



One of the largest and most destructive fires which has occurred in Dunedin for the past few years broke out on Monday morning about halfpast two o'clock. When the alarm bell tolled out the signal, the fire had a strong hold of the large block of buildings in the Octagon situated next to the Athenaeum, and known as Ross's Buildings. The flames were first seen in that portion of the buildings adjoining the dyeworks, at the corner of the Octagon and Stuart Street. This was just previous to the arrival of the Brigade. The fire is said to have originated in the Cafe Chantant. Some considerable time elapsed before the Brigade got a hose to bear on the back part of the premises, owing chiefly to the difficulty of access, the only way of leading the hose round from the front being down a narrow right-of-way, and here a stiff paling fence blocked the way, until an opening could be made through it. -When the hose at last began to play, the great height of the building — for the flames were at this time confined to the higher portion — prevented any effective result being attained in that direction. Above the noise, and shouting, and clanging of the bell could be heard the pitiful and heart-rending shrieks of women and men cut off from the only means of exit— the staircase, and it was indeed sorrowful to hear these piercing cries of terror, without any efficient means of rendering assistance.

The expectation then formed that a number of lives had been lost has been only too painfully borne out by the facts discovered during yesterday. Ten dead bodies now lie at the Hospital. Nine of these are burnt so badly as to be utterly beyond recognition, and their identity can only be judged from such facts as that they were known to be in the building, and that they were found in rooms where they were known to have been sleeping. One is that of a man who jumped from the building, and died from the injuries he received. At least another body is believed to remain in the ruins, and four persons are also in the Hospital suffering from injuries received in escaping from the flames. Eleven people, therefore, have met death by this terrible catastrophe, and four are more or less injured.

The scene of this heartrending occurrence was ROSS' BUILDINGS. These buildings formed a large brick pile fronting the Octagon, between the corner of Stuart Street and the Athenaeum. They belonged to and were built by Mr David Ross, the well-known architect. They were of four storeys, including a cellar with a back entrance only, but of three storeys from the street line. The cellar was mainly used by a Mr Drysdale, who carried on the business of a drysalter. Fronting and level with the street were three double shops. One— that nearest Stuart street —was occupied by Mr William Waters as a Cafe Chantant, otherwise an eating and boarding-house and a concert room. The centre shop was occupied by Mrs Wilson, who was wife of Mr Robert Wilson, editor of the Otago Witness, and who carried on a millinery and dressmaking business in conjunction with a registry office. The shop at the corner next the Athenaeum was unoccupied. To the first floor a staircase, rising from a main entrance between Mrs Wilson's and the unoccupied the shop, gave access; also a staircase rising from the cafe end of the building; and also by a private staircase from Mrs Wilson's back premises. On this first floor were, over the cafe, rooms used by Mr Waters for the purposes of his business, over the other portion of the building were rooms occupied by various people — one a book-agent, another a music-teacher, others by persons who used them as sleeping-rooms, getting their meals about town. A long passage divided these rooms back and front, and was so arranged that a person could come up from the cafe, traverse the

passage, and get down into the main street entrance before spoken of without meeting a door. On the second floor the rooms were mainly connected with Mr Waters' cafe ; three of those next the Athenaeum were used as sleeping apartments by the Wilson family ; one was let by them to two young men ; and another was used as a spare room for servant girls who were waiting for situations in connection with the registry office. This was the main building. At the back, standing at a kind of angle to the cafe, and approached by a separate entrance from the street, through an archway on the Stuart street side of the cafe, were Mr Ross' offices.

As they reached the top of the stair, a tongue of flame was roaring along the passage. How they reached the bottom floor neither knows, but after getting outside and having a breath of fresh air, the subject of what had become of the two men and of the Wilson children was broached. The two agreed to go upstairs again, and although they describe the heat as something fearful, especially on the centre floor, they did get up, Grant leading. Just on the landing Grant found Louisa Wilson, whom he took in his arms. It was impossible to go any farther, and another scramble downstairs succeeded. Both state that when they turned to go back they despaired of reaching the bottom again. However, they did so, both getting burned on the hands and also on the face slightly, with the addition of a good deal of singeing about the hair. On the way down they met three policemen attempting to make their way upstairs, but these were unable to get beyond the first landing, where they sang out to attract the attention of those above. Grant took Louisa Wilson to the Octagon Hotel. In the meantime Lily Wilson had got out of her bedroom window, and had lain down at full length upon the parapet below the windowsill to escape a tongue of flame coming out. Jenkinson saw her, and a blanket having been got, he called out to her to throw herself down. She did this, but striking an archway over the street door, she gave a rebound outside the blanket and fell on the pavement. Jenkinson picked her up and carried her to the Octagon Hotel. She was quite sensible, and complained of her back. While Lily was at the window, someone came out of Fred Wilson's window. He clambered along the parapet till he reached the corner, and when Jenkinson went away with Lily he was hanging to it by the hands. The young men themselves escaped with nothing but coat and trousers, and Grant handed over the extra pair of trousers he brought down to an unfortunate fellow he found downstairs without any, and who asked for them. The above are a few of the incidents of escape, and from them it may be imagined what scenes the spectators below had to witness while they stood helpless.

It was about 8 o'clock when the bodies of Mr and Mrs Wilson and the little four-year-old were recovered, and last about the same time the bodies of their daughter Sarah and the maidservant, Maggie McCartney, were found. Between the room which the last-named had occupied and the Athenaeum corner of the building the floor had given way and fallen down to the next storey. Right at the bottom of the sloping floor, and underneath the remains of a bedstead, were found two bodies. One is evidently that of Fred Wilson, and the other is believed to be that of a man named Swan, of whom the police can gain no particulars, although we have heard he was a bootmaker, and an employee of Messrs Reynolds, Clark, and Co.

The persons now in the Hospital suffering from injuries received in escaping are — Lily Wilson, who has a wound on the arm, a scalp wound, and superficial burns on both legs and

Louisa Wilson, who suffers only from burnt hands. Annie McFadyen, who has suffered injuries to her back. David Thomson, who is bruised on the left hip and ribs. A very painful circumstance in connection with the two girls Wilson is that they know nothing of their parents' fate. They wonder why they do not come to see them, and the younger especially calls plaintively for "mamma," and thinks every soft foot approaching is hers. No one has yet been courageous enough to break the sad news to them, that they alone are the survivors of the family circle. Poor things, they will learn it all too soon.

Next day two more bodies were found, neither of which has been identified. One was got shortly after 9 a.m., in the portion of the premises above Ross' offices, close to where the remains of George A. Martin were recovered the previous day. There was nothing but a small collection of bones picked up here, which could be put into a small bag, and the remains are in a thoroughly unrecognisable state. One or two suppositions have been bruited to their identity, but in the meantime nothing is certain.

So the fire claimed the lives of six of the Wilson family - Robert Wilson 69, Sarah Ann Wilson 41, Frederick Wilson 19, Sarah Wilson 8, Lawrence Oliphant Wilson 4, Robert Wilson jnr.10.

They are buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery.

Lily and Louisa Wilson survived, and one wonders what became of these two orphans.