

THE GREAT IROQUOIS FIRE

BY ALAN MACDONALD

UP AND AROUND the ivory and old-bronze laurel leaves festooning the shell-like proscenium arch of the new and richly-appointed Iroquois Theater in Chicago, on the afternoon of December 30, 1903, coiled two sinister wisps of black, oily smoke. Then came a bright snake of flame. Writhing out on a border-drop, it scurried for several feet along the lower edge of this scenery and disappeared under the top of the arch. For an appreciable space of time the spectators remained still and calm.

No dramatist ever made such use of pause — of the moment before the storm — as fate made of that brief space of calm which followed the appearance of the smoke. The second act of the musical extravaganza, *Mr. Bluebeard*, starring Eddie Foy, had just begun. The dark of the auditorium was deepened by the bluish light on the stage, where a double-sextet of chorus girls did a song-and-dance routine. A few nervous persons saw the smoke; more saw the fire-

line on the border-drop, but only a handful — not more than five or six — took warning and rose to go. Little children, who with their mothers comprised perhaps three-quarters of the audience, pointed with excited fingers at the flame-snake. Three girls in the balcony, who later escaped alive, arose to go, but a man beside them growled, "Sit down, or I'll put you down", and they did.

This waiting with death in the wings is explicable. The million-dollar Iroquois, on Randolph Street, had opened just five weeks before, and had been widely advertised as "absolutely fireproof". Its backers included such theater personages as Klaw and Erlanger, of New York, and two well-known Chicago showmen, William J. Davis and Harry J. Powers. These men had, so the public was assured, spared neither time, money, nor brains to make the Iroquois "the perfect theater — safe, comfortable, elegant". Two days after the opening, building and fire inspectors, flat-footedly and unre-

servedly, okayed the new theater as fireproof, beyond all doubt.

Nor was that all. The theater actually had more exits than any other in the country. Each floor — the orchestra, balcony, and gallery — had three double-door emergency exits. From each floor, there were also three double-doors leading into corridors or stairways which led ultimately into the foyer. In short, the plan of the theater hugged perfection so closely that such a horror as occurred that afternoon was laughed at as impossible by the management — until the moment it happened.

The first person to be alarmed by that small fire-serpent was William McMullen, a stage electrician who had charge of a spot-light in the wings at the right of the stage. Above his light, the metal covering of which was too hot to touch with the naked hand, a “tormenter”, or bit of scenery representing foliage, swayed back and forth, scraping the hot surface coquettishly. McMullen didn’t like this, and he watched it.

He was watching when the spot-light sputtered and he bent to attend it. Straightening up, he got the fright of his life: the edge of the “tormenter” had caught fire; he tried to crush the flame with his hands, but it writhed out of his

reach. McMullen stood helpless, bereft of speech. He looked up. The great stage was filled, save for the space for the show, with scenery and sets, none of it fire-proofed — forty thousand cubic feet of wooden sticks and frames, paint, and canvas! He shouted, but his cries were lost.

The fire, which by now had spread above McMullen’s platform, attracted the attention of a second man and terrified him on sight. He was William E. Sellers, a retired city fireman hired as stage fire-guard. Sellers seized one of two patent fire extinguishers, glass tubes of chemicals, and rushed across the stage. He shot the stream of chemicals toward the flame above his head, but it fell short. Meanwhile the fire had gained headway in the scenery above. Bits of burning canvas fell upon the singing sextet; her bare shoulder burned, one girl screamed. Joseph Dillea, an old hand, in charge of the orchestra, whipped up the music — crescendo, crescendo. James E. Cummings, the stage manager, rushed upon the stage, crying, “Sing, girls, sing, for God’s sake”. In the gathering rain of falling particles, one of the girls fainted, then another. Screaming, the others broke and fled. Out in the audience, people were rising here

and there, though mostly they sat still, seemingly too dazed or startled to act. Eddie Foy, half clad in his ludicrous costume as Sister Anne, "a poor but unhappy maid", ran from his dressing room to the footlights. Throwing up his hands, he shouted, "Keep your seats. It is nothing. It will be out in a minute. Play, Dillea, play!"

The audience wavered; but already there were little groups at the rear exits trying to get out, while the ushers, fearing panic and having no orders, held the doors against them.

"The asbestos curtain," shouted Foy. "Bring down the curtain!"

Sellers, the fireman, already was struggling with this curtain. Down, down, it came, and then, when the bottom was twenty feet from the stage, the right side caught, while the other side slid about twelve feet farther and held. Nobody had thought to fold back a twenty-foot, upright reflector hinged to the right of the arch, and the curtain caught on its top!

The stage was a blazing furnace when a stagehand named Farrell saw a group of chorus girls trapped against the great doors at the back of the stage. On both sides the backstage exits were jammed — there were 500 persons backstage when the fire started — and

the girls could only cower against the doors. So Farrell opened them up. Winter wind rushed in, banging them wide, and the half-clad girls tumbled out. Farrell had saved the girls, but he had signed the death warrant of scores in the auditorium.

II

Beyond the footlights, the panic-ridden crowd, now fully aroused to its peril, followed their first startled pause with a mad struggle toward the jammed exits. In some aisles, people piled up in heaps, clogging the passage; where some had fallen, others tripped, and still others attempted to climb or crawl past. Here and there bodies plunged, pushed or leaping, from the upper galleries, to crush themselves on seat tops, or break limbs and be trampled before they could drag themselves from the mob. The auditorium echoed with cries of rage, pain, and terror, with pleas for help, pity, and the mercy of God. And yet the apogee of this horror had not been reached.

