The Story of an Eyewitness
by JACK LONDON

Connect to Your Life

You Are There Have you ever been an eyewitness to a memorable event, such as an accident, a fire, or a flood? How did you feel at the time? Did everything happen too fast for you to notice details, or did every detail become locked in your memory? Discuss your reactions.

Build Background

SCIENCE
San Francisco sits on top of the San Andreas Fault, a 650-mile crack in the earth's crust that runs along the California coast. On April 18, 1906, parts of the fault line buckled, bent, and slid past each other by as much as 21 feet! This created the great San Francisco earthquake, which was followed by a devastating fire that destroyed much of the city.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS FEATURING STORY
One of the many forms of informative nonfiction is the newspaper or magazine feature story. A feature story is similar to a news story. Both answer the questions Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? A feature story, however, goes beyond the "just-the-facts" reporting that characterizes a news story. In a feature story, the writer often includes detailed descriptions and personal feelings. The author's perspective may reflect his or her attitude or beliefs about a subject. As you read "The Story of an Eyewitness," look for places where London puts himself into the scene instead of merely reporting the facts.

ACTIVE READING UNDERSTANDING CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER
The order in which events happen in time is called chronological order. In "The Story of an Eyewitness," Jack London proceeds day by day through the dreadful events of the fire. Now and then, he departs from chronological order and moves back and forth in time.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read this feature story, keep track of the order in which events happen. A chart like the one shown will help you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wednesday Morning</th>
<th>5:15—the beginning of the earthquake</th>
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<td>Wednesday Afternoon and Evening</td>
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<td>Thursday Morning</td>
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Upon receipt of the first news of the earthquake, Collier's telegraphed to Mr. Jack London—who lives only forty miles from San Francisco—requesting him to go to the scene of the disaster and write the story of what he saw. Mr. London started at once, and he sent the following dramatic description of the tragic event he witnessed in the burning city.

The earthquake shook down in San Francisco hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of walls and chimneys. But the conflagration that followed burned up hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of property. There is no estimating within hundreds of millions the actual damage wrought. Not in history has a modern imperial city been so completely destroyed. San Francisco is gone. Nothing remains of it but memories and a fringe of dwelling houses on its outskirts. Its industrial section is wiped out. Its business section is wiped out. Its social and residential section is wiped out. The factories and
warehouses, the great stores and newspaper buildings, the hotels and the palaces of the nabobs, are all gone. Remains only the fringe of dwelling houses on the outskirts of what was once San Francisco.

Within an hour after the earthquake shook the smoke of San Francisco’s burning was a lurid tower visible a hundred miles away. And for three days and nights this lurid tower swayed in the sky, reddening the sun, darkening the day, and filling the land with smoke.

On Wednesday morning at a quarter past five came the earthquake. A minute later the flames were leaping upward. In a dozen different quarters south of Market Street, in the working-class ghetto, and in the factories, fires started. There was no opposing the flames. There was no organization, no communication. All the cunning adjustments of a twentieth century city had been smashed by the earthquake. The streets were humped into ridges and depressions, and piled with the debris of fallen walls. The steel rails were twisted into perpendicular and horizontal angles. The telephone and telegraph systems were disrupted. And the great water-mains had burst. All the shrewd contrivances and safeguards of man had been thrown out of gear by thirty seconds’ twitching of the earth-crust.

THE FIRE MADE ITS OWN DRAFT

By Wednesday afternoon, inside of twelve hours, half the heart of the city was gone. At that time I watched the vast conflagration from out on the bay. It was dead calm. Not a flicker of wind stirred. Yet from every side wind was pouring in upon the city. East, west, north, and south, strong winds were blowing upon the doomed city. The heated air rising made an enormous vacuum. Thus did the fire of itself build its own colossal chimney through the atmosphere. Day and night this dead calm continued, and yet, near to the flames, the wind was often half a gale, so mighty was the vacuum.

