

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

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Synopsis

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"Word had spread through the East Side, by some magic of terror, that the plant of the Triangle Waist Company was on fire and that several hundred workers were trapped. Horrified and helpless, the crowds - I among them - looked up at the burning building, saw girl after girl appear at the reddened windows, pause for a terrified moment, and then leap to the pavement below, to land as mangled, bloody pulp. This went on for what seemed a ghastly eternity. Occasionally a girl who had hesitated too long was licked by pursuing flames and, screaming with clothing and hair ablaze, plunged like a living torch to the street. Life nets held by the firemen were torn by the impact of the falling bodies. The emotions of the crowd were indescribable. Women were hysterical, scores fainted; men wept as, in paroxysms of frenzy, they hurled themselves against the police lines." (Louis Waldman, a New York State Assemblyman)

During the afternoon of March 25, 1911, shortly before workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in the Asch Building left for the day, a fire broke out in a scrap bin on the eighth floor of the building. Fires were nothing new in such situations, and the industrial journal *The Insurance Monitor* noted that garment factories were, "[F]airly saturated with moral hazard." On this particular day, the spread of the fire to the main staircase made it impossible for workers still stuck on the ninth and 10th floors to escape. Furthermore, without today's labor regulations in place, an advanced warning of the fire never even made it to the ninth floor, despite the fire starting just one floor below, and the door to the only other stairway had been locked.

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