When Farrell opened the great backstage doors, he created a wind-draught, or fire-draught, that swept across the stage. It boomed against the asbestos curtain and bellied it out like a sail in a ty-

phoon, and then leaped out over the crowd in the pit, a solid wall of flame. This vast draught was further aided by the fact that the maddened crowds on the main floor had by now smashed open the paneled doors at the front of the theater, the ushers had thrown open the emergency doors, and the sky-lights over the auditorium were wide open — why, or by whose fault, no one knows.

And then came a second, even greater, wall of flame from the stage, wide as the auditorium, as deep at first as the space between the bottom of the fire curtain and the stage, then filling the theater, igniting all the wood-trim, plush, draperies, and curtains it touched. It rolled, swift as light, over the heads of those struggling on the first floor; it spanned the fifty-foot space to the first balcony, and split there so that the lower part swirled under the balcony and out to the top of the two-story glass partition between the auditorium and the foyer. Part of it smashed through the top of this glass wall, and in a great writhing tongue whirled and roared about the marble pillars and arches of the foyer ceiling, while the bulk of it roared up through the auditorium, to the people trapped in the balcony and gallery. In that great blast of flame the so-

called asbestos curtain was torn asunder and shattered into bits; investigation later showed that it was little more than paper.

Under their sliding ceiling of flame, the first-floor spectators, already crowding the aisles, already piling up around the three exits to the foyer and the emergency doors, fought and struggled with fiercer, more terrified intensity. Through the sea of flame above, human torches fell in the lurid, smoky light. Women and men clawed and crawled over the fallen, leaving clothing behind; others, unable to rise, clutched wildly, only to grab a handful of rags, or pull another to the floor to be trampled upon. Those who achieved the emergency doors found that the door-sills were four feet above the pavement. The crowd behind pushed them out and they lay with broken limbs or simply dazed, cushions for those who followed. Yet for all terror and torture, these ground-floor spectators were the fortunate ones. No more than three of the more than 800 who were on that floor lost their lives. In the gallery and the balcony, where the tidal wave of fire broke full upon the audience, over half of the more than 1100 spectators died.

When the horror broke in the gallery and balcony, just before the

great doors were thrown open at the back of the stage, the panic-stricken throng found that the exits were not marked. With the logic of terror they broke for the entrances through which they had come, up the inclined aisles to the corridors at the back, or toward the lower corners at either wall. The aisles were jammed in seconds and the horrors of the main-floor panic were repeated, while dozens died where they sat, too paralyzed to move. Three little girls were seen to run to a nook where the gallery met the upper boxes, as if seeking that shelter from the fire; they stood there with arms entwined, faces buried, until flame tongues swept down and around them and they fell, flaming, over the rail to death. The ushers, mainly sixteen-year-old boys, fled without opening the emergency doors — or unlocking the eleven lesser exits from the upper floors. The doors of some of these exits were at the end of short corridors, down three or four little steps, designed to lead into main corridors. Many rushed into these *cul de sacs*, and, because of those who madly followed, could not turn back and were crushed or suffocated. Much the same fate awaited those who finally ran for the emergency doors. These doors each consisted, actually, of two sets

of doors: inside, a pair of wooden doors that opened inward; and outside, a pair of iron doors that opened outward. The crowds solved the problem of opening these doors only once in six cases and those that got through found that someone had forgotten, or neglected, to equip the theater's fire escapes with ladders!

III

But it was the most ornate and pretentious part of the palatial theater — the sixty-foot high, gilt and marble foyer, “by far the most majestic interior in this city or in the country” — that was reserved for the climactic tragedy of this multiplication of tragedies. Straight through this foyer, between the two staircases, raged the flood of the spectators from the first floor, fighting, clawing, struggling, leaving behind a trail of the trampled and maimed. And here, seconds later, at the tops of the stairways, those from the balcony met head on with those from the gallery. Like the waters of rampaging streams these human currents formed in the blackness — all lights in the theater went out when the fire swept the auditorium — a whirlpool of death and terror, spilling humans over the rails to

the foyer as it crushed on.' Firemen who entered the foyer a scant twenty minutes after the fire began—the fire itself lasted but fifteen minutes!—saw by the light of their lanterns that those broad staircases were jammed with dead and dying tangled and entwined with each other so closely that it was impossible, save in a few instances, to lift the corpses; all the rescuers could do was to seize a limb and pull.

The dead were piled on the sidewalk before the theater. Before long there was a line fifty feet long, two and sometimes three bodies deep. The quick were taken at first to a restaurant adjoining the theater and laid upon the long tables. When this was filled, others were taken into nearby stores and laid upon the floor; many died on a saloon bar nearby. It was a full week before it was known that in all 591 had perished.

Of the 500 or more employees of the theater and members of the *Bluebeard* company, only one died in the fire. Of the city, theater, *Mr. Bluebeard* officials, and others concerned, only one served a jail sentence, and none of the injured victims or relatives of the dead ever collected a cent of damages, though several suits were filed. The owner of the theater, the

general manager, and a stage carpenter were indicted for manslaughter but got the indictments quashed on the ground of technical faults in the city ordinances. Shortly afterward, the Iroquois Theater Company was declared bankrupt, and the damage suits, too, were brought to a legal end. The man who went to jail was the proprietor of a saloon near the theater, who was convicted of taking money from the clothing of a victim.

And the theater? Basically, the Iroquois was fireproof. After the fire it was found that the building itself was intact. The stage was burned out, as were the upper boxes and all the wood-trim on the face of the balcony and the gallery, all the curtains, drapes, and other superficial decorations were destroyed, the seats three and four rows from the front on each floor were burned or scorched—but that was all. Fire underwriters estimated the damage at \$20,000. The theater was repaired, and twice opened again. But Chicago would have none of it. For years, then, it stood like the tomb it was; people passed it with bated breath and looks of sorrow. At last, the site was sold and the once-hand-some Iroquois Theater dismantled and destroyed.