

## The Burning of the Cathedral.

**I**N St. Dunstan's Cathedral on Friday, March the Seventh, A.D. 1913, the ceremonies incident to all such "First Fridays" were appropriately observed.

At early morning Mass the usual numbers partook of the Bread of Life, and at evening, in proper keeping with the Lenten season, the faithful trod in spirit once again the cruel road to Calvary, by the Stations of the Cross. The dolorous journey over, the appealing strains of *O Salutaris* and the inspiring notes of *Tantum Ergo* carried the mind from the tragedy of that ignominious Tree to contemplate the glorious Fruit it bore,—the ransom of all humanity.

The stately altar, grand in its simplicity of white and gold, shone with a myriad light. The golden rays of the *Ostensorium* glittered and twinkled like the fire of a saving faith, and cloud upon cloud of fragrant incense betokened the multitude of earnest prayer ascending in His sight. In awesome reverence the Benediction was pronounced; ejaculation and whole-souled response bespoke true sentiments of trust, fidelity and love,—a momentary silence—"Then all withdrew."

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But soon a light more lurid, and a scene to thrill with altogether different thought, was witnessed in that place. The shivering echoes from the city clock had scarcely died on the midnight air when their place was taken by a more clangorous sound. Wide the alarm rang, repeated, terrified and wild, caught up and hurled on the wintry blast, while quick from startled lip to lip the message sped "The Cathedral is afire."

High over the main altar the fiery fiend was firm intrenched. A wooden dividing wall had become his ground of vantage; stubbornly he resisted all efforts at attack, declining positively to be hampered or dislodged.

Instead, his sappers crept forward, upward, determined, inch by inch, until soon above groined arch and vaulted dome, accustomed only to "The sound of Anthems," billows of smoke rolled out in stifling volume, bestreaked with eddies of crackling flame.

Faithful custodians of a holy charge, the priests from the Palace across the way were early on the scene. Immediately were they there, striving to save some precious portion of those possessions for which above all they care; striving as men can strive only when impelled by that mysterious something transcending our mundane understanding,—but all to no avail. The die was cast—all, everything must go! What must have been their thought, what anguish must have suffused each soul, as they beheld this architectural gem, this outward symbol of devotion through patient years, the concrete expression of diocesan fealty and individual self-denial; the realization of long-cherished hope,—abandoned to the flames.

A flock without a shepherd, how eagerly all had looked forward to that appointed day, now near at hand, when the promised one, should come among them. Here was a temple, worthy alike of recipient and those by whom it would be bestowed in humble offering—but now it must be destroyed.

Bravely the firemen struggled, fighting every inch, but against overwhelming odds.

Stream after stream was played upon that seething cauldron, but only to turn to impotent vapor, powerless to check the hungry monster's march, as the mists of morning to stay the rising sun.

Citizens by the hundred stood through the biting cold; a twinge of sadness in every heart, without distinction of denominational allegiance, and as little by little the consuming canker accomplished its deadly work—as portion by portion the roof gave way, or sections of wall collapsed, a groan of pent-up agony arose, only to lose itself in the unpitied roar of flame.

Around the domes their onslaught wavered for some time, the copper sheathing offering a brave but all too short resistance. Tongues of vari-colored flame shot upward like frothy fangs, and then with a straining



harrowing roar, the lofty cupola sank to the depths within.

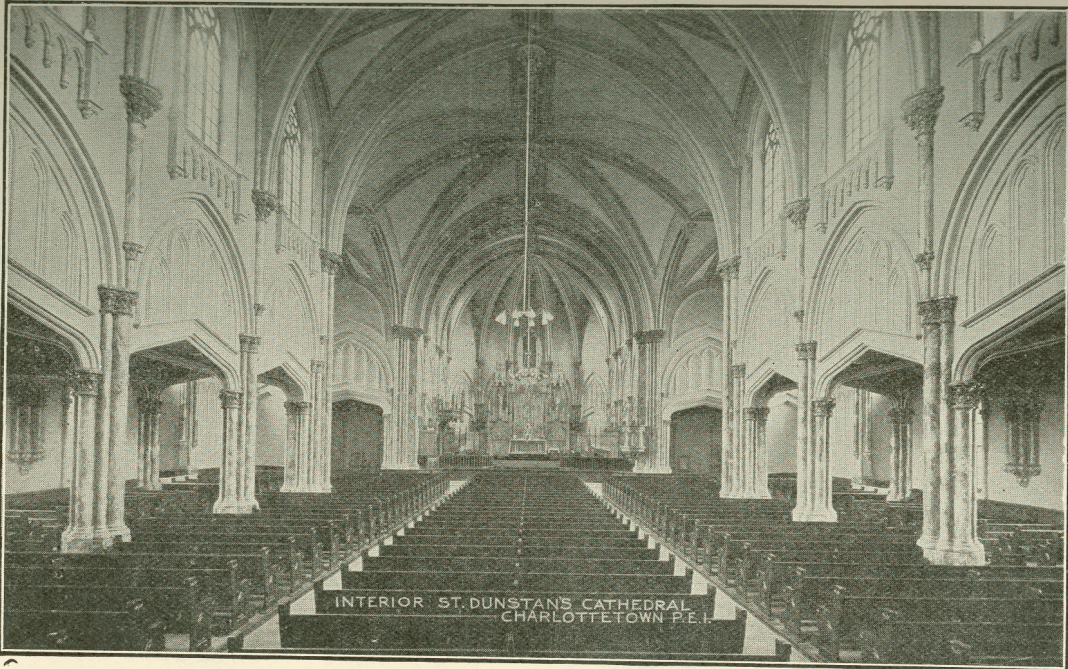
The fire leapt high in triumph; columns of billowy smoke sprang high into the night;—hark, another sound! The belfry of St. Paul's! A nearby church is tolling a friendly knell, and soon St. Peter's joins, but such kind alarms can serve as nothing further now than the requiem of a holocaust.

