

*This story has been slightly changed and expanded to "Blame," Windswept Journal No. 174*

## Billy Foley's Morning

by David Griffin

**Author's Note:** Today's Olbiston Apartments at the corner of Genesee Street and Clinton Place in Utica, NY were built on the site of a similar but taller structure known as the Genesee Flats. Shortly after it was built, the Flats burned to the ground in a horrific fire early in the morning of March 3, 1896. William Foley was a real person who did the things portrayed in this story, but of course we know little about him or what went through his mind. This story is from a novel in production online by three authors who invite the characters and the public to push the story. See the workbook beginning at [www.windsweptpress.com/ogh1.htm](http://www.windsweptpress.com/ogh1.htm)



Above: The Genesee Flats, two stories higher than the Olbiston, built on the same site.

Genesee Hill was the old name for the very upscale neighborhood south of Oneida Square, running up Genesee Street to the Parkway.

### Our Story:

I walked past City Hall all the way to the top of the hill to sell newspapers on the day I watched the Genesee Flats burn to ground. If Da (*Dah*) hadn't dragged me out of my lumpy bed that morning, I can tell you for sure I would not have been out there slogging through the ice and snow, trying to keep the old

newspaper in the bottom of my boot from jamming up under my toes. Da complained I didn't bring enough money home, that I could sell more papers the farther I trudged up the hill to Oneida Square and its neighborhood of homes and stores. But my feet almost froze on cold mornings and I was so tired. Just picking up my feet to clomp through a foot of new fallen snow wore me out some mornings.

But it was peaceful in the morning. No one was out and about, and all I ever heard were the trains and factories running all night over on the west side, out Whitesboro Street. And in the winter, the swish of tire rims when a hack was pulled past by a weary horse. And, you know, me and Da needed the money, so before school I ran down to the Herald and got me a bag of papers and signed the slip to pay tomorrow and took the whole shebang up Genesee Street, selling the news to whoever would give me a couple of pennies for the paper. I brought home the coins to Da and he counted them out and gave me the money that'd go to the Herald next day. He always had me put it in the old teapot on the window sill for the next day.

It'd been a cold winter and I was tired of dragging myself through the snow. And, Jesus, I got a welt on the back of my shoulders from Brother Barnabas at the academy, and he kept hitting me there every time I fell asleep reading the catechism.

I most often sold all the papers by the time I got to City Hall, so I didn't always get up to Genesee Hill beyond Oneida Square. But that morning it was freezing and not many people were on the streets. So I walked all the way to the fountain at the Square, and by that time I could smell the smoke. A bell clanged about a block away and horses neighed and in another minute all hell broke loose as the team of horses and men from the fire department's Engine Company No.1 pounded through the square. The few people crossing the roadway

scattered like pigeons and the rear wheels of the pumper wagon slid sideways when the driver hauled the reins sharply to the left and forced the beasts up Genesee Street. Holy Cripes, they were pulling the huge fire engine pumper, a Cole Brothers Steamer. The firemen's wrenches and hammers and spikes clanged against the copper sides of the big steam dome. It sounded like cannibals banging on a big pot as they waited for their dinner. Every dog in the neighborhood chased the two wagons and the steam pumper. A man ran by and shouted "The Flats is on fire!"

Holy Cripes, a real fire engine! I threw down the rest of the papers and I ran like the dickens to catch up. By the time I got to the Genesee Flats, the people were trying to get off the front of the place from the balconies. Seven stories of apartments makes for a lot of people.

I wished I'd gone home instead. Nobody should ever have to see people suffering like that. I still have dreams about it. Yeah, I know ... but that poor lady. I heard her head crack open. Sometimes when I'm dozing off in school, I'll hear that crack and my stomach will get queasy if it's just before lunch.

When I came up to the building, all I saw were firemen in the lantern lights. They were scurrying around and they didn't look like nobody had told them the fire was right in front of them and they should be doing something about it. I'm a good reader, and I've read everything in the papers about the fire, at least in the Herald, because that's the paper I sell. From what's in print, you'd think everyone in The Flats got called on by the management and politely told about the fire, and pretty please just get dressed and meet across the street for tea. But that's not what happened. Or if it did, it's only because nobody seemed to know whether they were dealing with a big fire or a small one. Not even the firemen.

I didn't see any flames, not at first. But what I heard was awful, people screaming and crying and yelling for help. I think I got a little rattled, and

wondered where the hell the voices were coming from. It was dark and there was smoke everywhere. For a second, I wondered if all the voices were up in the trees. Then a trunk of clothes crashed down and split open about ten feet from where I was standing. Just dropped right out of the sky! I looked up and saw coats and shoes and a lady's dress floating down at me. They must've been trying to save their belongings. And then, over at the far end, I saw a man dangling on what looked like a string of sheets or clothing. I had to laugh, thinking it was funny. I wanted to shout at the folks to go back inside. There weren't any flames. I thought this would be just a smoker ... like maybe someone's couch was burning and they'd haul it out in the snow in a few minutes, and everyone could have a good laugh and go back to bed.

When I got lighter, I saw people crawling down from the balconies like they were a circus troupe. Some were wailing and shouting and those down on the street they were trying to find each other. One lady kept grabbing me and asking if I'd seen her brother. She must've asked me ten times. It shook me, and made me afraid again. I didn't want to watch those poor people hanging from the windows and balconies, but I couldn't close my eyes to it..

The smoke was awful smelling, like the fire that happened down the street from our house last year when the little girl died. And the crackling and popping seemed to come from a long way off, from the same direction as a lady's voice screaming, I remember, for someone named Harry, And the moaning. I thought it came from a woman with no shoes standing near me, but it wasn't people at all. It was the wind being sucked through the trees into the fire.

