

An Illustration by a Victim

—OF THE—

Halifax Explosion

December 6th, 1917



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PROLOGUE

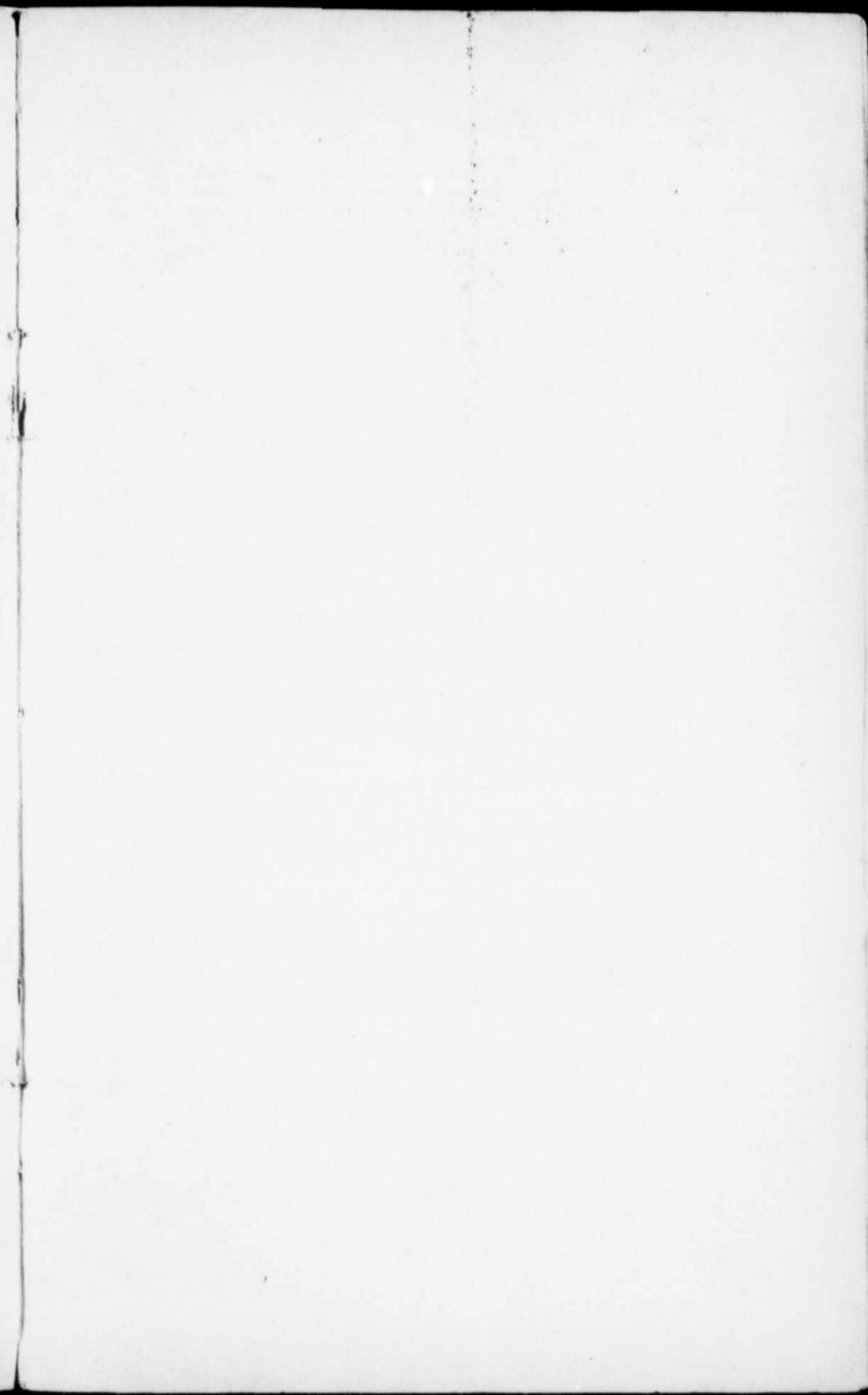
The Halifax Catastrophe

Proceeding up the Harbour and making for Bedford Basin was the French steamer "Mont Blanc," carrying a deck load cargo of Benzol and an under cargo of Picric Acid and about one thousand tons of the most powerful explosive "T. N. T." Leaving the upper Harbour and steaming at slow speed was the Norwegian steamer "Imo" on her way to New York for a cargo of relief for Belgium. Slowly the two vessels approached each other, reaching the narrows between Bedford Basin and Harbour where they should have passed, the two ships collided. Someone had blundered, and almost immediately the deck cargo on the "Mont Blanc" caught fire, a few minutes later the thousand tons of "T. N. T." exploded with a tremendous roar that baffles description, and in a second of time the whole of the North End of the City for a space of two square miles became a burning ruin, not a window in the whole City remained intact.

The amazing magnitude of the calamity can be somewhat realized by the appalling casualties, one thousand two hundred dead, two thousand or more wounded and six thousand rendered homeless.