The roof consumed, the lofty towers were next attacked. Here the brave firemen took a final stand, and not without result. But not to be outdone, the enemy leaped to the southern steeple far above, and there, beyond all reach, well up its one hundred and eighty feet of graceful height, flung out a mocking challenge to those who toiled beneath.

Slow, but with sloth of determined purpose, the supports were undermined. The wood consumed, the steel work held out most bravely, but the contest was too keen. The sheet of flame perched high near the staggering cross; the half-blurred outlines of the sombre palace, enwrapped in a smoky pall; the thunder of falling timbers and lighting of leaping flame, all in conjunction almost prepared the mind to see again some soul-thrilled Moses delivered the Tables of the Law! A few brief moments the severed steeple poised, and then,—crash! it plunged into the street. No second Decalogue accompanied its fall, but plain and clear its message read, true as the cross borne with it from above: "*Memento pulvis es, et in pulvis reverteris!*"

Leaving the second tower, the palace next received attention. As on the steeple, so also here the highest point was chosen. Forewarned though was forearmed, and the onslaught was quickly stayed. Here water proved the more powerful element, but hardly less destructive, as sopping floor and dripping ceiling attest in every room.

Outside, the firemen clung doggedly to their task. At three o'clock the fierce glare was dying down, and the rays of moonlight or from electric arcs were partly lost in smoke. In this weird half-light the valiant workers, encased in ice from head to foot as the steam and spray congealed in the bitter cold; playing their



INTERIOR ST. DUNSTAN'S CATHEDRAL  
CHARLOTTETOWN P.E.I.



hose on the fragments that remained; the hissing and seething, intermixed with the hoarse shout of occasional commands, conjured some story from ancient myth, when steel-clad knights gave battle to such rapacious monsters as that with which those men were engaged. It also rekindled vivid memories of Schillers' inimitable description "When fire is with water commixt and contending," but, most of all, it brought the memory back to the days of struggle of this parish and this diocese,—long, weary, but still hopeful years, and now their labor but a mass of smouldering ruins.

Awaking next morning from that short rest so rudely broken in its early hours, the thought came momentarily: Is it not a dream? Surely it could not be true! Soon the minute-hand crept round to that unvarying time when the bell from St. Dunstan's tower regularly rang out its Angelic message to greet the new-born day. Still no sound:—Seven-twenty;—twenty-one,—twenty-two,—three,—four,—five,—alas it was too true!

Yes, St. Dunstan's Cathedral in so far as we understand a mere fabric of stone, and wood, and steel is something now no more,—but the spirit that erected it still survives! For a community where opulence is rare, though very few are really poor, it is a task of no small magnitude to have carried through in little over fifteen years a work involving the outlay of a quarter of a million dollars, not to make mention of the accompanying care and guidance which no commercial standard can compute, and comparatively free of debt.

To the Catholics of Charlottetown and to the whole diocese the loss is a heavy one. No legitimate outlay had been spared to make of this an architectural gem, worthy alike of the spirit of which it was the outward manifestation, and of the lofty purpose by which that spirit was nurtured and sustained. Of that pure Gothic style which apparently more than any other lends itself to that ideal of a vivifying sermon in erstwhile silent stone; in the form of the Latin cross, its nave 200 and transept 120 feet, besides commodious vestries and basement; situated on a commanding eminence, its twin towers rising to a height of almost 200 feet, like

uplifted arms beseeching a blessing alike on field and town,—the last sight to bid adieu to the departing pilgrim as he took his way to other lands; the first to greet him when he retraced his course—the Cathedral stood an object of honest pride, not to the Catholics of the diocese alone, but to every true-hearted citizen of our Island province. As striking evidence of the latter fact let it be recorded that while still the edifice was wrapped in flame, a citizen of another creed wrote out his cheque, as the grateful recipient so strikingly expressed it, “By the lurid light of the still burning Cathedral,” donating Five Thousand Dollars as the nucleus of another building fund.

Consoling as such actions cannot fail to be, and others have followed that admirable example, still the loss is a heavy blow to the congregation of St. Dunstan's. Another year and the total debt would have been discharged—a labor of love, of struggle and self-sacrifice, and now,—“Love's Labor Lost!”

But only temporarily so. We turn our eyes in the same direction as did the lonely Twelve at that last parting on Ascension Mount, and may we not here behold an omen to strengthen and a sign to guide? Standing four-square to every wind, firm and immutable the north-east tower remains in unyielding strength. About its base there clings the battered remnant of a broken arc, but high above, still brightly outlined against the ethereal blue, that self-same sign proclaims as plainly as in days of old, “*In Hoc Signo Vinces!*”

The struggle has been renewed. By willing hands and loyal hearts, with power made perfect in adversity, the work goes bravely on. And it may not be too much to say that before the snow of winter settles again over the Garden of the Gulf another St. Dunstan's will have arisen, stronger and sturdier from its baptism of fire, to stand an even lovelier monument to that indomitable courage, supported by unfaltering Faith,—that unswerving fortitude which never knows—because it never admits—defeat.