

TRIANGLE FIRE WILL BE REPEATED HERE, SAYS CROKER

New York, Says the Ex-Fire Chief, Learned Nothing from That Event—
“Of the Practical Suggestions Made at That Time None, Broadly Speaking, Has Been Enacted Into Law.”

SAYS EDWARD F. CROKER:

New York may see a tragedy any day more horrible than anything it has yet known. It has not learned its lesson. It must not be surprised to pay the price.

We have refused to heed the repeated warnings we have had in this city and we must be prepared to take the consequences.

The people permitted conditions every bit as bad as those at the Triangle Waist Company and even worse to remain. What is going to be done about it?

The spirit of the employer is at the bottom of the thing.

You cannot save lives by theory. You must save them by practice.

What is the district where the greatest loss of life in fires like that of this week might occur? I would say in the lower Fifth Avenue region and its side streets.

There are danger points almost everywhere.

Let a quick fire start in one of them and let one or two persons lose their heads and there could easily be a disaster that would make anything the city has known seem insignificant.

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The people, roused by the calamity which followed closely the fatal fire in Newark, N. J., and thus had a double effect, quickly sank into lethargy again. They went along just about as they had been doing, and they permitted conditions every bit as bad as those at the Triangle Waist Company, and often much worse, to remain. Now comes this Binghamton fire. What is going to be done about it?

Fire Drills Not Enforced.

