

# THE WEEKLY EXPOSITOR,

ADRI ALTERAM PARTEM.

## OR REFORMER OF PUBLIC ABUSES, AND RAILWAY AND MINING INTELLIGENCE.

Vol. 1.]

MONTREAL, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1846.

[No. 3.

### Literature.

#### THE BURNING OF THE ST. LOUIS THEATRE, QUEBEC.

A Record of the Eminent Services of the Military.  
BY SIR J. E. ALEXANDER, KNT., K.L.S., 14TH REGIMENT.

"Quos Deus vult perdere prius dementat."

In the Upper Town of Quebec—the queen of North American cities, and looking down from its rocky site on the broad St. Lawrence, whilst extensive plains, scattered villages, and distant mountain ranges, greeted the eye on all sides—stood the Castle of St. Louis, the residence of the Governors-General of Canada. This interesting edifice was burned to the ground in 1834. Subsequently the Earl of Durham caused the ruins to be levelled, and converted into a terrace, enclosed with a railing, and which, from the charming prospect it commands up and down the river (in summer alive with shipping), became the favourite promenade of the inhabitants.

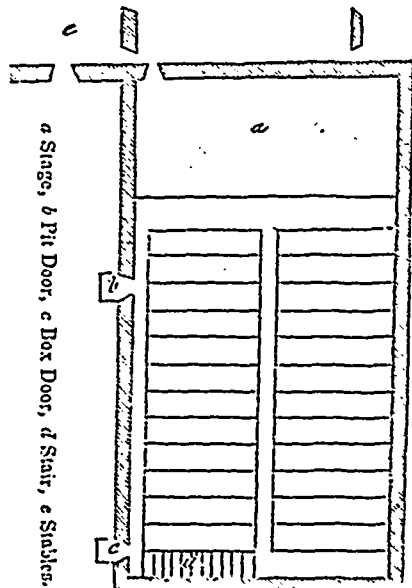
A wing of the old chateau still remained, also the guard-house at the entrance. Adjoining it were the Governor's stables, which were let to a livery-stable keeper, and next to them the St. Louis Theatre, formerly a riding-house, built by Sir James Craig. This was lately the scene of a fearful calamity, with which it pleased Divine Providence again to afflict Quebec, so severely chastened by the great fires of May and June, 1845. These, it will be remembered, laid in ashes the greater part of the suburbs, and deprived 20,000 of the inhabitants, or two-thirds of the population, of their homes. The seas of fire raged round the walls of the upper town on these fearful occasions, when the exertions of the military, under General Sir James Hope, the Royal Artillery, the 14th, 43rd, and 89th Regiments, were so very conspicuous, and so eminently useful in saving the upper town from falling a prey to the flames. The soldiers pulled down and blew up houses, drove before them those who still uselessly clung to their property, and saved the lives of many helpless women and children. The flames quite overpowered the firemen and the engines.

The St. Louis Theatre was a stone building, 60 feet by 40, and the walls about 30 feet high; the roof was covered with sheets of iron; along the upper part of the walls, and close under the eaves, were ten windows on each side of the building; there were no windows near the ground. Riding-houses have not usually windows below. When the officers of the garrison were allowed to fit up the building as a theatre, they found only two doors, one in the north gable, and another in one of the side walls. To gain access to the theatre, and also to prevent danger in case of fire, and give a ready exit, they got leave to make a third door in the side wall; they also suggested to the Corporation the expediency of having a fourth door in the opposite wall, but this was never carried into effect. However, over the side doors the officers placed strong porches, so that a person dropping on them from the windows above could easily save his life on an emergency; also below the stage there was an easy exit

for the musicians, and for the pit audience, if necessary; so that, with the stage door, the passage under the stage, the pit and box door, and the windows over them, the officers had arranged six outlets from the theatre, in case of an alarm; and whilst they found that, with the box or original door only open, it took half an hour to empty the house of a full audience, or 300, yet, with both pit and box doors open, three minutes sufficed to get every one out.

