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Arnold Genthe

As I Remember

Chapter Ten

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## Earthquake and Fire

ONE of the great social events of the opera season in the spring of 1906 was the joint appearance of Enrico Caruso and Olive Fremstad in *Carmen*. A large and enthusiastic audience filled the house for this gala occasion. It was the night of April 17th. After a quiet supper party with some friends, I walked home and went to bed with the music of *Carmen* still singing in my ears. It seemed as if I had scarcely been asleep when I was awakened by a terrifying sound—the Chinese porcelains that I had been collecting in the last years had crashed to the floor. (My interest in Chinese porcelains ever since then has been purely platonic.) The whole house was creaking and shaking, the chandelier was swinging like a pendulum, and I felt as if I were on a ship tossed about by a rough sea. "This can't go on much longer," I said to myself. "When a house shakes like this, the ceiling is bound to collapse. As soon as the plaster begins to fall, I'll cover my head and accept what comes."

An ominous quiet followed. I was about to get up when I found Hamada, my Japanese servant, standing beside me. An earthquake was, of course, no new experience for him, but now he looked thoroughly frightened and was as pale as a Japanese can be. "Master," he said, "very bad earthquake—many days nothing to eat—I go, yes." Before I could say anything he was on his way downstairs. I looked at the clock; the time was a quarter past five. I looked out of the window and saw a number of men and women, half-dressed, rushing to the middle of the street for safety. Pushing his way through them, with a sack of flour over his shoulder and carrying a basket of provisions, was Hamada.

I went to the top floor to see what had happened to my studio. The chimney had fallen through the roof, most of the

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book shelves had collapsed and the books were buried under mounds of plaster from the wall and ceiling. A sixteenth-century wood sculpture of Buddha had landed right side up and stood unharmed and inscrutable in the midst of the debris—"serene, indifferent of fate."

## Earthquake Attire

The earth continued to indulge in periodic tremors, though less violently. I started to get dressed and decided that the most suitable "earthquake attire" would be my khaki riding things—I was to live in them for weeks.

The streets presented a weird appearance, mothers and children in their nightgowns, men in pajamas and dinner coats, women scantily dressed with evening wraps hastily thrown over them. Many ludicrous sights met the eye: an old lady carrying a large bird cage with four kittens inside, while the original occupant, the parrot, perched on her hand; a man tenderly holding a pot of calla lilies, muttering to himself; a scrub woman, in one hand a new broom and in the other a large black hat with ostrich plumes; a man in an old-fashioned nightshirt and swallow tails, being startled when a friendly policeman spoke to him, "Say, Mister, I guess you better put on some pants." .. But there was no hysteria, no signs of real terror or despair. Nor did buildings show an alarming evidence of destruction; here and there parts of damaged walls had fallen into the streets, and most chimneys had collapsed. At Delmonico's, the front of one of the rooms on the third floor had fallen into the street. A chair with some clothes had been carried with it. The distressed owner called out to a passing workman, "Do you want to make \$20?" "Sure," he replied, "what is it?" "See that suit there? I want you to bring it up to me here." Just then another shock occurred. "Ah, you better come and get it yourself."

After wandering about for a while, I went to the house of some dear friends of mine, Milton and Mabel Bremer (she is now married to my old friend Bertram Alanson). I found them calmly sitting on the front steps. The one thing that Mabel was apparently most anxious to save was a pair of evening slippers—a purchase

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chase of the day before—which she thrust into my large coat pockets. But it did not save them. I left them at my studio when I returned there later and they were burned with all my possessions.

## Free Breakfast

We decided that it would be a good idea to have some breakfast and went to the St. Francis Hotel which had not been damaged. When we arrived we saw that we were not the only ones who had had the brilliant idea of breakfasting there. The lobby and the dining room were crowded. Near the entrance we saw Enrico Caruso with a fur coat over his pajamas, smoking a cigarette and muttering, " 'Ell of a place! 'Ell of a place!" He had been through many earthquakes in his native Italy but this one was too much for him. It appeared that when he was awakened by the shock, he had tried his vocal cords without success. " 'Ell of a place! I never come back here." And he never did.

Inside the hotel, people in all kinds of attire from evening clothes to nightgowns went milling about. There was no gas or electricity, but somehow hot coffee was available which, with bread and butter and fruit, made a satisfying breakfast. When I asked the waiter for a check he announced with a wave of his hand, "No charge today, sir. Everyone is welcome as long as things hold out."

