

**PRIMARY
SOURCE**

THE TRIANGLE FACTORY FIRE

CHAPTER 22

The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York City, which claimed the lives of 146 young immigrant workers, is one of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This incident has had great significance to this day because it highlights the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers can be subjected. To many, its horrors epitomize the extremes of industrialism. The tragedy still dwells in the collective memory of the nation and of the international labor movement. The victims of the tragedy are still celebrated as martyrs at the hands of industrial greed.

NEW YORK, March 27 — I was walking through Washington Square when a puff of smoke issuing from the factory building caught my eye. I reached the building before the alarm was turned in. I saw every feature of the tragedy visible from outside the building. I learned a new sound—a more horrible sound than description can picture. It was the thud of a speeding, living body on a stone sidewalk.

Thud-dead! Thud-dead! Thud-dead! Thud-dead! Sixty-two! The sound and the thought of death came to me, each time, at the same instant. There was plenty of chance to watch them as they came down; the height was 80 feet.

Suddenly the flames broke out through the windows on the floor below them, and curled up into their faces. The firemen began to raise a ladder. Others took out life nets. While they were rushing to the sidewalk with them two more girls shot down. The firemen held the net under the bodies. The two bodies broke it. Before they could move the net another girl's body flashed into it.

I had counted 10. Then my dulled sense began to work automatically. I noticed things that it had not occurred to me before to notice, little details that the first shock had blinded me to. I looked up to see whether those above watched those who fell. I noticed that they did—watched them every inch of the way down and probably heard the roaring thuds that we heard, unless the roaring flames were too loud.

As I looked up I saw a love affair in the midst of all the horror. A young man at a window helped a girl to the windowsill; then he held her out, deliberately, away from the building, and let her drop. He seemed cool and calculating. He held out a second girl in the same way and then let her drop. Then he held out a third girl. They didn't resist. I noticed that they were as unresisting as if he was helping them onto a street car instead of into eternity. Undoubtedly he saw that a terrible death awaited them in the

flames and his aid was only a terrible chivalry. Then came love amid the flames. He brought another girl to the window. Those of us who were looking saw him put her arms about him and kiss him. Then he held her out into space and dropped her. But, quick as a flash he was on the windowsill himself. His coat flattened upward: the air filled his trouser legs; I could see that he wore tan shoes, and hose. His hat remained on his head. Thud-dead! Thud-dead! They went into eternity together. I saw his face before they covered it. You could see in it that he was a real man. He had done his best.

We found out later that, in the room in which he stood, many girls were being burned to death by the flames, and were screaming in an inferno of heat and smoke. He chose the easiest way and was brave enough even to help the girl he loved to die, after she had given him a goodbye kiss. He leaped with energy as if he believed that he could cheat gravitation and arrive first in that mysterious land of eternity only a second of time distant, to receive her. But her thud-dead! came first.

The firemen raised their ladder. It reached only to the sixth floor. I saw the last girl jump at it and miss it. And then the faces disappeared from the windows.

Girls were burning to death before our eyes. There were jams in the windows. No one was lucky enough to be able to jump, it seemed. But, one by one, the jams broke. Down came bodies in a shower, burning, smoking, lighted bodies, with the disheveled hair of the girls trailing upward. They had fought each other to die by jumping instead of by fire.

There were 33 in that shower. The flesh of some of them was cooked. The clothes of most of them were burned away. The whole, sound, unharmed girls who jumped on the other side of the street had done their best to fall feet down, but these fire-tortured, suffering ones fell inertly, as if they didn't care how

they fell, just so that death came to them on the sidewalk instead of in the fiery furnace behind them.

On the sidewalk lay heaps of broken bodies. I saw a policeman later going about with tags, which he fastened with a wire to the wrists of the dead girls, numbering each of them with a lead pencil, and I saw him fasten tag No. 54 onto the wrist of a girl who wore an engagement ring.

And there I saw the first fire escape I had seen. It was narrow. The fireman told me that many girls had

gone down it and that others had fallen from it in the rush. But on the two fronts of the building there were no fire escapes.

These girls were all shirtwaist makers. As I looked at the heap of dead bodies I remembered their great strike of last year, in which these girls demanded more sanitary workrooms, and MORE SAFETY PRECAUTIONS in the shops. These dead bodies told the result.