No accident had ever occurred during any of the garrison performances; the camphine lamps were then placed under the charge of a man who knew well how to manage them; there was always a fatigue party of strong artillerymen in attendance, and plenty of water; and no doors were locked.

On the 8th of June last, a Canadian artist, Mr. M. R. Harrington, hired the St. Louis Theatre from the Corporation of Quebec, for the exhibition of "illuminated dioramas." For this purpose the pit was boarded over, and the floor sloped upwards from the orchestra to the back part of the house; a centre passage was left as before between the seats, and from the upper and back part of the house a steep wooden stair, three and a half feet wide, led to the box door.



To illuminate his dioramas, Mr. Harrington unfortunately did not take into his employ the person who understood the management of camphine lamps; he merely hired four of his lamps, to be used with two hundred oil lamps. The camphine which is used in North America is generally prepared by distilling turpentine, and is a very dangerous fluid to handle; it is very light, floats on water, spreads rapidly all about if spilt, and water thrown on it only increases the danger without extinguishing the flame.

The insurance companies in Quebec will not now grant policies for buildings where camphine is used.

On the evening of the 12th June the theatre was crowded to the door. At least 300 people were present. The price of admission had been reduced to a quarter of a dollar. The audience was very respectable: heads of

families who would have hesitated to attend a theatrical exhibition, took their children to witness these interesting illuminated pictures. It was very properly objected by some that the awful scene of the crucifixion should not have been exhibited, with its accompanying darkness, gleams of light, &c.; yet an aged couple, named Tardiff, who had charge of the Court-House, were rich, and had never been in a theatre before, went to see the dioramas solely from religious motives.

At ten o'clock, the exhibition having finished, the band played the National Anthem, the audience were retiring well pleased with what they had witnessed, and a few young men at the upper part of the house were calling out, as a joke, for "Yankee Doodle," when a strong light was observed behind the green curtain. A camphine lamp had been upset by a boy, and the flame began to communicate with the baize. Some of the audience in the front rows sat for a short time, watching the progress of the flames. Lieut. Armstrong, 14th Regt., leapt on the stage and assisted to extinguish them, but nothing could master the camphine. The leader of the band, Mr. Savagau, quietly collected his music and instruments, and retired under the flames, telling his son to follow him. So little danger did Mr. Savagau apprehend, that, missing a favourite piece of music, he returned for it, and again retired in safety; but not so his son.

About 240 people had already quitted the house by the only door left open for them, namely, that by which they had entered, the box door; and now, when the thick camphine smoke began to roll round the walls, the 60 people, who still remained on the front rows, now suddenly got up, without uttering a word, and made their way to the stair. They seemed awe-struck. Their silence was fearful.

M. Dupuis, a French-Canadian, who was present with his wife, now showed great presence of mind. When he was entering the house he had remarked the porch over the pit door, which door was not used to admit any one, and now seeing a rush towards the box door he thought to try another mode of escape. Where he had seen a porch, he thought there must be a door; he therefore took his wife, who was greatly agitated, to a dark passage on the left, and found the pit door, but it was locked. He felt for the key; it was on a nail near; he applied it to the lock, the door opened, and he found himself inside the closed porch: but he soon kicked out a panel, and got himself and his wife out. Lieut. Armstrong also escaped by the same door. A boy, twelve years of age, named Shaw, who had taken his two little brothers with him to see the dioramas, also maintained his self-possession, and when the rush to the back part of the house took place, he held the children, and said, "Stop! we won't go there and be killed: we'll go out another way." And so they did so in safety.

Armstrong now ran round to the box door with some others; it was found closed; it was pushed open and all was darkness inside. He returned to the pit calling out "Fire!" which was carried on by others; he again entered the theatre, the flames were among the scenery, though the stage was still clear. Armstrong then kicked down a door commu-