

Great Fire This Morning Destruction of the Ragged Schools

Most unfeignedly do we regret being called upon to record the destruction, by fire this morning, of the Sheffield Ragged Schools. The fine pile of buildings of yesterday, erected by generous people for one of the most noble benevolent of purposes, will now be found a windowless, charred, and disfigured mass. That which was an ornament to a very humble locality, and useful far beyond being ornamental has been literally gutted, and for every good work rendered useless.

The Sheffield Ragged Schools were erected fourteen or fifteen years ago and, for all practical purposes, through the indomitable perseverance and instrumentality of Mrs. H.E. Hoole, entered upon with the prospect of accomplishing a vast amount of good. Year by year their value has been exhibited in the most satisfactory results; and in 1865 the scope of the institution was increased by the erection of an additional clump of buildings for the purposes of an industrial school. With the growth of the buildings there was accomplished a corresponding reclamation of outcasts, and but for this calamity there was every reason to believe that this home for our street Arabs would become one of the most successful of its class in the country.

The devastation worked in a few hours this morning has, in a lamentable manner, checked its progress and rendered homeless "mitherless bairns" and forsaken and neglected children. There will be an appeal to the public on behalf of the work of resuscitating with the least possible delay an institution whose services the community cannot for long afford to see interrupted.

The fire broke out, or was discovered, this morning about one o'clock in one of the upper stories in the rear of the noble pile. The note of warning was conveyed by swift footed messengers to all the fire brigades, who showed an alacrity which induces the thought that surely our firemen sleep in their boots, numbers of them being on the scene of the calamity in an incredibly short time. The engines were brought up with speed, and the hose, like a network, was speedily spread over the adjacent roads and lanes; but alas! when the water pipes were appealed to, there was no water. The motion of Ald. Webster, to buy up the effete Water Company of Sheffield would, if it could have been, put to the vote of the hundreds of half-clad alarmed women who surrounded the fast-consuming mass, and the earnest, angry men who gathered round, anxiously willing to render help, have been carried by acclamation, accompanied by shouts of derision for a concern which has so often in the hour of the town's exigencies failed to render assistance which, if given as often as it has been required, would have been a redeeming feature in its unfortunate history.

The night, or morning, was delightfully placid. Not a breath of wind prevailed. The masses of sparks and flakes of burning wood rose but slightly above the fast decaying interior of the building and dropped in showers on the houses and living congregation which choked the surrounding lanes and gulleys or peered from chamber windows in the *dishabille* of the night. To say that the scene was picturesquely grand would be to convey a very inadequate notion of this impromptu spectacle. So vast a fire quietly spreading in its destructive course, so great a throng turning their faces upwards in silence and helplessness - the glare of the sheet of red flames reflected on a sea of human heads; the ominous silence prevailing over all, broken only by the crackling wood and the occasional spurt of water, constituted a dramatic tableaux requiring no art, distancing in fact all theatrical attempts.

The fire swept with amazing rapidity round the Pea-croft end of the building, and at length bursting through the large front window, lighted up the surrounding houses with an alarming glare. In a short time through this vast aperture, a view was obtained of almost the whole of the interior of what was yesterday a spacious and well adapted school-room. Whilst it was tearing round in unrestrained fury by the front, the fire was spreading with alarming rapidity backwards in the direction of the Catholic schools and chapel. There, however, when we left the scene at 2 o'clock, was with the least likelihood of danger arising. The crofts swarm - if we may say so

without being considered offensive - with Irishmen and women. The proximity of danger to their place of worship put as Tam O'Shanter has it, "life and death at their heels" and numerous or almost innumerable gangs of men planted themselves at every point from which danger was to be apprehended, and whilst they lashed back to foe as soon as ever he showed himself, other gangs of water-carriers kept up a steady and effective supply of the needful fluid. The exertions on the part of those men were worthy of all praise, and they were well rewarded if in no other way by the success which attended their efforts, without which it is hardly possible to conceive that the proportions of the disaster would not have been vastly swollen.

Two o'clock.

Though upwards of an hour had elapsed from the time at which the fire was discovered, the flames were making rapid progress through and over the building with unchecked fury. The engines were standing idle for want of water, while there were plenty of willing hands to work them. That part of the premises nearest Pea-croft, which was used as the school, was entirely gutted - nothing but a portion of the woodwork and the beams remaining, and these were nearly consumed.

As the fire had spread towards the part of the fabric nearest Lee-croft, considerable fears were entertained for the Catholic chapel, which adjoins the schools. With the view of protecting a part of the construction, and at the same time saving the chapel, a hose was laid up into the third floor; but as the fire was then far above the roof of the chapel, the danger in that quarter did not appear to be great, and what water was available was speedily expended upon a more dangerous point.

The schools being situated in a densely-populated part of the town, the numerous cottage houses being within a few feet on all sides, the alarm created was very great. The immense block of building, two-thirds of which was blazing furiously at one time without the least attempt to stop it, made the poor people in the neighbourhood justifiably apprehensive for the safety of their property, and many of them roused out of sleep, made a hasty retreat with what they could carry.

Had the night been rough - Indeed, had there been a breath of wind - it is fearful to contemplate the destruction. The elevated situation and closeness of the buildings, coupled with the impotency of the fire brigade from the want of water - such a fire as that of this morning could only have been arrested by the wideness of a street.

The fire was seen from a considerable distance, and consequently a large crowd was speedily gathered; but considering the circumstances, there was remarkably little noise. Every one seemed to feel deeply that the destruction would be a great loss to many to many, especially to those in the neighbourhood; and many there were who seemed to forget that their own property was in danger, while helping to save at least a portion of the schools.

Inspector King and Sergeant Leonard, with a large body of police, were present, to keep order and protect property. Mr. John Jackson, the Chief Constable, was very early on the scene.

At half-past three the fire was subdued.