Wednesday night saw the destruction of the very heart of the city. Dynamite was lavishly used, and many of San Francisco’s proudest structures were crumbled by man himself into ruins, but there was no withstanding the onrush of the flames. Time and again successful stands were made by the fire-fighters, and every time the flames flanked around on either side or came up from the rear, and turned to defeat the hard-won victory. An enumeration of the buildings destroyed would be a directory of San Francisco. An enumeration of the buildings undestroyed would be a line and several addresses. An enumeration of the deeds of heroism would stock a library and bankrupt the Carnegie medal fund. An enumeration of the dead will never be made. All vestiges of them were destroyed by the flames. The number of the victims of the earthquake will never be known. South of Market Street, where the loss of life was particularly heavy, was the first to catch fire.

Remarkable as it may seem, Wednesday night while the whole city crashed and roared into ruin, was a quiet night. There were no crowds. There was no shouting and yelling.

1. nabobs: persons of wealth who are well known.
There was no hysteria, no disorder. I passed Wednesday night in the path of the advancing flames, and in all those terrible hours I saw not one woman who wept, not one man who was excited, not one person who was in the slightest degree panic stricken.

Before the flames, throughout the night, fled tens of thousands of homeless ones. Some were wrapped in blankets. Others carried bundles of bedding and dear household treasures. Sometimes a whole family was harnessed to a carriage or delivery wagon that was weighted down with their possessions. Baby buggies, toy wagons, and go-carts were used as trucks, while every other person was dragging a trunk. Yet everybody was gracious. The most perfect courtesy obtained. Never in all San Francisco’s history, were her people so kind and courteous as on this night of terror.

**A CARAVAN OF TRUNKS**

All night these tens of thousands fled before the flames. Many of them, the poor people from the labor ghetto, had fled all day as well. They had left their homes burdened with possessions. Now and again they lightened up, flinging out upon the street clothing and treasures they had dragged for miles.

They held on longest to their trunks, and over these trunks many a strong man broke his heart that night. The hills of San Francisco are steep, and up these hills, mile after mile, were the trunks dragged. Everywhere were trunks with across them lying their exhausted owners, men and women. Before the march of the flames were flung picket lines of soldiers. And a block at a time, as the flames advanced, these pickets retreated. One of their tasks was to keep the trunk-pullers moving. The exhausted creatures, stirred on by the menace of bayonets, would arise and struggle up the steep pavements, pausing from weakness every five or ten feet.

Often, after surmounting a heart-breaking hill, they would find another wall of flame advancing upon them at right angles and be compelled to change anew the line of their retreat. In the end, completely played out, after toiling for a dozen hours like giants, thousands of them were compelled to abandon their trunks. Here the shopkeepers and soft members of the middle class were at a disadvantage. But
the working-men dug holes in vacant lots and backyards and buried their trunks.

THE DOOMED CITY

At nine o'clock Wednesday evening I walked down through the very heart of the city. I walked through miles and miles of magnificent buildings and towering skyscrapers. Here was no fire. All was in perfect order. The police patrolled the streets. Every building had its watchman at the door. And yet it was doomed, all of it. There was no water. The dynamite was giving out. And at right angles two different conflagrations were sweeping down upon it.

At one o'clock in the morning I walked down through the same section. Everything still stood intact. There was no fire. And yet there was a change. A rain of ashes\(^2\) was falling. The watchmen at the doors were gone. The police had been withdrawn. There were no firemen, no fire-engines, no men fighting with dynamite. The district had been absolutely abandoned. I stood at the corner of Kearney and Market, in the very innermost heart of San Francisco. Kearny Street was deserted. Half a dozen blocks away it was burning on both sides. The street was a wall of flame. And against this wall of flame, silhouetted sharply, were two United States cavalrmen\(^3\) sitting on their horses, calmly watching. That was all. Not another person was in sight. In the intact heart of the city, two troopers sat there on their horses and watched.

