justice, across Kearny Street from Portsmouth Square.

A onetime theater orchestra fiddler, he had been blatantly unfit for office. Many looked upon him as a weakling, a pawn, a sawdust mayor. But now he was astounding his severest critics. From somewhere in his make-up, he summoned forth a hero.

At this moment, under his orders, General Funston's troops were deploying on the double, with full cartridge belts and fixed bayonets, to protect lives and property. Couriers were abroad calling a crisis Committee of Fifty into session at 3:00 P.M. at the Hall of Justice. Meanwhile, in a voice charged with authority, he laid down the law.

No water to check the fires? Get dynamiters from the Army. Get dynamite from the powder company at Pinole. Bring it down the bay by tugboat. Blow up buildings in the path of the flames. That was how they controlled the big fire in Baltimore.

Drunkness and disorder in the streets? "I forbid the sale of alcohol . . ." Looting? The mayor dictated a proclamation: "The Federal Troops, the members of the Regular Police Force and all Special Police Officers have been authorized by me to KILL any and all persons found engaged in Looting or in the Commission of Any Other Crime. . . ."

South of Market Street the landmarks were beginning to go. One incredible sweep of flame was now destroying Metropolitan Hall, the Lincoln Grammar School and The Emporium, the largest department store west of Chicago.

Across Fifth Street, the square, three-story, granite-and-sandstone United States Mint, with \$220,000,000 in its vaults, stood lonely and indestructible in a wallowing sea of fire. Behind its barred iron shutters 40 men choked in refinery fumes and wet down sills and sashes to keep the flames at bay.

Two blocks east on Mission Street the blazing roof of the Grand Opera House crashed down upon the stage where Carmen had danced and died the night before.

The fire leaped the alley behind the theater to the power shed of Market Street's proudest skyscraper, the 18-story Call Building. A mighty dra sucked the fire through the tunnel and up the skyscraper's elevator shaft. With the wild scream of a thousand windows shattering at once, the building burst into a 300-foot gusher of pulverized fire.

Down toward the waterfront the fire had crossed Market to join the earliest blazes that General Funston had seen from Nob Hill. Now in an advancing comber of flame they rolled unchecked over the ramshack warehouses and wholesale sheds of Drumm and Battery Streets.

A block north a band of rescuers tugged impotently at the wreckage of the type foundry at Sansome and Clay Streets. They had been working for hours to free the two trapped men. They were near the limit of their endurance. No help was in sight. They stopped and with ashen faces stared at one another. The flames roared closer.

"Good-by! God help you!" they cried, and ran away.

From the mass of debris rose a muffled shout of despair. "For the love of Christ, give us a pistol!"

But the street was deserted. . . .

SO NOW THE BONNY CITY, the proud city, the lovely happy city was burning to death, and it was a heartbreaking hour, a passing of things loved and lived with, an hour of farewell and good-by forever.

A new sight appeared on the streets, and a new sound mingled in the tumult of death and destruction: the straw-bedded wagons flying red flags and laden with dynamite cases, and the hunched figures of the crews, silhouetted against the glow as they ran with their charges into the buildings, and then the thumping boom as the charge exploded, and then the slow collapse of walls, the unfurling of cloud of dust, the fall and crash of roof.

During the forenoon the people had sat in the hilly streets, looking down on the fires, at the backdrop of smoke they hung against the sky. In the Gold Rush days, San Francisco had caught fire six times, and six times had all but burned to the ground. Each time, the pioneers went to work in the smoking ruins and rebuilt her.

After the sixth great fire, they chose a symbol for San Francisco—the phoenix, the mythical bird that burned to death, then emerged reborn from its own ashes, and flew upward, swifter-winged and more beautiful than ever.

The San Franciscans recalled their fathers and grandfathers telling them about the phoenix. "Remember it," the old men said. "It's part of your heritage."

But San Francisco then had been a primitive settlement of tents and crate-



wood shacks, made for boom-camp bonfires. Now she was a modern metropolis, substantial, enduring. Someone, something, would save her—if nothing else, the wind and fog from the sea.