The damage is estimated at between forty and fifty millions of dollars.

JOHN T. GAMMON.



An Illustration by a Victim of the Halifax Explosion
December 6th, 1917.

Thursday, 6th December, will remain impressed in my memory until I join the Great Beyond.

At 8 a. m. I had left my house, 39½ Union Street. The sun was shining bright. It was a glorious morning with a touch of frost in the air, that made the blood rush through one's veins.

I kissed my wife and children good morning. The children were full of fun, and shouted all kinds of childish remarks as I closed the front door. I arrived on board my ship at 8.10 a. m., had my breakfast and prepared for a day's work.

As I was leaving the ship, my attention was drawn to two ships being in collision. I gave a casual glance and took no further notice, as ships in collision were a common occurrence in my experience. Never dreaming of the sequel it would have on my life, I wended my way to the Pier at No. 4 Dockyard, where I had divers employed for several weeks making a concrete foundation for a crane that was to be used for Service work.

The first diver had gone down, and the second one was preparing to go down the ladder. Everything was working serenely. I had just gone around to the side of the crane where one of the men was passing a board which the first diver was going to nail in position.

About a few minutes past nine, a terrible explosion took place. I was blown on my stomach, and on regaining my feet, I saw the buildings collapsing and shrapnel falling. To my horror the house in which the pump was secured was demolished, the men all blown away from the vicinity by concussion, and the pump was stopped. I first thought we were being bombarded by a German submarine which had crept through the gates and was shelling the Dockyard. My next thoughts were the divers. I sprang to the ladder where they would have to ascend and noticed that the water had receded 8 or 10 feet. I saw no men in sight, but noticed the diving pump was intact. At that moment a man picked himself up about 20 yards away. I shouted to him to man the pump; he did so single-handed, holding up the roof of the building with one hand and turning the handle of the pump with the other.

On getting close to the bottom of the ladder I got the diver, took his glass off and pushed him up the ladder. I grasped the air-pipe and breast rope of No. 2 diver and pulled him back to the ladder, but unfortunately the air-pipe got entangled, and with one hand I had to haul down slack from above and pull the diver with the other. I thank God I was able to get him to the ladder and took his glass off and assisted him up the ladder and he fell exhausted. This took several seconds, and I was expecting any moment for the water to return and drown us both.

After getting the two divers undressed I saw a poor fellow laid out, and I was asked to look at him, but could do nothing but cover him over. My attention was next drawn to another man who was a sailor, and went to render him aid but found it was of no use.

All this time I had given no thought to my own family until Petty Officer Hall said "Mr. Gammon, what about your house in the North End?" I looked and saw the flames reaching around, and seeing my party were alright, rushed to the Dockyard Gate to telephone to my house. On arriving at the Gate I saw the place was demolished, and I hurried towards my house. On getting into Campbell Road I saw the burning houses and women and children shrieking. Some were terribly injured. I turned up Russell Street. The heat from the burning houses on each side was so intense that I had to put the hood of my coat over my face. After a great struggle I reached my own street and found my home which was completely gutted. There was nothing left. I knelt down in the street and offered up a prayer for my wife and two children who I thought were inside.

Seeing that I could not do anything there I next turned my steps towards St. Joseph's school where my two elder children were. On going up Young Street I saw a house which had been demolished, but the hall and hall stove were intact. I saw two women and three children sitting around and who were looking distracted. I went up the steps to see what I could do and found a little girl of about ten years who complained that her arm and leg hurt her. I put her arm in a rough bandage, also eased her boot from her foot. I asked her where she had come from, she answered St. Joseph's school. I asked her if she knew anything of my two little girls; she said no. I left these people and got to the school. I saw some children lying outside the door and also two sisters. One of the sisters told me that the other had broken her leg, and asked if I could help her. Although distracted myself, I lifted her up and put her leg in a rough splint and carried her to the kitchen of the sisters' home where

she felt easier. I then asked some of the other sisters if they knew of the whereabouts of my two little daughters, but could not get anything definite. I then went into Gottingen Street, where I saw Mrs. Chubb, who was a friend of my wife, and she was injured and looked very frightened. I asked if she knew anything of my wife, and she told me that she was with her at the time of the explosion and saw her killed with the two children. I was stunned. I directed her to a team and she was taken to the hospital. At that time the military were telling the people to fly to the country as another explosion was expected. The women became panic-stricken. I commandeered a horse and team that was passing and filled it with women and children and drove towards the North-West Arm.

Seeing they were well away, I left them and wended my way to Melville Island and saw Mr. and Mrs. Cox, who kindly gave me some dry underclothes, mine being wet. I had a cup of tea with them, but could not eat; I borrowed some tobacco from Mr. Cox, it being my only consolation.

After remaining at the Island some time, I left for my ship, arriving back at about 3.20 p. m. I met the Captain on the pier; he asked me how I fared in the disaster; I told him that I believed I had lost my whole family; he was overcome; I was strange and callous.