SPREAD OF THE CONFLAGRATION

Surrender was complete. There was no water. The sewers had long since been pumped dry. There was no dynamite. Another fire had broken out further uptown, and now from three sides conflagrations were sweeping down. The fourth side had been burned earlier in the day. In that direction stood the tottering walls of the Examiner Building, the burned-out Call Building, the smoldering ruins of the Grand Hotel, and the gutted, devastated, dynamited Palace Hotel.

The following will illustrate the sweep of the flames and the inability of men to calculate their spread. At eight o'clock Wednesday evening I passed through Union Square. It was packed with refugees. Thousands of them had gone to bed on the grass. Government tents had been set up, supper was being cooked, and the refugees were lining up for free meals.

At half past one in the morning three sides of Union Square were in flames. The fourth side, where stood the great St. Francis Hotel, was still holding out. An hour later, ignited from top and sides the St. Francis was flaming heavenward. Union Square, heaped high with mountains of trunks, was deserted. Troops, refugees, and all had retreated.

A FORTUNE FOR A HORSE!

It was at Union Square that I saw a man offering a thousand dollars for a team of horses. He was in charge of a truck piled high with trunks from some hotel. It had been hauled here into what was considered safety, and the horses had been taken out. The flames were on three sides of the Square and there were no horses.

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2. rain of ashes: an imaginative description of the large amount of ashes blown about by the wind.

3. cavalrmen: soldiers trained to fight on horseback; in this story, they were sent to help with the fire but could do nothing.

WORDS TO KNOW

refugee (rəˈfyəдеж) n. one who leaves his or her home in search of protection or shelter elsewhere, as in times of war
Also, at this time, standing beside the truck, I urged a man to seek safety in flight. He was all but hemmed in by several conflagrations. He was an old man and he was on crutches. Said he: “Today is my birthday. Last night I was worth thirty thousand dollars. I bought some delicate fish and other things for my birthday dinner. I have had no dinner, and all I own are these crutches.”

I convinced him of his danger and started him limping on his way. An hour later, from a distance, I saw the truck-load of trunks burning merrily in the middle of the street.

On Thursday morning at a quarter past five, just twenty-four hours after the earthquake, I sat on the steps of a small residence on Nob Hill. With me sat Japanese, Italians, Chinese, and negroes—a bit of the cosmopolitan flotsam of the wreck of the city. All about were the palaces of the nabob pioneers of Forty-nine. To the east and south at right angles, were advancing two mighty walls of flame.

I went inside with the owner of the house on the steps of which I sat. He was cool and cheerful and hospitable. “Yesterday morning,” he said, “I was worth six hundred thousand dollars. This morning this house is all I have left. It will go in fifteen minutes. He pointed to a large cabinet. “That is my wife’s collection of china. This rug upon which we stand is a present. It cost fifteen hundred dollars. Try that piano. Listen to its tone. There are few like it. There are no horses. The flames will be here in fifteen minutes.”

Outside the old Mark Hopkins residence a palace was just catching fire. The troops were falling back and driving the refugees before them. From every side came the roaring of flames, the crashing of walls, and the detonations of dynamite.

**THE DAWN OF THE SECOND DAY**

I passed out of the house. Day was trying to dawn through the smoke-pall. A sickly light was creeping over the face of things. Once only the sun broke through the smoke-pall, blood-red, and showing a quarter its usual size. The smoke-pall itself, viewed from beneath, was a rose color that pulsed and fluttered with lavender shades. Then it turned to mauve and yellow and dun. There was no sun. And so dawned the second day on stricken San Francisco.

An hour later I was creeping past the shattered dome of the City Hall. Than it there was no better exhibit of the destructive force of the earthquake. Most of the stone had been shaken from the great dome, leaving standing the naked framework of steel. Market Street was piled high with the wreckage, and across the wreckage lay the overturned pillars of the City Hall shattered into short crosswise sections.

This section of the city with the exception of the Mint and the Post-Office, was already a waste of smoking ruins. Here and there through the smoke, creeping warily under the shadows of tottering walls, emerged occasional men and women. It was like the meeting of the handful of survivors after the day of the end of the world.

