

# GENERAL TRACY STRICKEN

## WIFE AND DAUGHTER BOTH DIE A TERRIBLE DEATH.

### HIS OWN LIFE NEARLY LOST IN THE FLAMES.

MRS. WILMERDING AND A GRAND-DAUGHTER SERIOUSLY INJURED BY JUMPING FROM THE BURNING BUILDING—A SERVANT BURNED TO DEATH—THRILLING SCENES AT AN EARLY MORNING FIRE, WHICH DESTROYED THE TRACY MANSION IN WASHINGTON.

WASHINGTON, Feb. 3.—An alarm of fire, struck as usual here from all the city fire bells, was heard this morning by persons who were awake at 7 o'clock, but it conveyed to no one any intimation of the appalling calamity that had befallen the family of Gen. B. F. Tracy, the Secretary of the Navy.

An hour later the report had swept through the city that the Secretary's house was a ruin, and that he and several members of his household were dead. The excitement and distressful sympathy that were at once aroused by the horrible details of the story, harrowing as it proved to be, even with many modifications of the earliest reports, affected everybody. The Secretary had easily and acceptably stepped into and occupied the place of his predecessor, and he and his family had made many friends in the short social season in which they had taken an active and hospitable part.

By the fire which swept through the home of the Secretary, the Secretary's wife, his daughter Mary, and Mrs. Tracy's maid lost their lives. Mrs. Wilmerding, the Secretary's widowed daughter, and Miss Alice Wilmerding, his grand-daughter, were injured, and the Secretary himself barely escaped with his life.

At a late hour to-night the injured are reported to be improving. The President visited Secretary Tracy again this evening and found him regaining his strength, though still hardly able to realize the great loss he has sustained. To-morrow the President will have the Secretary removed to the White House.

At no time since the shooting of Garfield by the assassin, Guiteau, have the people of this city been so shocked and so excited as when the intelligence of the terrible loss which has fallen upon Secretary Tracy spread through the town. It did not take long for the news to spread. Within an hour after the fatal fire had broken out, and long before the fire engines had ceased playing upon the flames, people coming out of their houses in distant parts of the city were met by excited persons who told them that the Secretary's house was in ruins and that his family circle had been destroyed.

In every street car and public conveyance the fire was the first thing an incoming passenger heard mentioned. The story traveled with great rapidity, too, from house to house and neighbor to neighbor, so that in an incredibly short time the whole city knew of the calamity and was talking of it to the exclusion of every other subject.

The small crowd which had been attracted to the scene of the fire by the clatter of the fire engines was soon increased by arrivals of throngs from every part of the city, and until late at night the street on either side of the burned home was packed with people, who found a strange fascination in watching the blackened walls. The policemen had difficulty in keeping the crowd back until long ropes were brought and stretched across the street from curb to curb and along nearly the whole length of the sidewalk from the square opposite the house.

After the exciting and tragic scenes of the first half hour, when there were few spectators, the crowd found little to see. They could see through the burned-out windows and doors that the inside of the house was a wreck, and the great black patches on the brick front showed late comers how flames and smoke had leaped upward from the windows. The little grass-covered area in front was strewn with torn and charred pieces of window curtains and draperies and black pieces of slate and cornice from the roof.

Conspicuous among this debris was the body of a small lap dog with a blue ribbon still tied about its neck, and the crowd looked at this with peculiar interest when it became known that the dog had been the pet of the Secretary's daughter. This was all there was to see at the Tracy house, but the throng remained until after darkness had covered the scene.

Elsewhere through the city, in all the departments, in the hotels, and on the street corners, the fire and its victims were the only topics of conversation, and everywhere sympathy for Secretary Tracy was expressed with full hearts. The great suddenness of the calamity added to the sensation the city has experienced and, even late at night, the people find it hard to realize what a terrible blow has fallen upon the head of the Navy Department.

#### THE STARTING OF THE FIRE.

Secretary Tracy's house is a large three-story-and-basement brick structure on I-street, between Sixteenth and Seventeenth streets, facing Farragut-square. It is of unusual width, and is far enough back from the sidewalk to make room for a rather narrow strip of parking, which is terraced a couple of steps above the level of the street. A wide bay window runs from the ground to the third floor, its top forming a little balcony, to which entrance is obtained from one of the third-story windows.