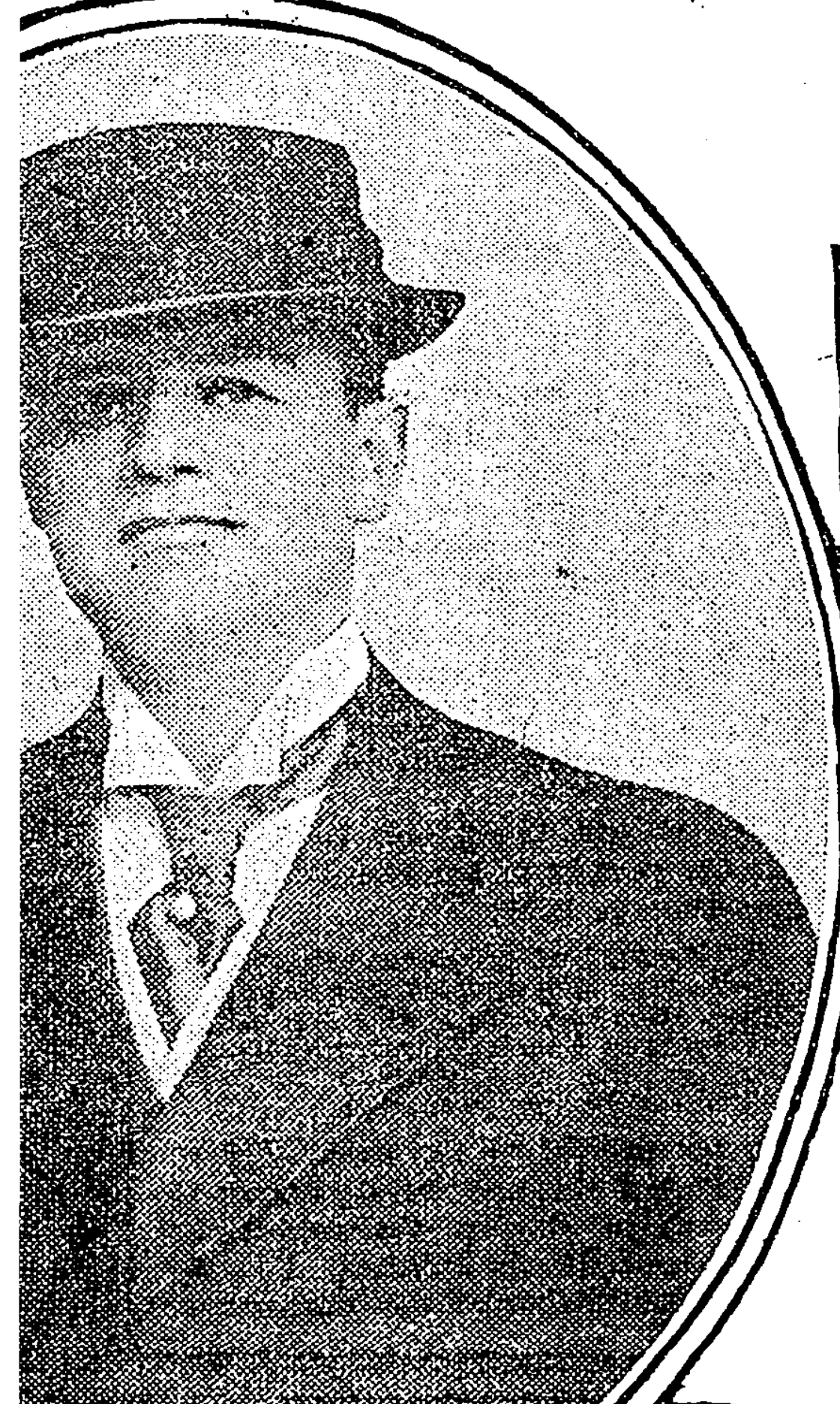
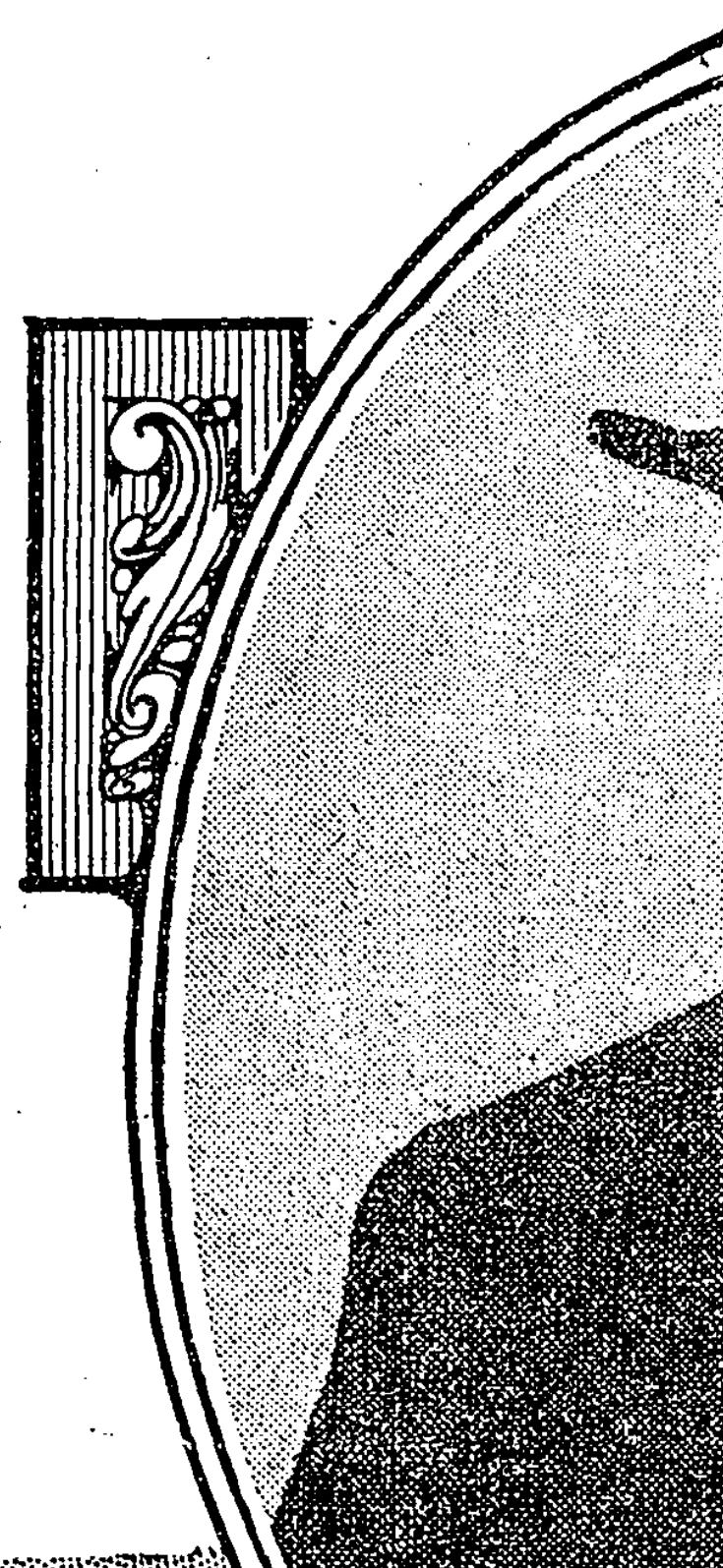
The Bureau of Fire Prevention of the New York Fire Department has placed a number of violations and put up a lot of non-smoking signs. Fire drills have been instituted—even required. But all that is not getting at the heart of the matter. All the fire drills in the world are not going to save lives if they are not enforced; if they are not executed regularly and promptly, and if they are not properly planned in the first place.