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WORDS TO KNOW

**flotsam** (flōt'sam) n. floating wreckage or cargo after a shipwreck

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BEEVES SLAUGHTERED AND ROASTED

On Mission Street lay a dozen steers, in a neat row stretching across the street just as they had been struck down by the flying ruins of the earthquake. The fire had passed through afterward and roasted them. The human dead had been carried away before the fire came. At another place on Mission Street I saw a milk wagon. A steel telegraph pole had smashed down sheer through the driver's seat and crushed the front wheels. The milk cans lay scattered around.

All day Thursday and all Thursday night, all day Friday and Friday night, the flames still raged on.

Friday night saw the flames finally conquered, though not until Russian Hill and Telegraph Hill had been swept and three-quarters of a mile of wharves and docks had been licked up.

THE LAST STAND

The great stand of the fire-fighters was made Thursday night on Van Ness Avenue. Had they failed here, the comparatively few remaining houses of the city would have been swept. Here were the magnificent residences of the second generation of San Francisco nabobs, and these, in a solid zone, were dynamited down across the path of the fire. Here and there the flames leaped the zone, but these fires were beaten out, principally by the use of wet blankets and rugs.

San Francisco, at the present time, is like the crater of a volcano, around which are camped tens of thousands of refugees. At the Presidio alone are at least twenty thousand. All the surrounding cities and towns are jammed with the homeless ones, where they are being cared for by the relief committees. The refugees were carried free by the railroads to any point they wished to go, and it is estimated that over one hundred thousand people have left the peninsula on which San Francisco stood. The government has the situation in hand, and, thanks to the immediate relief given by the whole United States, there is not the slightest possibility of a famine. The bankers and business men have already set about making preparations to rebuild San Francisco.

5. relief committees: emergency groups organized to give aid such as food, clothing, shelter, and medical assistance.
Connect to the Literature

1. **What Do You Think?**
   What are your impressions of the people who were affected by this tragedy?

2. **Comprehension Check**
   - What natural disaster caused the fire?
   - What firefighting techniques were used?
   - Why were soldiers in the city, and what were they doing?

Think Critically

2. How does London use descriptive language to convey what it is like during the fire? Cite a passage that helped you visualize the disaster.

3. London says, “Never in all San Francisco’s history, were her people so kind and courteous as on this night of terror.” Why do you suppose people behaved this way?

4. **ACTIVE READING UNDERSTANDING CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER**
   Go back to the chart that you made in your **READER’S NOTEBOOK**. In your opinion, does London’s use of chronological order add to the effectiveness of the account? Why or why not?

Extend Interpretations

5. **Connect to Life**
   Does this feature story support the statement “In the face of tragedy, all people are equal”? Why or why not?

   **Think About:**
   - the description on page 162 of the poor people as they drag their trunks up and down the city’s hills
   - the description on page 164 of London’s encounter with the wealthy man who owns a piano

Literary Analysis

**FEATURE STORY**

A feature story is a form of informative nonfiction. Like a news story, a feature story provides the facts about an event or situation. However, the language in a feature story is usually more descriptive than the language in a news story. In addition, a feature story frequently focuses on elements of human interest, such as the personal experiences of individuals, and often includes the author’s personal observations and feelings. The author’s perspective of the events or situation may reflect his or her attitude or beliefs about a subject.

**Paired Activity**

Working with a partner, go back through the selection and identify passages in which Jack London presents elements of human interest. Discuss your findings with your partner or with other members of the class. Which passages reflect London’s personal feelings? Which passages reflect the experiences of the victims? What conclusions can you make about London’s attitude toward the subject based on his descriptions? In what way does the human-interest element add to the overall effect of the report?
Grammar in Context: Problems with Here and There

In most of the following sentences, the subject comes before the verb. However, sentences beginning with here or there follow an unusual pattern in which the subject follows the verb.