Secretary Tracy purchased the house last year from ex-Postmaster General Don M. Dickinson, who had occupied it during his term as a member of Mr. Cleveland's Cabinet. At that time there was a large vacant space between the house and the building on the adjacent lot to the east. Mr. Tracy decided to enlarge his new home, and all last Summer workmen were busy filling up this space with an addition to the already wide house. Its exterior was in entire harmony with the original building, and, when finished last Fall, no one would have supposed that it had not been built at the same time. A light mansard roof covered the house.

Adjoining the Tracy house to the west is the residence of Judge Walter S. Cox of the Supreme Court of this district. These two, with the residence on the west, filled the block between Connecticut-avenue and Seventeenth-street, Mr. Tracy's home being in the centre.

At 7 o'clock this morning few persons were stirring in the fashionable neighborhood. A policeman strolling slowly down the street,

a Post Office employe making an early collection from the street letter boxes, and a few laborers going to work were the only persons sight. As the policeman passed by the Secretary's house he saw little streaks of what looked, in the mist, like smoke creeping out from the parlor windows. As he stopped an instant to take a closer look, a bright tongue of flame shot out from one of the windows. A fire company is housed on K-street, near Seventeenth-street, a short square distant from the Tracy house.

Shouting to some passers-by to run and give the alarm to the firemen there, the policeman ran up the front steps, pulled the bell furiously, and tried to break through the heavy front doors. Falling in this he jumped down to the basement door, which he found unlocked, and shouted to the servants he found in the basement that the house was on fire.

All this had taken but a moment, but by this time the little tongue of flame he had first noticed had increased to a broad sheet, and dense volumes of smoke were pouring out of the front windows. Enough people had yelled "Fire!" on the street to awake the whole neighborhood, and a small crowd had already assembled. The citizen who carried the alarm to the engine house had made good time, and the firemen, having sent out a call for other engines, were quickly at the house.

#### SEEKING SAFETY BY JUMPING.

Before they could get out their ladders and place them against the house, smoke was pouring from the windows of all the floors above the basement, and the flames could be seen playing havoc with the parlors.

While the firemen were bringing ladders and the crowd was watching the firemen a lady and young girl were seen trying to get out of one of the windows on the second floor. They were clad only in their night garments, having evidently just been aroused from sleep. They were screaming with fright and appeared unable to understand the cries that were shouted to them to stand still for a moment and not to jump, for ladders would be raised in time to rescue them.

The lady was Mrs. Wilmerding, Secretary Tracy's widowed daughter, and the girl by her side was her daughter Alice. They were too dazed to heed the advice of the firemen, and, after a momentary hesitation, both sprang from the window. Both fell upon the narrow grass-plot in front of the house, and firemen and policemen sprang forward to pick them up. Both were badly bruised, and Mrs. Wilmerding, who had fallen upon her left side, had received a broken wrist. Overcoats were wrapped about mother and daughter, and they were hurriedly carried around the corner to the home of Dr. J. H. Baxter, United States Army, where they received such medical assistance as they needed.

Later in the day Mrs. Wilmerding and her daughter accepted the shelter of Lieut. T. B. M. Mason's residence, in Twentieth-street. When the fire broke out they were asleep in the front room over the parlor. They were awakened by the cries of the people on the street, and sprang out of bed to find the room filled with smoke. They opened the door into the hall, thinking to escape that way, but found the hallway filled with fire and smoke, and they were driven back into the room and to the window, whence they jumped to the ground.

#### MRS. TRACY'S TRAGIC DEATH.

Meanwhile much more tragic scenes were being enacted in other parts of the house. The alarm had brought several engines and hook and ladder companies to the scene, and preparations were made to attack the fire from both front and rear. As the firemen were hurrying into the alley running back of the Secretary's home it was seen that the fire was spreading rapidly all through the house.

Ladders were called for, and just as they were being brought the firemen saw an elderly lady slowly climbing out of the window of a bedroom on the second floor. She was Mrs. Tracy, and wore only her night dress. Smoke was pouring out of the window as she climbed over the sill, and it was plain that she was greatly exhausted. While the firemen shouted to Mrs. Tracy to keep her courage for only a moment longer, when ladders would be brought, she let herself carefully down until she swung in midair, holding on to the window sill with her hands.

But while a ladder was being placed in position to save her the poor woman's strength gave out and she dropped heavily to the ground. A paved area adjoins the rear of the house, and Mrs. Tracy fell into this, striking with fatal force upon the stones. She was unconscious when the firemen reached her. Carefully wrapping her in overcoats, the firemen carried her out of the area and into a neighbor's house on Seventeenth-street, whence messengers were sent on a run for the nearest physicians.