Two firemen ran up to me and began yelling about fire engines. I thought they wanted to tell me something, but they only happened to stop in front of me. One man wanted to call for more engines. The other said there was no need. All they had to do was find the couch or chair someone had dropped a cigar into and

all would be well. He ran off and the other man, a tall fellow who reminded me of my Uncle Jack, asked me if I knew how to use the alarm box up the street on the corner. He wanted more engines.

"I guess you just pull it," I said, and he told me how to break the glass and turn the crank.

I wasn't sure I wanted to and he knew it. I wanted to get out of there. The horses were really getting nervous, snorting and stamping. The men didn't seem to know what they were doing and as we stood there an old fellow jumped from a first floor window and shouted out in pain when he hit the ground with a cracking sound I heard across the snow covered grass. The sound made my teeth hurt, but it wouldn't be the worst sound I would hear that day. The fireman said to not be afraid. He put his hand on my shoulder.

"Go crank the alarm," he said. "You'll be saving lives, son."

"But it's only a smoker, isn't it?" I said.

He turned and left.

. I turned and ran up the street to the alarm box. I was so worked up when I got there I couldn't break the glass with the mitten still on my hand. I found a stone and broke the little window and cut my finger. The tiny crank inside didn't want to move. I banged on it with the heel of my hand and tried it again. It twisted and I heard a clunk inside the box.

I walked back toward the apartment house. The sun was up and shining under a bright blue sky. Smoke billowed out the side windows of the Flats and drifted up the street through the green Hemlocks rooted into the snow covered ground. Icicles glistened in the sun on homes across the road from The Flats. A perfect late winter day, except for the smoke and the cries for help.

The firemen were busy getting people down ladders from the lower balconies. Higher up, some of the residents used blankets and drapes to work

their way down, tying and re-tying their rope, one floor at a time as they dropped from balcony to balcony. Neighbors had come from their porches into the road and some stood at the foot of the building, calling up to those still on the balconies to get a move on. Some of the residents stood as still as death on their balconies, fully dressed in their morning clothes, gripping the railings but doing nothing. One man sucked on a cigar as smoke billowed out from the balcony above him.

Unless they climbed down or found a route through the smoke filled hallways, nothing could be done for these people who were so close I could have talked to them. It was as if I watched them on a sinking ship at sea and they couldn't or wouldn't climb down the hull and swim over to me.

If I live to be 90 years old I'll never forget what happened next. The young trees near the building suddenly bent way over. Louder and louder they moaned as a strong wind sucked through them .... and Wooooosh! A huge sheet of flame shot up from the roof of the building and out every window I could see on the seventh floor. At the same time showers of sparks curled out many of the lower windows fighting the incoming wind. Window shades ripped themselves into postage stamp pieces. Holy Mother Mary, I'd never heard or seen anything like it! All the voices on the balconies and down on the ground hushed for a moment. Then a loud groan went up, a sob from the crowd of neighbors and firemen and victims. Embers and pieces of shade and roofing fluttered to the ground as the blow-up wound down and flames began to lick out the windows and balcony doors behind the victims.

I fell backward and plopped down in the snow on my butt. A man on one of the balconies collapsed, sinking to his knees but holding on to the railing with gloved hands. A woman jumped from the second floor screaming. I didn't hear her hit the ground. I heard myself mumbling, "oh, no ... oh, no." I fell all the

way back flat on the snow and looked up at the sky. I didn't want to see any more of the burning building and the people. I had to get out of there. In a moment I took a deep breath and sat up, my eyes avoiding the scene. Brother Barnabas would think me a coward. Maybe I was. But this was a huge fire. The biggest building most of had ever seen was now the biggest fire most of us would ever see. And people were going to die and I didn't want to watch it.

That poor lady. She was coming down a string of sheets like some others, and she was crying all the way. She wore a hat kinda like the one I used to see on my old mother ... God rest her soul as she walks with all the saints in Paradise. A man in his shirtsleeves up on the fifth floor had gotten her on the sheets. He must have thought he was saving her life. I yelled up at her to hold on. I ran up to where she would land and I held out my arms. I'm a strong young guy. I shouted up to her, "Just a little farther!" She was down to the third floor now, but then she just stopped and hung there. I knew she couldn't last long.

"C'mon! Slide! I'll catch ya!" I shouted.

A fireman came out on the balcony next door and called to her to swing over to him, Maybe he had a plan to get her down the staircase, I don't know. But I can't see how she would've had the strength for it. All she had to do was slide down to me and she'd be safe.

She looked over at the fireman, and then looked down at me. She looked sick and tired. Brother Barnabas says the word is miserable. Well, miserable is how she looked.

"Over here!" the fireman shouted.

"Down here, lady!" I cried

She didn't have very good choices, anyway, now that I think on it. But, oh, how I wish I could forget what I said next.

"C'mon! Let go. Let go and slide," I yelled. But she just let go and fell.

She hit a railing on the second floor, bounced off and then banged down at my side. She came so fast! Right next to me. On the pavement. On her head.

Honest! I tried, I had my hands up. She was past my arms and on the ground before I could catch her.

I wish I'd just gone home when I got to Oneida Square that morning, taken my leftover papers and my coins and headed back down the hill to the academy. Wish I'd only read about the fire in the paper and not gone there.

Next day the Herald said that poor lady landed on her shoulder and broke it, not her head. Well, I've never before heard either a head or a shoulder break. But I have to tell you. If you ever hear a head bust open, you'll be sure to know it. It sounds like nothing else in the whole world.

I don't feel so good.

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