Genthe, with a borrowed Kodak, walked among them taking their pictures—the women in wide hats, long gored skirts and puff-sleeved shirt-waists; the men in derbys and dark suits, the children in sailor hats and long black stockings. And beside them in the street, quite forgotten for the moment, the sewing machine, the victrola, the basketful of pans, the roll of blankets that they had pulled or carried from their homes in the moment of the earthquake, and before all this began.

The spectacle bewitched them. They told themselves that none of this was real. They were dreaming. They sat waiting to wake up—or for the rising wind.

But no wind came. Instead the holocaust soared fiercer and higher heavenward. They felt its heat on their faces. It advanced toward the hills on which they sat, in an unbroken front three miles long. They stirred uneasily. Ashes began to drift down. A fetid smell filled the air. Slowly, in twos and threes, they stood up. They began to comprehend that it was true. And to understand that no miracle was going to save them.

Stone-faced, they hurried away then, headed for the open spaces of the parks and the Presidio. By the tens of thousands they toiled across the hills, sweating and panting in the hot stifling air, in the fall of ash and cinders. The trunks, bedsprings, cots and crates in which they dragged their belongings gave off a long-drawn, never-ending, rasping screech. Children wailed and clung to their mothers' skirts. Beside them all, out-distancing them, trotted packs of silent dogs with dripping jaws and lolling tongues.

Rumors, tidings of catastrophe, flew up and down the lines. Chicago was in flames. A tidal wave had engulfed Seattle. New York had toppled into the sea. Confusion and chaos were besetting the world. San Francisco's fate was merely a tick of the clock of doomsday.

Behind them, fire of a magnitude never before experienced by man was reaching toward its climax in vast, heaven-soaring banners of smoke and flame. There was no wind. Yet from every compass point fire-generated drafts flowed toward the city. Meeting above the streets, they turned skyward, whipping the flames to fresher vigor and carrying with them in their enormous up-rush a curtain or pall of smoke that was now visible a hundred miles at sea.

Down in the streets, in the blocks of blazing structures, the flames were the flames of a fire that was destroying property at the rate of \$1,000,000 every ten minutes. They burned with blast-furnace heat ranging up to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Sash weights and window glass turned liquid. Steel bars were welded solid. Porcelainware softened and dripped in blobs, like colored wax.

At two o'clock that afternoon the lady novelist, one of thousands packed in Jefferson Square west of Van Ness, wrote down her notes on a pad of white paper.

She had seen an Italian woman kneeling in the yard of a demolished house. The woman was weeping and praying. The crowd passed her by without a glance. On a heap of clothes nearby lay a two- or three-year-old

girl, with a doll cradled in her arms. It did not occur to the lady novelist until later that the child was not breathing.

A young man passed a grocery store. Its door was sprung loose, its plate glass had fallen out and the young man and his mother and fiancée had no food. He gathered an armload of canned goods, and stepped back into the street, and a National Guardsman shot him dead for looting.

Then, with the note she had saved for last, she finished the page. On the front steps of an abandoned house she had seen a young Chinese mother nursing a baby. The mother's face was besmirched, and drawn with weariness. Her own child slept in swaddling blankets beside her. The child at her breast was white.

At three o'clock the Palace, the bonanza caravansera and the pride and joy of three generations of San Franciscans, went blazing up in glory.

They were blasting along Kearny Street, near the half-wrecked Hall of Justice, and Mayor Schmitz held the

meeting of his Committee of Fifty across the street in Portsmouth Square. Striding among the dynamite kegs, he outlined his plans for the relief of the refugees, the hospitalization of the injured, the maintenance of public health and safety, the striking of a last-ditch resistance line along



## Van Ness Avenue.

The committeemen might have been resurrected from vigilante days. Grim-faced and solemn, yet with a flint-edged courage that would never surrender San Francisco, they sat beneath the poplars with the ashes pattering down on the square and the city burning behind them.



Down one end of the square ranged the raw mounds of 39 hastily dug graves, and up the hill in back of the old Monumental firehouse the flimsy tong rooms and banner-hung bazaars, the joss houses and honeycombed cellars and tenements of Chinatown awaited their fate.

