

CHICAGO'S AWFUL TRAGEDY.

Over Six Hundred People Lost Their Lives

IN A FIRE THAT BROKE OUT IN THE IROQUOIS THEATRE DURING A PERFORMANCE.

Many of the Victims were Women and Children.

GRAPHIC DETAILS OF THE HORROR.

(Special to the Daily Herald.)

Chicago, Dec. 31.—The official record today shows the number of dead at 360 and counting the injured likely to die and missing, it is certain the total will reach over 600.

The morgues are crowded with people searching frantically for relatives. The city is shrouded in sorrow. Ten days' truce in the livery drivers' strike has been declared in sympathy with the bereaved.

A remarkable feature of the fire was that the audience at the Garrick theatre, 200 feet away were kept in complete ignorance of what was passing at the Iroquois.

The death roll includes members of millionaires' families as of the common people.

Roman Catholic priests administered general absolution to the injured. Messages of sympathy were received from the Lord Mayor of London.

Chicago, Dec. 31.—Over seven hundred people were killed in ten minutes yesterday afternoon during a fire in the Iroquois Theatre, the newest, the largest, and as far as human power could make it, the safest theatre in Chicago.

A few of these people were burned to death by fire, many were suffocated by gas, and scores were trampled to death in the panic that followed the mad plunge of the frightened audience for the exits.

The fire broke out during the second act of the play—Mr. Bluebeard—which was the first dramatic production in the theatre since its erection.

The company, which was very large, escaped in safety, nearly all of them, however, being compelled to flee into the snowy streets with no clothing but their stage costumes.

The accounts of the origin of the fire are conflicting and none of them certain, but the best reason given is that an electric wire near the lower part of a piece of drop scenery suddenly broke and was grounded. The fire spread rapidly toward the front of the stage, causing the members of the chorus, who were then engaged in the performance, to flee to the wings with screams of terror. The fire in itself up to this time was not serious and possibly could have been checked had not the asbestos curtain failed to work.

As soon as the fire was discovered Eddie Foy, the chief comedian of the company, shouted to lower the curtain, and this was immediately done. It descended about half way and then stuck. The fire was thus given practically a free through which a strong draught was setting, aided by the doors which had been thrown open in the front of the theatre. With a roar and a bound the flames shot out through the opening over the heads of the people on the first floor and reaching clear up to those in the first balcony, caught them and burned them to death where they sat. Immediately following this rush of flames there came an explosion which lifted the entire roof of the theatre from its walls, shattering the great skylight into fragments. As soon as the flames first appeared beyond the curtain a man in the rear of the hall shouted "Fire, fire," and the entire audience rose as one person and made for the doors. It is believed the explosion was caused by the flames coming in contact with the gas reservoirs of the theatre, causing them to burn.

As near as can be estimated at the present time about 1,300 people were in

the theatre. Three hundred of these were on the first floor, the balance being in the two upper balconies and in the hallways back of them.

The theatre is modelled after the Opera Comique in Paris, and from the rear of each balcony there are three doors leading out to passageways toward the front of the theatre. Two of these doorways are at the end of the balcony and one being in the centre. The audience in its rush for the outer air seems to have, for the greater part, chosen to flee to the left entrance and to attempt to make its way down the eastern stairway leading into the lobby of the theatre. Outside of the people burned and suffocated by gas, it was in those two doorways on the first and second balconies that the greatest loss of life occurred. When the firemen entered the building the dead were found stretched in a pile leading from the head of the stairway.

In the aisles nearest to the doors the scenes were harrowing in the extreme. Bodies lay in every conceivable attitude, half naked, the look on their faces revealing some portion of the agony which must have preceded their death. There were scores and scores of people whose entire face had been trampled off completely by the heels of those who rushed over them, and in one aisle the body of a man was found with not a vestige of clothing, flesh or bone remaining above his waist line. The entire upper portion of his body had been cut into mince meat and carried away by the feet of those who trampled on him.

The theatre had been constructed but a short time and all its equipment was not yet in place. This was unfortunately the case with a fire escape in the rear of the building. The small iron balconies to which the iron ladders were to be attached were up but the ladders had not yet been constructed. When the panic was at its height a great number of women ran for these fire escapes, only to find as they emerged from the doorway upon the little iron platform that they were 30 to 50 feet from the ground, a fire behind and no method of escape in front. Those who reached the platform first endeavored to hold their footing and to keep back the crowd that pressed upon them from the rear. The effort was utterly useless and in a few moments the iron ledges were jammed with crowds of women who screamed, fought and tore at each other like maniacs.

