

Police Carry On Search to Find Victims

WITH forty-seven people missing, believed dead, two injured, and property loss of more than £500,000, disaster struck with incredible swiftness late yesterday afternoon to destroy Ballantyne's entire store on the corner of Cashel and Colombo Streets.

It was the city's greatest tragedy. Striking like wild-fire, the flames were right through the acre block within fifteen minutes of the alarm at 3.46 p.m., trapping staff and shoppers at the busiest time of the day.

Piteous scenes were witnessed as people jumped from upper floor windows, or appeared, briefly, only to fall back into the flames.

A gigantic maelstrom of flame leaped 300 feet into the air for more than half an hour, punctuated with violent, surging outbursts as parts of the roof and floors fell in. Flames spouted from windows all round the block and sealed the way of escape for many.

The full degree of the disaster was not realised until towards 6 p.m. when a party of police was able to enter the gutted building from Colombo Street and seek the remains of several victims. After dark, until operations were suspended at 8.30, the gruesome task of recovering the bodies continued.

Again this morning, parties were at work, particularly in the south-east corner of the building, where many bodies were intermingled with debris from the upper floors.

After this debris had been cleared, many more remains were found near the main entrance to the shop, and about the entrance half-way down the Colombo Street frontage.

No one was able to account for the amazing rapidity with which the flames engulfed the building.

Although he would not hazard a guess on the origin of the fire this morning, the Superintendent of the Christchurch Fire Brigade (Mr A. Morrison) said that it appeared to him to have started in the cellar or basement.

Deep as the tragedy was one aspect made it even more so. Two of the missing persons, Miss J. M. Lloyd, the youngest daughter of Mr and Mrs S. C. Lloyd, of Papanui, and Mr W. S. McKibbin, only son of Mr and Mrs V. J. McKibbin, of Cashmere, had intended to announce their engagement last night.

Those classified in the official list as doubtful casualties had not been transferred to the main list of missing persons this afternoon, but no word had been obtained of their whereabouts, and it was considered possible that they also were among the victims.

The remains of two, or possibly three persons were found about the centre of the building this afternoon. This brings the total of known dead up to thirty-six or thirty-seven.

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LAST SURVIVOR OF FIRE UNDERWENT TERRIBLE ORDEAL

Seared by flames licking out from the blazing cauldron behind him, the last man to escape from the third storey at Ballantyne's yesterday had two hoses played on him to protect him until a ladder could be set up. His rescue brought a cheer from spectators massed in Colombo Street, who had earlier seen two girls escape from the same floor.

Describing the scene as "ghastly," Mr C. D. W. L. Sheppard said that the man who endured the ordeal was Mr Kenneth Ballantyne, a director of the firm. Of the girls who escaped, one fell or jumped to the verandah above the show windows. The other, heeding the urgent calls of the firemen, waited for a ladder.

Speaking of the startling suddenness with which an apparently minor outbreak became a blaze in a matter of minutes, both Mr L. W. Payne, a city business man, of Mersey Street, and Mrs J. Murphy, of Leinster Road, who was about to enter the building, said that girls in the top storey obviously had no idea of their danger.

"They seemed to be taking only a casual interest," said Mr Payne. "Then the smoke, billowing out from below, practically hid them, and they screamed 'Help!' and waved their handkerchiefs."

Up to that time Mrs Murphy thought that smoke coming out of an upper window was merely from a machine working there, but she found the door of the shop shut and could not enter.

Fall To Verandah

Climbing on to the window ledge, the two girls, screaming for help, apparently did not hear the shouts of firemen rushing to hoist a ladder to them. One either jumped, or fell, to the roof of the verandah above the show windows.

"She fell behind the ridge of the verandah," said Mr Payne, "and only her legs were visible. A civilian went up a ladder and dropped her to people on the road."

This girl appeared to be severely injured, and was one of those removed by an ambulance, said Mr Sheppard.

The other girl stayed where she

was, and firemen played hoses on her until a ladder was placed in position for her to escape.

Then there was a groan from the crowd when a man was seen waving his handkerchief through the smoke almost obscuring a third-storey window. In searing heat, which could be felt fifty yards away, firemen charged across the street, placed a ladder up to the verandah, and swarmed up it to place a second ladder in position for the rescue.

Hosed by Firemen

Spectators were appalled to see that it was too short. As the man crouched grimly on the ledge, firemen played two hoses on him to afford what protection they could.

Almost obscured by smoke, the firemen worked frantically to get a longer ladder up, as flames billowed from the first floor windows. The trapped man was obviously on the point of collapse, but held out pluckily, and there was a cheer of relief as he came down.

His rescue was effected none too soon, for only minutes later, accompanied by a menacing crackle, sheets of blue flame swept along the shop front as power lines burned out.

The lines snapped with sharp reports, and spectators on the opposite footpath scattered in fear as the white, electrical flames flared out against the orange mass of the burning building.

Civilians and servicemen were quick to do what they could to help the firebrigadesmen in the almost hopeless task that confronted them. and an officer of the R.N.Z.A.F. was one of the first volunteers to lend a hand with a lead of hose at the intersection of Colombo and Cashel Streets.

On the Cashel Street frontage another Air Force man, Mr F. S. Davis, who is stationed at Wigram, made gallant efforts towards saving whoever he could. Braving the intense heat, he mounted a ladder to the first floor and burst into the tearoom.

"I tried to tell the men and women what to do, but they just looked at me," he said afterwards. "They did not take any notice, and just seemed bemused. I managed to get two girls out of the building, but the firemen would not let me go back again."

When the fire had gutted most of the lower part of the building, and the top floor was a roaring furnace, a girl was seen at one of the windows, said spectators.

She screamed pitifully, swayed backwards and was not seen again.

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