There, prone in a cobbled alley called "The Street of a Thousand Flowers," was the carcass of the great black steer. Bawling in pain from its bullet wounds, flanks bright with blood, it had looked for a field, a meadow, a corral, and labored up a hill, and came to a throng of Chinese milling in the street.

Howls of terror broke from them at the sight of the gory beast. The legend that four bulls held up the world was true! This was one of them, and he had run away! That was why the earth had trembled!

"Go back! Bull, go back under the world!" they cried, reaching for stones. "Your brothers need you!"

They drove the dying steer down Dupont Street. It staggered into "The Street of a Thousand Flowers." There it fell before the pelting stones and lashing sticks, and soon lay still.

Then the Chinese fled west by the thousand up Clay and Washington and Jackson Streets in a procession set to the crashing of temple gongs and the wail of moon fiddle—stolid coolies bearing pole-slung baskets of quacking white ducks and jute bags of rice and tea; round-faced children shuffling in embroidered slippers; mincing slave girls carrying cosmetic pots and lily bulbs; pig-tailed merchants sweating under brassbound chests; lily-footed wives in brocaded satins, teetering along, arms outstretched for balance, in their tiny shoes and for the first time in their lives appearing on a public street with their husbands.



The flaming billows leaped skyward at their backs. Below the square, the theater where little Lotta Crabtree's buck and wing had brought the miners cheering to their feet was blazing, and the old saloons of Montgomery Street's "Ambrosial Path," and the three-story, iron-shuttered, brick buildings the pioneers had built after the Gold Rush fires.

In one of them that dynamiters had marked for blasting sat a stern, dark-haired man in his thirties. On the desk before him was a cocked revolver. The door burst open. It framed an Army lieutenant. At his back stood his crew, dynamite cases on their shoulders. The lieutenant ordered the man to leave at once.

The man picked up his pistol. He was deadly calm.

"Lieutenant, I am not leaving. This was my father's building. This was his office, and his desk. If you think I am going to desert them, you are

*More than 250,000 people were driven from  
their homes by the earthquake and the  
fire combined*

mistaken. I am telling you that if one of your men tries to lay a stick of dynamite in these rooms, I'll blow his brains out . . ."

The lieutenant hesitated, and then with his crew was gone. The man put down his pistol and locked the steel doors and shutters. Then he soaked his sacks and curtains in the water-filled fire buckets, and prepared to make his stand.

BY SEVEN O'CLOCK the fire front was advancing methodically at the rate of two blocks an hour along Bush and Sutter Streets. The editorial staffs of the Call and the Chronicle held a conference. Executives reported that their presses were useless. The plan was to prepare copy in San Francisco and send it by launch to Oakland. There, on Thursday, in the plant of an Oakland paper, they would issue a joint paper until other arrangements could be worked out. The conference adjourned.

"All Chronicle men," said the Chronicle editor, "will meet at 1:00 P.M. tomorrow at the Chronicle Building—if there is a Chronicle Building." The Call editor said good night to his men. "All Call men will meet at 1:00 P.M. tomorrow at the Fairmont Hotel—if there is a tomorrow."

The fire was a monster that now, at its leisure, was eating its prey. What it could not devour or feed upon—concrete, brick, steel—it tumbled into rubble or left behind in ravaged smoke-blackened shells. The throbbing glare it cast across the night heaven was an awe-inspiring sight. Residents of San Jose, 40 miles south, stood outside their homes and read newspapers in the ruddy glimmer.

In the squares on the heights west of Van Ness, on the grassy meadows of Golden Gate Park, in sheltered Presidio hollows, the refugees—some 250,000 of them—numbly watched the glowing sky, or talked, or tried to rest.

In the makeshift hospital tents men died and were borne on litters to makeshift graves. Doctors and Red Cross nurses, limp with fatigue, set broken bones and administered drugs, bandaged wounds and delivered babies.

There was no disorder. People walked slowly through the camps calling the names of lost loved ones. Someone sang, or played a salvaged piano.