Medical help was quickly obtained, and everything possible was done to save the patient's life. She soon recovered consciousness, but complained of pains about her heart. Then a little blood trickled down from her mouth, and turning her head aside with a sigh she died, less than an hour after the first discovery of the fire. She had been partially suffocated by smoke, but it was the shock of the terrible fall from the window that proved fatal.

Chief Parris, the head of the District Fire Department, was one of the first to reach the burning house. As the firemen burst in the massive front doors the Chief sprang in through the smoke and fire and dashed up the burning stairway. He had heard as he got there that the family was still in the house, and he felt that it was no time for cowardice.

#### FINDING THE SECRETARY'S BODY.

From the top of the stairs on the second floor he groped his way through the blinding smoke into the rear bedroom, where he stumbled over the body of a man lying on the floor. The Chief was himself nearly choked with the thick smoke, but he dragged the limp body to a window and yelled to the firemen below for help. A ladder was hastily raised to the window, and two firemen, who ran nimbly up the rungs, carried the body down.

Then they learned that it was Secretary Tracy who had thus been rescued from the flames. It was at first thought he was dead, but he was found to be alive, though unconscious. Covering him with their coats, as they had his dying wife, the firemen carried him through the alley and into the house of ex-Judge J. C. Bancroft Davis, on H-street, in the rear of the Tracy house.

Having caught a breath of fresh air while helping to get the Secretary out of the window, Chief Parris turned back and groped his way into a room adjoining that in which he had found the unconscious Secretary. This room was like a furnace, but by the light of the flames he saw through the smoke the form of a young woman lying upon a bed. The Chief dashed into the room, grasped the body and some of the smoking bedclothes, and ran out.

The first touch of the body told him that life had fled from it. As he ran he folded the bedclothes around the body, sprang down the stairs, upon which the firemen had turned a stream of water, and reached the street in safety. His burden was laid upon the sidewalk, whence it was removed in a police ambulance to an undertaker's establishment on Pennsylvania-avenue. Later in the morning Chief Parris learned that the body he had so bravely recovered was that of Miss Mary Tracy, the Secretary's younger daughter.

#### BRAVELY FIGHTING THE FLAMES.

While Miss Tracy's body was being carried from the house the people in the rear were witnesses of an exciting incident. In the midst of the smoke a woman appeared at a window in the mansard story and climbed out upon the narrow ledge just under the sill. The flames seemed to dart out after her, but she had with

her a blanket, and as she crept along the ledge she fairly fought off the flames and heat with this blanket until she was out of their reach.

The people below shouted to her not to jump, and, though she screamed steadily, she had sense enough to remain on the roof until the firemen shifted long ladders and carried her down safely. She was one of the servants who slept in the upper part of the house and had been unable to reach the floors below.

Most of the employees of the family were in the basement when the fire was discovered, and had no difficulty in making their escape. They could, indeed, have safely remained in the house, for the basement was not touched by the fire.

When the woman had been taken from the roof it was thought that all the occupants of the house had been accounted for, but in passing into one of the upper rooms after the fire had been gotten under control the firemen came upon one more body. It was horribly burned, past all recognition, but by a portion of the slipper which remained on one foot it was afterward identified as the body of Josephine Morell, a Frenchwoman, and Mrs. Tracy's maid.

She had probably tried to dress, and had been overtaken by the flames before she could get out of her room. The body was taken to the same place to which Miss Tracy's body had been taken and placed in charge of the undertaker. Later in the morning the bodies of Mrs. Tracy and her daughter were removed to the home of Attorney General Miller, on Massachusetts-avenue.

#### HOVERING BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

While all these exciting scenes were being enacted at the ruined home of Secretary Tracy, the Secretary himself was hovering between life and death in the Bancroft house. Ex-Surgeon Gen. Wales and Dr. Ruth of the navy had been hastily brought in, and together they worked hard to restore the Secretary to consciousness. For nearly an hour they labored without interruption. Then the Secretary became partially conscious and cried out several times, "Save her!" "Save her!" His first thought was evidently of his wife.

Then he lapsed into unconsciousness again, but the doctors' work was finally rewarded with success, and by 10 o'clock he had become fully conscious. The physicians were then able to make a more careful examination of his condition, and to the great relief of those about them they declared that he would recover. His lungs had been saturated with smoke, but he had inhaled no flame, and the doctors at noon said they were warranted in pronouncing him out of danger. At the same time they admitted that bronchial troubles might follow which might prove a serious menace to Mr. Tracy's life.