After seeing my friends home, I went back to my studio to get a camera. The one thought uppermost in my mind was not to bring some of my possessions to a place of safety but to make photographs of the scenes I had been witnessing, the effects of the earthquake and the beginning of the conflagration that had started in various parts of the city. I found that my hand cameras had been so damaged by the falling plaster as to be rendered useless. I went to Montgomery Street to the shop of George Kahn, my dealer, and asked him to lend me a camera. "Take anything you want. This place is going to burn up anyway." I selected the best small camera, a 3A Kodak Special. I stuffed my pockets with films and started out. It was only then that I began to realize the extent of the disaster which had befallen the city. The fire had

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started simultaneously in many different places when the housewives had attempted to get breakfast for their

families, not realizing what a menace the ruined chimneys were. All along the skyline as far as eye could see, clouds of smoke and flames were bursting forth. The work of the fire department was badly hampered, as the water mains had burst.

## **Unforgettable Scenes**

By this time the city had been put under martial law with General Funston in supreme command. He decided to check the progress of the conflagration by dynamiting a block in advance of the fire in order to create a breach over which the flames could not leap. All day and night the detonations resounded in one's ears and yet the fire continued to make headway. By noon the whole town was in flight. Thousands were moving toward the ferry hoping to get across the bay to Oakland or Alameda. On all streets leading to Golden Gate Park, there was a steady stream of men, women and children. Since all wagons or automobiles had been commandeered by the military authorities, only makeshift vehicles were available. Baby carriages and toy wagons, carts constructed out of boxes and wheels, were used to transport groceries, kitchen utensils, clothes and blankets; trunks mounted on roller skates or even without them were being dragged along by ropes. No one who witnessed these scenes can ever forget the rumbling noise of the trunks drawn along the sidewalks—a sound to which the detonations of the blasting furnished a fitting contrapuntal accompaniment.

Farther out on Geary and Sutter Streets, men and women cooked on improvised stoves on the sidewalks and as the crowds passed they called out invitations to stop for a rest and a cup of coffee. Up on the hill the wealthy were taking strangers into their homes, regardless of any risk they were running. I recall the picture of Henry J. Crocker laughing heartily as he carried the pails of water from the faucet in his garden to a little iron stove, probably one of his children's toys, set up by the curb in front of his red stone mansion.

I have often wondered, thinking back, what it is in the mind

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of the individual that so often makes him feel himself immune to the disaster that may be going on all around him. So many whom I met during the day seemed completely unconscious that the fire which was spreading through the city was bound to overtake their own homes and possessions. I know that this was so with me. All morning and through the early afternoon I wandered from one end of the city to the other, taking pictures without a thought that my studio was in danger.

## **Among the Ruins**

As I was passing the home of some friends on Van Ness Avenue, they were on the porch and called out, "Come in and have a drink." While we were raising our glasses, there occurred another shock. Everyone but my hostess and I ran outside. "Let us finish anyway," she said.

"Sure," I said, giving her as a toast the line from Horace, "And even if the whole world should collapse, he will stand fearless among the falling ruins."

On my way to the Bohemian Club I met Charles K. Field. "You dummy," he said. "What are you doing here? Don't you know that your house is going to be blown up?" This was the first time I had thought of such a possibility. Turning back I hurried up Sutter Street to find a militiaman guarding the entrance of my studio.

"You can't get in here," he said, handling his rifle in an unpleasant manner.

"But it's my home," I said.

"I don't care whether it is or not. Orders are to clear all houses in the block. If you don't do as I say, I shoot, see?"

There were rumors that some of the militia, drunk with liquor and power, had been shooting people. I did not want to argue with him, but I did want to get inside, with the hope that I might save a few of my things.

"How about a little drink?" I asked.

"Well, all right," he replied eagerly.

In my cellar I had been keeping a precious bottle—Johannisberger Schloss 1868, which I had brought from the Bremer Rathskeller

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in 1904—reserving it for a special occasion worthy of it. There had been several gay events that might have justified its consumption, but now there was no doubt about it. The special occasion had arrived. I knew that to my unwelcome guest it would mean nothing, so I brought out for him a bottle of whiskey and while he poured himself drink after drink, I sipped the wine, if not with the leisurely enjoyment that it called for, at least getting some of its exquisite flavor without having to gulp it down with barbarous haste. When my militia friend had absorbed enough of his bottle, he pushed me through the door saying, "Now you have got to get out of here or I'll have to shoot you, see?"