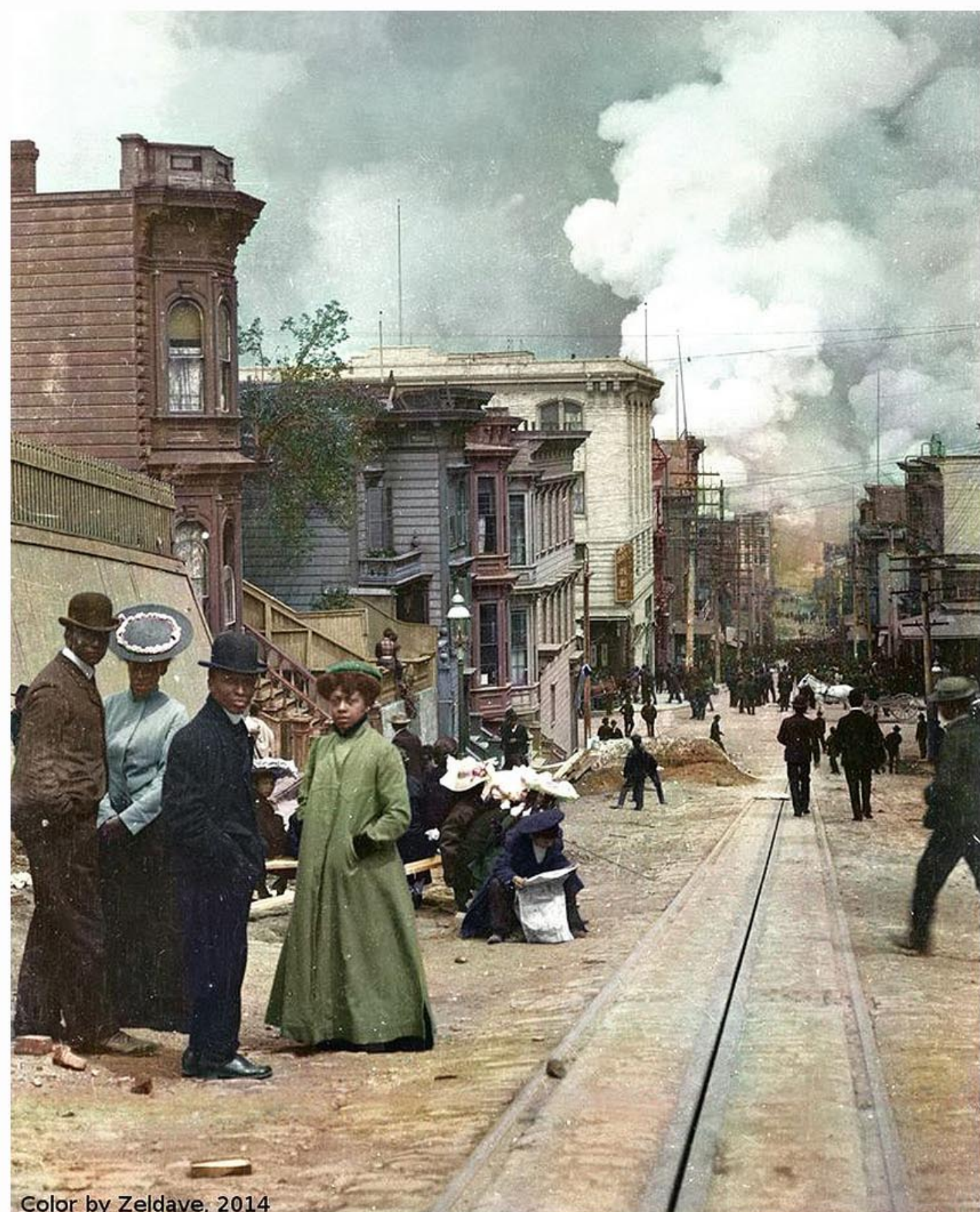
The refugees tried to cheer one another up. But sadness was everywhere in the air.

At midnight, Union Square was empty. Fire advanced on it rapidly from three directions. For blocks around, massive buildings sat dark and abandoned. They had a remote, meditative air, as if they were brooding to themselves. There was no water. There was nothing anyone could do. The light fall of ash drifted down like soft gray snow. The only sound was the sound of the hungry flames. . . .