Fire escapes, no matter what their measurements or specifications, are not going to be efficient exits if the people in the building cannot get to them easily and without fear of trip-

the risks they run every day; an ignorance which spares them at least mental terror if it adds to their physical danger.

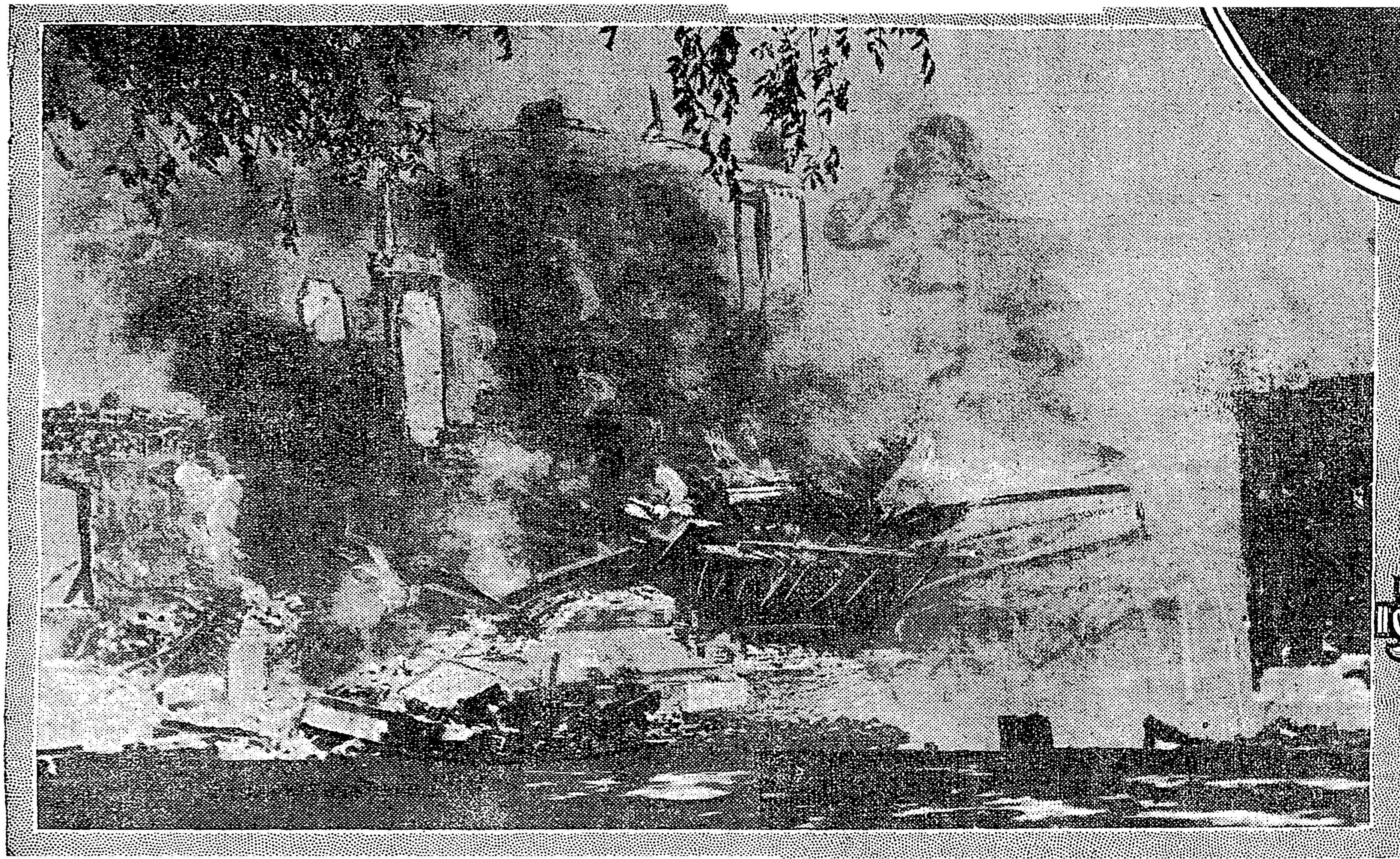
In the case of piece workers, I believe it would be just to make the employer compensate them for the time lost in drill. Such a law might be difficult to enact, but I believe it would do much good. In the case of laziness or ignorance, explanation of the dangers and of the value of drill and, if necessary, coercion should be used. If an employee could know that laxness in a fire drill was tantamount to dismissal there would be no more instances of pathetic inefficiency such as the exclamation of the Binghamton girls that it was ‘only another fire drill.’

