



One of the most extensive and most disastrous fires that have occurred in Dunedin broke out on Sunday afternoon, when the whole of the Dunedin Iron and Woodware Company's premises in Princes Street south, with the exception of the furniture department, situated at the southern extremity of the block, was completely destroyed. The magnitude of the conflagration will readily be estimated when it is stated that this building, of brick and cement, which was in most places four storeys high, had a frontage to Princes and Bond Streets of nearly 200 ft, and a depth of about 100 ft. It comprised, beginning at the northern end, the spacious factory and saw mill, entered by handsome archways from the streets back and front. Next came the offices fronting Princes Street, and at the back of them the woodware department with a frontage to Bond Street. The hardware department, extending the whole depth of the building, adjoined this, and last of all came the furniture department, the only slip of this magnificent structure which remains comparatively intact. In August 1874 the old premises situated on the same site, then known as Guthrie and Larnach's factory, were destroyed by fire, and they were rebuilt on an imposing scale and were subsequently brought under the proprietorship of a joint stock company. Some four years ago the company was wound up, and the extensive business then passed into the hands of the Bank of New Zealand, with whom the property now rests. At the former fire there was no loss of life to record, but the catastrophe of Sunday was intensified and rendered more painful and appalling to the onlookers by the knowledge that a number of men lay dead and dying beneath the ruins.

At the time of writing four unfortunates have been extricated after hours of labour from beneath a mass of iron debris, tons in weight, and it is by no means certain that more bodies do not remain to be discovered. Two of the men were completely buried, and were taken out of course quite dead. These were Andrew Millar, head carter and stableman in the employ of the company, and a man, believed from his appearance to be a sailor, whose body has not yet been identified. Death in both these cases must have been instantaneous, but with Edward Esquilant, a young man of about 23 years of age, and Robert Wallace, a sailor belonging to the crew of the Waimate, it was very different. These two had their heads and a portion of their bodies exposed and lay conscious and in unspeakable agony, while a brave band of workers were for hours trying to release them. The task was accomplished first in the case of Wallace, who was taken to the hospital at about 6 o'clock only to succumb to his injuries a few hours later, and young Esquilant, 22 years of age, who had been kept stupefied by chloroform during a portion of the time occupied in the rescue, was extricated in a terrible condition at about 7.30 p.m. The two expired at the hospital shortly after 10 o'clock. The cause of these deplorable fatalities was in the first instance the thoughtless intrepidity with which many people entered the burning building to save such small quantities of goods as they might be able to lay hands on. There were no lives at stake which the first volunteers were endeavouring to save. It was merely a question of saving property with the man or men who were first struck down, but it was different with the others. They met their fearful death in a gallant attempt to rescue one of the earlier victims, and a number of brave men who were with them at the time narrowly escaped sharing the same fate. That the police should not have possessed the force or the organisation to prevent the general public from rushing into the building during the earlier stages of the fire is greatly to be regretted. Sir Robert Stout, who was present shortly after the outbreak, issued instructions to the police to exclude all persons save members of the brigade from the premises, but this was not effectually managed. By far the best way would have been to promptly run barricades across the roads at either extremity of the block, and allow none of the public to overstep the limit. Very shortly after the alarm, which was given at about 1.30 p.m., there were many thousand people in attendance, and it was of course not a very easy matter to control so large and excited a gathering. The fire, originating near the inquiry office, about the centre of the building, gained a firm hold at once, and spread with such astonishing rapidity that it was soon evident the whole, or the greater part, of the buildings must go. Half-an-hour after the outbreak the flames had travelled along to the top storey of the ironmongery department. At half-past 2 they had reached the second storey, and at about half-past 3 the fatal accident occurred by the fall of the floors and staircase in this part of the building. The scene at this time was one of intense excitement. The four brigades and the Salvage Corps were hard at work, and a hose had been taken on to the roof of the Spanish Restaurant, from which point water was poured downwards upon the burning pile. Numbers of men were visible inside the building on the first and second floors collecting what furniture, hardware, &c. was most easily moveable and lowering it from the windows by ropes. Princes Street was strewn in this way with goods, which were removed in vans as quickly as possible. On the opposite side of the street the heat was so intense as to be almost intolerable, and it was found necessary to drench the shop fronts with water from time to time. The work upon which those within the building were engaged was obviously exceedingly hazardous, and there was more than one narrow escape. One man was so nearly suffocated that he had to rush to the window, which he just got open in time, and was rescued by means of a ladder.

Another man named **Fiddes** was upstairs with Millar, who afterwards met his death on the basement, and he succeeded in bringing out a quantity of gunpowder before being driven down by the smoke. He called upon his companions to "clear," and got downstairs and broke out of the front door before the floors fell. From Bond Street a number of men could also be seen at the windows, and they were working while the floor beneath them was partly on fire, and were repeatedly urged to come down. It is in fact surprising that there was not more loss of life than is known so far to have occurred.

The situation of Esquilant and Willis during five weary hours was inexpressibly shocking to contemplate. Willis spoke from time to time, and bore up very pluckily, but was evidently suffering intensely. Brandy and water was administered to him at intervals. Esquilant, as already stated was in even greater pain, and murmured an entreaty to those around to put him out of his misery. He also begged for chloroform, and this Dr Brown sent for and administered a large quantity to him in the course of the afternoon. Still he was conscious for the greater part of the time. His father and brother were amongst the onlookers at this dreadful scene.

At half-past 7 o'clock the difficult work of freeing Esquilant was accomplished, and the unfortunate young fellow was drawn out still conscious. He had been jammed between an upright support of the staircase and about a dozen or more grates which had fallen upon him. The lower portion of his body was practically lifeless when he was extricated. He was promptly conveyed to the hospital in the ambulance, and once more there was a feeble cheer from the attendant crowd. But as it proved, the agony of the two rescued men had only been prolonged for a few hours. On being removed to one of the wards it was at once seen that his chance of recovery was extremely slight, and on an examination of his injuries the case seemed hopeless. Nearly every stitch of clothing had been burned off him, and his boots and portions of his shirt which remained had to be cut off with scissors. His face and body were fearfully burned and presented a ghastly sight. He, however, appeared to be conscious, and evidently suffered no pain in the extremities, which were quite dead. Dr Brown, assisted by the medical students, quickly attended to the sufferer, and administered brandy and morphia. As the evening wore on it was seen that neither of the patients could survive for any length of time. Just after half-past 10 Esquilant died.

Edward Henry Esquilant is buried in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery.

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