TOMORROW DAWNED, AFTER ALL. The morning smoke, flickering with orange and lavender lights, boiled majestically heavenward in a vast cumulus that reared 10,000 feet into the motionless air. The rising sun turned its billowing summits a creamy white against the blue, like the caps of trade-wind clouds at sea.

And now an outside world, that didn't quite know yet what had happened, was involved. It knew only that San Francisco was in trouble, and her people needed help, and it was responding.

The Navy's Pacific Squadron steamed into the bay and put ashore blue-jackets and Marines. Regulars from the Presidio of Monterey were marching north. Mule trains of food, clothing and medical supplies filed south from the barracks at Fort Vancouver. U.S. Revenue tugs and fireboats converged on the waterfront. Relief trains sped from Los Angeles and Portland. Red Cross funds, supplies and fieldworkers were on their way from the East.



Color by Zeldave, 2014

It was, in truth, San Francisco's darkest hour.

A quarter of a million men, women and children, stupefied with exhaustion and shock, their homes destroyed or in danger of destruction, lived a nomad existence in open spaces, and over them all hovered the dread specter of typhoid and smallpox. Another 70,000 had fled or were fleeing to the safety of the Oakland and Berkeley beaches and the communities of Marin County. Still another 20,000 or 30,000 had boarded trains, or were in head-long exodus to the south in a variety of other vehicles or on foot.

Behind them they left the heart of a metropolis in Carthaginian ruin. Banks, commercial buildings, schools, churches, hotels, stores, warehouses—all were destroyed or under tons of rubble. The telephone system, except for improvised military lines, was useless. Every telegraph office was gone. One million books had burned. Two hundred and sixty-one miles of railways were paralyzed.

And incredibly, the nightmare of sound and fatigue and fury continued as if it would never end until every trace of the living city had been obliterated.

The vortex swept up the southern slope of Nob Hill and up from Chinatown to the ridgetop where General Funston had stood looking down at the rising smoke wisps, the lifetime ago that was yesterday morning, and now the lofty aeries of the rich, with their costly woods, their cut-crystal chandeliers and lace-canopied beds, were blazing as brightly as the hovels of Chinatown had burned.

Their inhabitants had fled to Burlingame in silver-mounted broughams, or to New York or Newport or Europe, and it would be years before they came back and some would never come back at all.

But now in the afternoon of the second day, the fire worked its way westward. Troopers on guard fell back along the hillcrest, driving homeowners before them.

An elderly man said, "I was worth \$600,000 yesterday. All I have left is my house, and in another 15 minutes that'll go with the rest of them." An Irish policeman from South of Market, who didn't have anything left either, consoled him.

At that moment they were brothers. The cast of the drama was so vast identities had become meaningless. The great and the famous of yesterday blended back into the crowd today. The dowager stood in line for soup with the scrubwoman.

The firemen pumping from sumps and wells and partially repaired mains, and indomitable men and women with mops and wet blankets had stopped the fire that morning South of Market, out on the hill beyond Mission Dolores and east in a ragged line to Townsend Street. Along Townsend Street to the Bay fire tugs turned it back with sea water from the China Basin channel.

But down the western slopes of Nob Hill the fire blazed 75 feet high on a front 14 blocks long. Consuming a house, a tier of flats, a store, at the rate of one every three minutes, it crackled toward Van Ness Avenue, and the heights and valleys of the Western Addition beyond.

The fire seemed to be traveling from housetop to housetop in a macabre game of leapfrog with the beleaguered firemen, who now fought on nerve and heart alone. When they dropped exhausted in the gutters, doctors revived them with strychnine and they struggled on. Their hoses burned, the engine fuel gave out. Helmets baked to their heads. Rubber coats shredded from their backs. The courageous fire horses collapsed in their harness.

That forenoon, in a bursting spray of sparks, the fire jumped Van Ness

Avenue and attacked the bell tower and gilded cross of Saint Mary's Cathedral. Hundreds of refugees who had sought sanctuary in the great nave poured screaming into the street. While the cross burned brighter and brighter, the Reverend Charles Ramm climbed into the tower and with an ax chopped away the blazing timbers. From a vantage point in Jefferson Square, the lady novelist saw him; he was a tiny figure at the tower peak, grimly hacking "with the constrained small movement of a mechanical toy."