This lasted but a brief interval and the rush from the interior of the building became so violent that many of them were crowded off and fell to the granite pavement below. Others leaped from the platform, fracturing legs and arms and two were picked up at this point with fractured skulls, having been killed instantly.

Rarely in the history of Chicago has its people been so stirred as by the calamity of yesterday. It is next to the Chicago fire, the greatest catastrophe that has ever occurred here, and the speed with which it came and went seemed for a brief period to appal the business section of the city. The news spread with great rapidity, and in a short time hundreds of men, women and children were rushing toward the theatre. It was found for a time almost impossible to hold back the frenzied crowd that pressed forward, many of them, having friends or relatives in the theatre and anxious to learn something of them.

The building was so full of smoke when the firemen first arrived that the extent of the catastrophe was not immediately grasped until a fireman and a newspaper

man crawled up the stairs leading to the balcony, holding handkerchiefs over their mouths to avoid suffocation. As they reached the doorway the fireman, whose wisdom was better trained in such emergencies, seized his companion by the arm exclaiming "Good God, man, don't walk on their faces."

The two men tried vainly to get through the door which was jammed with dead women piled higher than either of their heads. All the lights in the theatre were necessarily out, and the only illumination came through the cloud of smoke that hung between the interior of the theatre and the street. The two men immediately hurried to the floor below and informed Chief Mussham of the fire department that the dead bodies were piled high in the balcony and prompt assistance must be rendered if any of them were saved.

The chief at once called upon all his men in the vicinity to abandon work on the fire and come at once to the rescue. The building was so dark and the smoke so thick that it was found impossible to accomplish anything until lights had been secured. Over 200 lights were quickly carried into the building and the work of rescue commenced. So rapidly were the bodies brought down that for over an hour there were two streams of men passing in and out of the doorway, the one carrying bodies, the other composed of men returning to get more. They were carried into Thompson's restaurant, which adjoins the theatre on the east, where all the available space was given by the proprietor. The dead and wounded were placed upon chairs, tables and counters. Because of the tremendous throng which surrounded the block in which the theatre building stood, it was not possible for the police to carry the dead and wounded any distance and they were compelled to wait for ambulances at the theatre. Although all the patrol wagons and every ambulance owned by the city was pressed into service, they were utterly inadequate to carry away the dead, and in a short time there was a line fifty feet long of corpses piled two and three feet high on the sidewalk in front of the theatre.

It was found necessary, in order to carry the bodies rapidly to the morgue, and to the various undertaking establishments, to impress trucks into the service, and in these upon costly blankets furnished by the dry goods stores in the vicinity and covered with the same material the dead bodies were hauled away practically like so much cordwood.

Doctors and trained nurses were on the ground by the score within half an hour after the extent of the calamity was known, and every wounded person who was carried from the building received prompt aid.

One large truck ordinarily used for conveying freight to the depots was so heavily loaded with the dead in front of the theatre that the two horses attached to it were unable to start it and the police were compelled to assist by tugging at the wheels.

Among the hundreds of persons who rushed to the rescue when the call of fire was heard on the streets was Bishop Samuel Fellows, who happened to be passing the theatre. Without fear or hesitation he made his way through the darkness that was intensified by the volumes of smoke that filled the auditorium to the top gallery and assisted in carrying out the victims.

"God forbid that I ever again see such a heartrending sight," said the Bishop last night. "I have been in wars and upon the bloody field of battle, but in all my experience I have never seen anything half so gruesome as the sight that met my eyes when, with the aid of a tiny lantern, I was finally able to penetrate the inky darkness of that balcony. There was a pile of twisted and bleeding bodies ten feet high with blackened faces and remnants of charred clothing clinging to them. Some were alive and moaning in their agony. Others, and by far the greatest number, were dead. I assisted in carrying many of the injured down and ministered to them as best I could."

It was the presence of the children, hundreds of whom were in the audience, and the efforts of their frantic mothers, impelled by their first thought to seek the safety of their young, that caused much of the pandemonium.

At 9.30 p. m. it was declared by the police that 637 bodies had been taken from the ruins.

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