## **My Studio Goes**

From a safe distance I watched with others the dynamiting of the block of our homes. There was no expression of despair. ("Well, there it goes!" "That's that!" being the only comments heard.) That night I slept in Golden Gate Park together with thousands of others who were in the same plight. The crowd there suggested more a camping out than refugees from a disaster in which they had lost their homes and all their material possessions. A cheerful spirit seemed to prevail throughout and whatever one had was gladly shared.

The fire raged all the next day and well into the morning after, when it was stopped at Van Ness Avenue, which was wide enough to break the spread of the flames. Ten square miles lay devastated with hardly a building intact. In some parts of the city dynamiting continued and the crash of toppling walls could still be heard.

The day of the earthquake, a committee of outstanding citizens met with the mayor and the military authorities and it was unanimously voted that the mayor be empowered to draw checks for any amount for the relief of the sufferers—the committee guaranteeing the payment. The relief measures were carried out with remarkable efficiency. All vehicles and foodstuffs were commandeered for the public good. No food was sold in the shops. Rich and poor had to stand in line at the relief stations to receive their

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daily rations. On Market Street, rough tables and benches had been put up for the length of several blocks to accommodate the hundreds of people for whom food was being provided. In the military reservation, the Presidio, a city of tents had sprung up affording a shelter for thousands of homeless. In the public squares likewise, tents and shelter of a more substantial form were put up, the occupants readily adapting themselves to this new mode of housekeeping. Some of these shacks were marked "Excelsior Hotel," "The Ritz," "The Little St. Francis," "New Palace Hotel," etc.

## **Military Law**

In the houses no cooking was permitted; it had to be done on stoves put up on the sidewalks. Water was rationed to be used only for drinking and cooking purposes. Not more than one lamp or candle was permitted in each home. It had to be out by eight o'clock and those who had no business to attend to were obliged to stay indoors. Military patrols on all streets saw that these rules were carried out, and over a period of many weeks of this mode of improvised living, there was not a complaint of neglect or an instance of wrongdoing.

During the day, piling bricks became the enforced pastime of pedestrians. Any man walking through the burned district was likely to be stopped by a soldier or marine and ordered to do his share. Several times while I was out taking pictures, I was put to work.

Rebuilding started while the ruins were still smoking. On top of a heap of collapsed walls, a sign would announce, "On this site will be erected a six-story office building to be ready for occupancy in the Fall." An entertaining illustration of the indomitable spirit of San Francisco was furnished by Mattias (whose restaurant was almost as popular as Coppa's). Having been very prosperous he had decided to take a long vacation and visit his relatives in Spain. He closed his establishment, placing a sign on the door: "Gone to Spain. Will be back in six months." He had been gone only a few weeks when he received a cable from his brother: "Everything lost. Come back at once." When he returned,

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he found not a house standing in the district where his restaurant had been. Undismayed, he put up a large sign: "Gone to Hell. Will be back in three months." And he was. His was the first building completed in that neighborhood. I recall that Professor Morse Stephens of the University of California made a delightful dedication speech at the opening of the restaurant.

### **"Posed by the Lord"**

In the Frank Cowderys' home on Maple Street and later on in the Octavia Street home of Dr. Millicent Cosgrave (whose friendship throughout these years has meant so much to me) I had found a haven of rest. For several weeks I did not concern myself with any thought of the future. I blithely continued to take photographs. Of the pictures I had made during the fire, there are several, I believe, that will be of lasting interest. There is particularly the one scene that I recorded the morning of the first day of the fire (on Sacramento Street, looking toward the Bay) which shows, in a pictorially effective composition, the results of the earthquake, the beginning of the fire and the attitude of the people. On the right is a house, the front of which had collapsed into the street. The occupants are sitting on chairs calmly watching the approach of the fire. Groups of people are standing in the street, motionless, gazing at the clouds of smoke. When the fire crept up close, they would just move up a block. It is hard to believe that such a scene actually occurred in the way the photograph represents it. Several people upon seeing it have exclaimed, "Oh, is that a still from a Cecil De Mille picture?" To which the answer has been, "No, the director of this scene was the Lord himself." A few months ago an interview about my work—I had told the story of that fire picture—appeared in a New York paper with the headline, "His pictures posed by the Lord, says photographer."

The ruins of Nob Hill became a rich field for my camera. All that remained standing of the Towne residence on California Street was the marble columned entrance. The picture I made of it by moonlight brought out its classic beauty. Charles K. Field found the title for it, "Portals of the Past," by which the portico

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is known today. It has been removed to Golden Gate Park where in a setting of cypresses it remains a noble monument to a noble past. Charles Rollo Peters made a large painting of it, using my photograph, for the Bohemian Club, and for once the photographer was given credit by a painter. Over his signature on the canvas he inscribed, "With thanks to Arnold Genthe."