But he had saved the church and stopped the fire. Angrily it turned to its shortened front. Most of the flamboyant Nob Hill villas and châteaux had been built in the 1870s by the railroad giants and the silver kings; these were the solid middle-class mansions of a second generation of nabobs, the later merchants and burghers.

Along this stretch of boulevard, the time had come for the showdown. Here the fire fighters came to grips with the monster at last.

They smothered it with flame and blasted it with dynamite. They drowned it in salt water pumped two miles from the bay, and flailed it with blankets and brooms and sticks and their bare hands in a reeling struggle that endured long after the sun had set. In the smoke and turmoil and flaming confusion of the battle, five blocks of homes on the east side of Van Ness were put to the back-firing torch; on the west side of Van Ness, five blocks of homes were dynamited.

One small flame, bright yellow and wriggling with evil life, raced to the far side of Franklin, the next street west. Groggy firemen converged on it. A brief, desperate struggle and it was dead.

Maimed and crippled, harried by a rising west wind, the fire wheeled back to the north and east as if it were now its turn to seek an escape. The line along Van Ness held fast. At the avenue's end, by the docks of Fort Mason, the fighters cut off the flames and drove them down to the bay and the soaring white streams that feathered from the nozzles of the swarming fireboats.

But back up the sides of Russian Hill, the fire front went sweeping up over the high, brown-shingled houses that for 30 and 40 years had looked down upon Alcatraz and the bay. Many of their inhabitants, hoping for a miracle that would spare their homes, had stayed with them. Now they, too, fled for their lives.

Others, with homes in hilltop open spaces, had a chance to fight back. One man, believing everything lost, dipped the American flag on his rooftop staff three times in a gesture of defiance, and prepared to flee. Fort Mason troops, taking it for an Army signal, rushed up the hill to the rescue and saved the house with buckets of wet sand.

While nearby homes went up like kindling wood, "Humphrey's Castle," a turreted landmark on Russian Hill's north ridge, was saved when its owner and son wet down its shingles with squirting seltzer bottles and three cases of Roederer's champagne.

As Friday ended, the flame banners flared skyward from the narrow alleys of the foreign quarters that nestled against the base of Telegraph Hill. They rippled with a strange lazy ease up the rocky eastern slopes of the hill, through the ramshackle rookeries and unsavory deadfalls of the Barbary Coast. Higher still, swarthy Neapolitan fishermen fought the conflagration for their rose-grown cottages. Barrels of sharp red Chianti and zinfandel were aging in their cellars from the fall crush, but what was wine if you lost a home to drink it in? Swinging wine-soaked blankets, they drove the fire from their roofs and porches, and bested it in the last, most spirited revolt of all.

Hour after hour along the waterfront that night, 30 tugs tied to the smoking piers threw their streams into the flames. Now at last they had it cornered. The scene was one of wild disorder and excitement. Firemen, staggering with weariness but sensing the finish, lowered their helmets against the searing heat and carried their nozzles time and again toward the savage flames, then, with warning shouts, fell back in retreat. Walls crashed to earth and sent the flames shooting skyward amid geysers of snapping sparks.

Then, at the end of an endless dawn, the life went out of the fire. Suddenly it flickered lower. And all at once, there at the foot of the smoke-black cliffs, in the foggy daybreak with the gulls wheeling and crying overhead, it was all over.



*At last it ended. People came back and began removing debris—and planning reconstruction*



San Franciscans drift back into their smoking, gutted city to start cleaning up

When the firemen grasped what had happened and what they had done, they sank to the streets beside their engines. The tugs kept their strong white streams arching into the smoldering expanse of embers, but their whistles shrieked, and climbed, and joined in a long shrill blast of triumph.

Moments later, jaunty victory notes broke out over the camps from Army bugles, and brought the refugees laughing and cheering and weeping for joy from their tents and blanket rolls. In another hour the whole world knew that San Francisco's ordeal had ended. . . .

**AS THE APRIL SUN BROKE THROUGH** the mist that morning, a band of San Franciscans picked their way through the ruins. They had come to look at what was left.

As far as they could see, the city—four fifths of her—lay destroyed.