**Rewritten** Here stood the magnificent residences of the rich.

**Example:** Original The magnificent residences of the rich stood in this place.

1. The flames leaped over the roofs of buildings in this place and in that place.
2. I saw a watchman at the door of every building.
3. I heard loud explosions as houses cracked.
4. People who had lost everything were in this place.
5. A grand hotel stood in that place.

**Grammar Handbook**

**Writing Exercise** Rewrite these sentences so that each sentence begins with here, there, or both.

**Vocabulary**

**EXERCISE: CONTEXT CLUES** On your paper, complete each sentence with the correct form of the Word to Know.

1. Jack London reported that the smoke from the _____ after the earthquake could be seen one hundred miles away.
2. He could not give an _____ of all the buildings destroyed, because there were too many to mention.
3. He described how the _____ had fled with as much as they could carry.
4. People carried bedding and anything that was _____ to them.
5. The _____ of the fire threatened rich and poor alike.
6. London compared the city to a shipwreck and its people to the _____ that covers the waves when a great ship goes down.
7. With both sides of the street on fire, people were often _____ by burning buildings.
8. Thousands of people were _____, against their will, to abandon their possessions.
9. People had to _____ the hills in order to escape.
10. The great earthquake and fire proved that all the clever _____ of modern life cannot protect us from the forces of nature.

**Vocabulary Handbook**
Gentlemen:

In reply to yours of January 25th, requesting additional biographical data. I see I shall have to piece out my previous narrative, which, in turn, will make this choppy. My father was Pennsylvania-born, a soldier, scout, backwoodsman, trapper, and wanderer. My mother was born in Ohio. Both came west independently, meeting and marrying in San Francisco, where I was born January 12, 1876. What little city life I then passed was in my babyhood. My life, from my fourth to my ninth years, was spent upon Californian ranches. I learned to read and write about my fifth year, though I do not remember anything about it. I always could read and write, and have no recollection antedating such a condition.

Folks say I simply insisted upon being taught. Was an omnivorous reader, principally because reading matter was scarce and I had to be grateful for whatever fell into my hands. . . .

Somewhere around my ninth year we removed to Oakland. . . . Here, most precious to me was a free library.

From my ninth year, with the exception of the hours spent at school (and I earned them by hard labor), my life has been one of toil. It is worthless to give the long sordid list of occupations, none of them trades, all heavy manual labor. Of course I continued to read. Was never without a book. . . . Took a taste for the water. At fifteen left home and went upon a Bay life. . . . I was a salmon fisher, an oyster pirate, a schooner sailor, a fishpatrolman, a longshoresman, and a general sort of bay-faring
adventurer—a boy in years and a man amongst men. Always a book, and always reading when the rest were asleep. . . .

Within a week of my seventeenth birthday I shipped before the mast as sailor on a three top-mast sealing schooner. We went to Japan and hunted along the coast north to the Russian side of Bering Sea. This was my longest voyage; I could not again endure one of such length; nor because it was tedious or long, but because life was so short. . . .

In the main I am self-educated; have had no mentor but myself. High school or college curriculums I simply selected from, finding it impossible to follow the rut—life and pocket book were both too short. I attended the first year of high school (Oakland), then stayed at home, without coaching, and crammed the next two years into three months and took the entrance examinations, and entered the University of California at Berkeley. Was forced, much against my inclinations, to give this over just prior to the completion of my Freshman Year. . . .

Naturally, my reading early bred in me a desire to write, but my manner of life prevented me attempting it. I have had no literary help or advice of any kind—just been sort of hammering around in the dark till I knocked holes through here and there and caught glimpses of daylight. Common knowledge of magazine methods, etc., came to me as revelation. Not a soul to say here you err and there you mistake. . . .

Am healthy, love exercise, and take little. . . .

Very truly yours,

Jack London.

THINKING through the LITERATURE

1. According to London, who is responsible for his education?
2. What is London's attitude about his life so far?