When the Secretary awoke to consciousness he found President Harrison standing by his bedside. The President was one of a throng of persons who had called at the Davis house within an hour after Mr. Tracy had been carried there, and who kept coming to the house in streams all day. All the Cabinet officers called except Mr. Blaine, who sent a pathetic message of sympathy from the darkened death chamber in his own stricken home. The parlors were filled with naval officers and bureau chiefs, and the callers became so numerous that early in the day it was found necessary to station marine guards at the front door to prevent the general public from overrunning the house.

#### TELLING THE SAD NEWS.

The East Room of the White House, which has been so recently the scene of brilliant gatherings, has been turned into a place of mourning. At 5:30 o'clock the bodies of Mrs. and Miss Tracy were borne in and laid in state in the centre of the apartment in two cloth-covered caskets, placed side by side.

At 7:45 o'clock this morning, when the President was informed of the appalling calamity which had befallen the Secretary of the Navy, without waiting for his breakfast he at once hurried off to the small frame house on Seventeenth-street, in the rear of the Tracy mansion, where the unconscious forms of the Secretary and his wife had been conveyed.

As the President entered the room Mrs. Tracy opened her eyes, and, with a smile of recognition, feebly extended her hand, which was at once grasped by the Chief Magistrate, who, taking one of the chairs offered by an attendant physician, seated himself beside her, and, still holding the hand of the dying woman, talked to her in a low tone until, with a gasping sigh, Mrs. Tracy looked at him for a moment. Then the look of recognition faded, and, closing her eyes, she lapsed into that unconsciousness from which she never again roused.

The President, seeing that all was over, turned his attention to the Secretary of the Navy, who as soon as possible was placed on a stretcher and conveyed to the residence of the Hon. J. C. Bancroft Davis, just around the corner, on H-street. The motion of the bearers, together with the current of fresh morning air, seemed to rouse the sufferer, and calling the President at once to his side he asked to be informed of the condition of his wife. The President looked into the troubled face for a moment, and then said:

"I have not seen Mrs. Tracy since I first came."

Secretary Tracy groaned, and turning his face away, said:

"I know by your reply that she is dead."

#### THE BEREAVED MAN'S FORTITUDE.

He seemed for a moment so overcome that the gravest results were feared from the shock. Not knowing exactly what to say, the President stood an instant longer. Then, bending down to the bereaved man, he tried to comfort him by telling of the safety of Mrs. Wilmerding and her young daughter, whose death had been providentially averted by their striking against the sodded terrace which extends before the front of the house.

Secretary Tracy listened quietly, and as the President ceased urged him to give him the particulars of the awful tragedy, which he then did to the minutest detail, including an account of how Mrs. Tracy had died without apparent suffering as he held her hand. The President concluded with the remark:

"You must be strong for the sake of your daughter, who looks to you for strength."

"If that is the case I will try to rally," responded the Secretary.

The President remained at the residence of Judge Davis until 1 o'clock, when he returned to the White House, leaving orders that he was to be sent for if any change for the worse should occur.

Half an hour later, news arrived that the Secretary was rapidly sinking, and the President prepared at once to rejoin him, but, having ascertained through a mounted messenger that the report was a false one, he waited to partake of the much-needed refreshments.

Attorney General Miller had the bodies of Mrs. and Miss Tracy taken at once to his residence on Massachusetts-avenue, where they remained until 5 o'clock in charge of the undertaker, who embalmed them. Miss Tracy's body was frightfully burned, but was identified by the rings on one hand and a slight gold charm which she wore around her neck.

#### AT REST IN THE WHITE HOUSE.

At 5 o'clock a melancholy procession started from the Attorney General's residence. As the two caskets containing the bodies of Mrs. Tracy and Miss Tracy were borne from the house the bystanders on the pavement stood with uncovered heads. The two hearses were followed by a carriage containing Mrs. Harrison and Attorney General and Mrs. Miller.

The first carriage was followed by that of the Vice President and Mrs. Morton, who were detained at home, and met the funeral procession as it passed slowly down Massachusetts-avenue, when it halted a moment as they entered the sad procession. Behind this came the White House carriage, in which were seated



Mr. and Mrs. McKee and the Misses Thomas. Last of all came Private Secretary Halford and Lieut. Parker.