A footpath led them down Market Street. On every side loomed tottering walls, piles of rubble, twisted skeletons of steel, incinerated shells of buildings open to the sky, and, where the city had proudly crowned her hills, mile upon mile of—nothing.

Acrid yellow smoke drifted slowly across the desolate scene. A brooding silence hung in the air. The men and women might have been travelers, exploring the remains of a long-perished race, a long-dead civilization.

But the curious thing was, they did not see, really, the ashen waste. They saw instead the rocklike mint, still standing as it was when its valiant crew stumbled choking into the street, their battle won. Two blocks west, they saw the imposing post office and federal court building; the quake had battered it and the fire had scarred it, but men had stood fast and fought for it, and it had come through.

Down in the devastated streets of the Gold Rush town, the Montgomery Block, erected in the '50s, rose solid and fortresslike among the wreckage. And there was the building that the son of the pioneer had saved with the spirit of '49. On Russian Hill were the homes, scorched but intact, that resolute men had snatched from disaster. To the cliffs of Telegraph Hill clung the cottages the fishermen would not yield.

The San Franciscans took off their coats and rolled up their sleeves.

"Let's go," they said. "Let's get started."

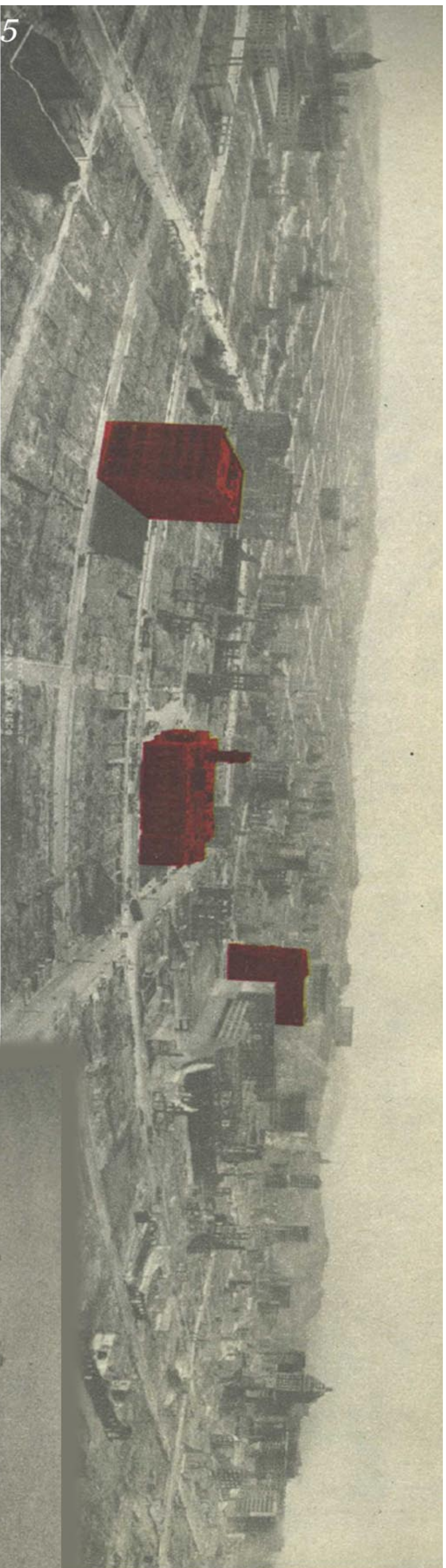
The bricks in Market Street were still hot, and blistered their hands. But they could not wait. Bending over, they began to clear away the rubble, and if at that moment they had looked up, they might have seen the phoenix—the mythical golden bird, with the shimmering golden wings.

Somewhere near the city's heart, it must have risen from the ashes. On immortal wings it must have flown triumphantly toward the sun, higher and higher into the sky, until it was a shining speck, until it disappeared.

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The 1906 picture was taken from a captive balloon, looking northwest; the 1956 picture was made from a helicopter hovering over the same spot. Among the buildings which still stood after the fire are at least three—marked in red in both photographs and map—which are

still visible today. The one in the center (half hidden in 1956 photo) is old United States Mint—saved by heroic workers who stayed inside through fire