### **"Steps That Lead to Nowhere"**

On the other side of California Street, in front of the Huntington home, were two marble lions, the traditional common-place guardians of a home of wealth. The terrific heat of the flames had broken off parts of the stone here and there, simplifying and ennobling their form, as a great sculptor might have done. Of another house all that remained were some chimneys and a foreground of steps. Beyond them was devastation with only the

lights of the Mission District visible in the distance. It was another scene that had to be taken by moonlight so as to bring out its full significance. I called the picture "Steps That Lead to Nowhere."

The attitude of calmness of which I have spoken, the apparent indifference of the people who had lost everything, was perhaps not so much a proof of stoic philosophy that accepts whatever fate brings. I rather believe that the shock of the disaster had completely numbed our sensibilities. I know from my own experience that it was many weeks before I could feel sure that my mind reacted and functioned in a normal manner. If I had shown any sense, I might easily have saved some of the things I valued most—family papers, letters and photographs of my parents and brothers, books written by my closest relatives, and of course my more important negatives, which I could have carried away in a suitcase. As it was, practically everything I possessed had gone up in smoke.

To make my loss more complete, it happened that less than two years before, all my family possessions, including my brother Siegfried's, had been brought to San Francisco from Hamburg: the library of over three thousand volumes, some two hundred of which had been written by members of my family in the last

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century, several pieces of furniture designed by my architect grandfather, family portraits painted by Gruson in the eighteenth century.

## **Almost Everything Lost**

Since the death of my brother Siegfried, no family ties had remained to hold me in Germany. As a correspondent for the *Cologne Gazette* he had traveled all over the world, his last assignment being Morocco, where he had been sent during the Buhamara rebellion at the beginning of 1903. He had lived in Fez for a year and was ready to return to Germany, where I had planned to join him. We were to start out together on a several months' expedition to Persia. His trunks were all packed and he was to leave Fez the next day. That afternoon he went out for his daily ride, though he had frequently been warned against these solitary excursions on account of the unrest of the tribes. Not far from the outskirts of the city, he was killed by bandits, who were merely after his fine Arab stallion.

I went to Germany in the summer of 1904—I have never been back since—and had all his belongings shipped to my house in San Francisco. As I needed more space, I had added to my studio the top floor of the adjoining house which was on the level with the studio floor, and there in rooms filled with furniture, books and paintings that I treasured, I had created for myself a background and an atmosphere which gave me peace and happiness. Now all this had gone up in smoke and with it all evidence of the work I had done since the beginning of my career. The thousands of negatives which I had made during that time were now but chunks of molten, iridescent glass, fused together in fantastic forms. Everything I possessed was destroyed except my enthusiasm for work. However, I still had my bungalow at Carmel and, more important, my old negatives of Chinatown. The latter were saved in a curious manner. Before returning to New York, Will Irwin had come to my studio, and looking through my Chinatown pictures remarked, "You really ought not to keep these plates and films here. Some day the whole city will burn up. There'll never be another Chinatown like this one, and you have its only picture

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record." I heeded his warning, giving all the negatives into the keeping of a friend who had put them into his vault. They were not damaged in the fire.

## **After the Fire**

Among the many telegrams I received was one from Edward Sothorn and Julia Marlowe. "Now that you have lost everything," it read, "you should come to New York. We will see that you find a fully equipped studio

waiting for you, so that you can start work without delay." It was heartening and consoling to have this fine proof of real friendship. The temptation was great, but I was not willing to leave San Francisco then. I wanted to stay, to see the new city which would rise out of the ruins. I felt that my place was there. I had something to contribute, even if only in a small measure, to the rebuilding of the city. I started my search for a new studio. It would take years before the business section would be rebuilt. No one knew exactly just where the new center of the city was to be. Location was unimportant. On Clay Street, not far from the gates of the Presidio, I discovered a picturesque one-story cottage. In its small garden was a fine old scrub-oak, and I believe it was this and not so much the house that made me decide to take a five-year lease. My friends encouraged me. "Don't worry about being so far out. We'll come anyway, no matter where you are. The chief thing is for you to have a place that you like and where you feel you can work." And so I started to make a few structural changes and to get together the necessary equipment that would enable me to continue my work as a portrait photographer.