The following day—Friday—I received a message that a Mr. Tucker of the Royal Bank of Canada had one of my little girls. I went and interviewed him at the bank, and he told me that he had Dorothy, my eldest girl, at his lodgings, kindly cared for by the landlady. I at once left and discovered her at North Park Street. She was delighted to see me, and the first remark she made was "Daddy, I heard you were all killed and I had no one in the world." I was then brokenhearted. After a little time I left her there and went to see some friends, Mrs. White of 11 Compton Avenue. I asked her if she would accommodate my little girl for the time which she did. I removed Dorothy from Park Street to Compton Avenue about 4 p. m. In the meantime I found that the house was damaged, all windows being out, so I got some tar paper and boards, etc., and assisted in blocking the gaps.

I left the house about 6 p. m.; it was blowing; I wandered around the City to the Police Station to get shelter from the storm. I left the Police Station about 8 o'clock, it was still blowing and the blizzard was raging, and started for the ship.

Unconsciously I wandered, struggling against the elements, and found myself on Brunswick Street, and then went to the house of Mr. Horne. His wife

seeing the state I was in gave me a little stimulant. I was still very strange in my manner. Some time after Mr. Horne came from the ship and I heard him remark that the Niobe had broken away from her moorings and it was impossible to go on board. He then made a bed for me on the couch, and covered me over where I fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and remained so until 4.30 a. m. I woke up refreshed and the scene all came back. I got up and sat by the hall stove, and once more resorted to the pipe. About 8.30 a. m., Mr. Horne and I left for the ship, arriving on board. I remained until the afternoon, when I was shown a paper which had the names of survivors at the various hospitals. A name was in the paper which resembled mine. I thought perhaps it might be my other little girl who had been at school at the time of accident. So I went to Camp Hill Hospital and made enquiries. I met a kind nursing sister there, and I told her I was looking for a little girl "Ena," and by my descriptions, she thought that she knew the child on taking me to the cot we found the child had been claimed by others, so I was greatly disappointed. We still carried on looking through the wards, and another nursing sister asked who we were looking for. We told her we were seeking a child called "Ena" May Gammon. She said a woman called Gammon was under her care, who had just come from the operating table, and just then I saw a hand beckon me from a bed, and on going over discovered my wife unrecognizable. Imagine my feelings! I could scarcely believe my eyes and ears. I spoke to her and she answered, then relapsed into unconsciousness again. She remained semi-conscious for several days but started to improve later.

She had been severely injured in the head and side of face and completely puzzled the doctors to see her alive. Her vitality and pluck pulled her through by degrees. After remaining with her for several hours, I went back to the ship with a lighter heart and found that the news had gone around that my wife was found. I was congratulated by numerous friends who had deeply sympathized with me. I advertised to try and find who had rescued my wife, and wished to thank the person or persons personally but could not obtain the information. After discovering my wife and one girl I felt a bit more hopeful.

I visited my wife every day and noticed that she was improving. On the Tuesday evening December 11th, I received a message by telephone that another little girl of mine was located at Mount St. Vincent Convent, thinking that I should be disappointed again, but to my great joy found it was my little girl. She had run from the school on the day of

the disaster and wended her way alone to this place, a distance of about four miles. She had no hat or coat but her little school bag was on her shoulder. I took her away and placed her at the house with her sister. The meeting of the two little girls was delightful to watch.

This made No. 3 of my family that I had found, so I was still in hopes of the other two children, but as weeks have gone by my hopes are waning. The ruins of my home have been searched by the Military authorities but no trace can be found.

So I am still grieving for my little boy Freddie, aged 3 years, and baby Laura, aged 14 months. I can only suppose that the fire had been so fierce and the children young every visage would be consumed.

At the time of writing my wife is still in hospital improving, and does not know of the loss of the two younger children. This has to be broken later.

On asking my wife what she remembered of the accident, she stated that she had gone upstairs to straighten the bedrooms, and opening the staircase window, noticed the ship burning. She called to her friend next door, a Mrs. Chubb, and she also came up and watched the sight with her. A few seconds after she noticed a big column of smoke ascend, and then nothing more until she recovered in hospital three weeks later. Mrs. Chubb was the person who escaped from the house and told me my wife had perished.

In closing I may add that I lost the whole of my worldly possessions by the explosion, also the lives of two of my children, and have had to depend on the relief which has been so kindly provided by various sources, etc.

The whole proceeding has been so impressed on my mind that it appears like a hideous dream.

Mrs. Gammon came to Halifax eight months before the outbreak of the war from Plymouth, England.

I came to this country in the H.M.C.S. "Niobe," transferring from the Imperial Navy.

I was at Malta in 1908 when the Messina earthquake happened. We left Malta to render aid to the stricken populace. That was terrible to witness, but for so short a notice I think the Halifax disaster was more so.

JOHN T. GAMMON,
H.M.C.S. "Niobe,"
Halifax, N. S.,
25th January, 1918.