Turning from Massachusetts-avenue into Sixteenth-street, the hearses and attendant carriages moved down to Lafayette-square, down Jackson-place, across the avenue, and through the White House gates, and up to the Executive Mansion. The President stood just within the doorway, and was at once joined by Mrs. Harrison, with whom he walked to the middle of the corridor, where they were joined by Vice President and Mrs. Morton, Attorney General and Mrs. Miller, Mr. and Mrs. McKee, the party standing in line as the bearers passed with the bodies of Mrs. and Miss Tracy through the corridor to the East Room, where the blinds had been closely drawn.

As the second coffin was born in, the President gave his arm to Mrs. Harrison and led the way to the East Room, followed by the small party which by this time had been increased by the addition of Gen. Schofield, Gen. Vincent, U. S. A., and Dr. Ruth, U. S. N. Major Ernst arrived soon after.

As soon as the two caskets had been placed in position Mrs. Harrison advanced and laid the cluster of calla lilies upon Miss Tracy's casket, while Mrs. Morton laid upon Mrs. Tracy's coffin a large cluster of purple Parma violets. After remaining in the East Room a short time, the President and Mrs. Harrison, followed by the whole party, passed down the corridor into the private part of the mansion.

Mr. Frank Tracy, the Secretary's only son, was at the farm at Owego, N. Y., and cannot reach the city before morning. Gen. Catlin of New-York, Secretary Tracy's brother-in-law, arrived to-night.

No final arrangements for the funeral have been made as yet, and none will be made until the arrival of Secretary Tracy's son.

The funeral of Josephine Morrell, the French maid, will take place to-morrow. Mrs. Harrison caused inquiries to be made to-day with regard to her, and when she ascertained that the maid had no relatives in this country directed Lieut. Mason to make arrangements for her funeral. The interment will be in Mount Olivet Cemetery. The Coroner will hold an inquest to ascertain, if possible, the cause of the fire, but he consented to permit the burial of the nurse without waiting for the investigation.

It is thought to-night that the remains of Mrs. and Miss Tracy will be placed in a vault here for several days, and that the funeral will be postponed until Secretary Tracy recovers.

The only similar instance of record when the East Room was used as a chamber of mourning was after the explosion on board the Princeton, Feb. 28, 1844, at the Washington Navy Yard, when the Hon. Thomas W. Gilmer, at that time Secretary of War, was killed, with many others. The body of the Secretary, with that of Mr. Maxie and one other, were brought at once to the East Room, where they lay in state for several days.

Secretary and Mrs. Blaine, in an interview with the President and Mrs. Harrison this morning, stated that when the day dawned it had seemed to them that their own burden was greater than they could bear; but when the news of Secretary Tracy's double loss was conveyed to them every private feeling of grief was lost sight of in the overwhelming calamity which had befallen the Secretary of the Navy.

#### THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE.

The origin of the fire which destroyed so many lives is still uncertain, and a careful inquiry will have to be made to discover it. It is certain that the fire started in the large front parlor, and there are indications that its beginning was very near the carved wood mantel.

The furnace which heated the house was in the basement, just below this part of the room, and the generally-accepted theory is that the wood above became overheated from the furnace fires, and after smoldering some time finally burst into flame. There was a grate in the parlor, however, in which there had been a cheerful fire last night. The servants say the family retired late last evening, and they do not know whether the fire was left burning or had gone out. It is possible that the fire was not out when the house was closed for the night, and a spark from the grate may have caused the calamity.

It has been asserted that one of the servants started a fire in the parlor grate this morning, but this is denied by them. However the fire started, it appears to have rushed through the house with amazing rapidity, for in five minutes after the first faint wreaths of smoke were seen outside the whole three floors and the roof were on fire.

#### BUSINESS PRACTICALLY SUSPENDED.

Business was practically suspended in the Navy Department to-day. Commodore Ramsay, the senior Bureau Chief, was acting Secretary, but he had very little official mail to sign. The officers on duty in the department and the clerks were all in their places, but they had little thought of their work, and most of the day was spent in discussing the tragedy of the morning and anxiously inquiring for the latest information as to the Secretary's condition.

The department telegraph wire was crowded all day with messages of condolence and inquiries from prominent people in all parts of the country. Most of the naval officers on duty in Washington called in person at the residence of Judge Davis during the afternoon and evening to inquire about the Secretary and to offer their services. All the Cabinet officers in the city, except Mr. Blaine, who was kept at home by the bereavement in his own family, passed most of the day at Judge Davis's house, and there was little business done in any of the departments.