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H.G. Wells Dines at Delmonico's

“At a bright table in Delmonico's today at lunch-time, my host told me the first news of the destruction of the great part of San Francisco by earthquake and fire. It had just come through to him; it wasn't yet being shouted by the newsboys. He told me compactly of dislocated water-mains, of the ill-luck of the unusual eastward wind that was blowing the fire up-town, of a thousand reported dead, of the manifest doom of the greater portion of the city, and presently the shouting voices in the street outside arose to chorus him. He was a newspaper man and a little preoccupied because his San Francisco offices were burning, and that no further news was arriving after these first intimations. Naturally, the catastrophe was our topic. But this disaster did not affect him; it does not seem to have affected anyone with a sense of final destruction, with any foreboding of irreparable disaster. Everyone is talking of it this afternoon, and no one is in the least degree dismayed. I have talked and listened in two clubs, watched people in cars and in the street, and one man is glad that Chinatown will be cleared out for good; another's chief solicitude is for Millet's "Man with the Hoe." "They'll cut it out of the frame," he says, a little anxiously. "Sure." But there is no doubt anywhere that San Francisco can be rebuilt, larger, better, and soon. Just as there would be none at all if all this New York that has so obsessed me with its limitless bigness was itself a blazing ruin. I believe these people would more than half like the situation. It would give them scope, it would facilitate that conversion into white marble

in progress everywhere, it would settle the difficulties of the Elevated railroad, and clear out the tangles of lower New York. There is no sense of accomplishment and finality in any of these things; the largest, the finest, the tallest, are so obviously no more than symptoms and promises of Material Progress, of inhuman material progress that is so in the nature of things that no one would regret their passing. That, I say again, is at the first encounter the peculiar American effect that began directly I stepped aboard the liner, and that rises here to a towering, shining, clamorous climax. The sense of inexhaustible supply, of an ultra-human force behind it all, is, for a time, invincible” (Wells 40-42).

Works Cited

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