The trouble is that all our measures for the protection of life from fire are based too much on theory. Various public-spirited men and women get together whenever there is an important fire disaster and form organizations of one kind or another to better conditions, or to look into conditions, or to devise means for safer conditions. But when these organizations do not fade into mere names, as they frequently do when the disaster is no longer on every-



(PHOTO BY UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD)

Binghamton. Will New York Learn Anything from This?



The Destruction in a Few Minutes of the “Slow-Burning” Factory at Binghamton.

THAT New York State and New York City have learned no lessons from their holocausts of fire such as that which snuffed out the lives of some sixty women in the destruction of the Binghamton Clothing Company's factory at Binghamton on Tuesday afternoon, is the startling deduction which Edward F. Croker, ex-Chief of the New York Fire Department, and perhaps the leading authority on fire in the country, draws from this most recent disaster.

He believes that such a tragedy might be enacted at any moment in any one of hundreds of buildings in this city and that there are as many deadly firetraps in the city to-day as there were on March 25, 1911, when one hundred and forty-seven persons, chiefly women and girls, were killed in the ghastly Triangle Waist Company fire in Washington Place.

The veteran fire fighter admits that some legislation in the right direction has been enacted since that date, but he holds that it is for the most part unenforced and unenforceable, and asserts flatly that no single practical step has been taken since the Triangle fire to lessen the great and imminent fire peril in which thousands must do their daily work.

Too Such Firetraps Here.

“The same thing might happen in any one of a hundred places in New York while we are talking,” began, with characteristic directness, the man who commanded the city's firemen for twelve years, when asked what made such a slaughter as that at Binghamton possible.

“But here it might easily be worse,” he went on, “because the buildings are higher and there are more people in them. I don't like to be a prophet of evil, but we have refused to heed the repeated warnings we have had in this city, and we must be prepared to take the consequences.

“When the whole community, the whole country, was shocked by the death list in the Washington Place fire, Gov. Dix appointed a commission to investigate the condition of manufacturing in the State, the factories and workshops. There was not a single practical man on that commission. Not one knew the practical side of fire prevention or fire protection.

“Of the truly practical suggestions from various sources that followed that fire—the most costly in life in

ping and going down under a stampede. Workshops are not going to be safe as long as they are permitted to be littered with inflammable material and as long as smoking does not mean instant dismissal.

“The spirit of the employer is at the bottom of the thing. If he is too greedy to put his building in a safe condition, and too greedy to enforce efficient fire protective measures, such as fire drills rigorously carried out, then he should be forced, by the pressure of an aroused public opinion, to do so.

Greedy Employers.

“I have known many cases in which employers objected to instituting fire drills because they would cause loss of workers' time. The buildings in which these men had their shops could, any one of them, have been emptied in five minutes. Twice a month is sufficient practice for an effective fire drill. Imagine the greed of a man who would not lose five minutes of his employees' time used in leaving the building and five minutes more used in going back again twice a month, or twenty minutes a month in all, for the sake of safeguarding their lives! It was in twenty minutes that fifty girls were burned to death on Tuesday.

“The point upon which I would lay emphasis is that employers like these are doing business right now in New York. There are hundreds of workshops in which no fire drills worthy of the name are performed, hundreds in which exits are within the letter of the law but utterly at variance with its spirit; many—as witness the \$50 fines imposed only the other day—where doors are locked while the workers are within, and many, many more where, with some slight unfortunate combination of circumstances, a far greater death list than that at Binghamton or even that in Washington Place might occur.

“It is not only employers that are to blame. Odd as it may seem, many of the workers themselves are opposed to fire drills. These men and women are usually piece workers. To drop their work for five minutes, or five seconds, means to lose money.

“In other cases it is mere laziness; they do not want to take the trouble to go through the drill, or they complain that after they have walked down the stairs or the escapes they have to walk up again! Of course such a position is due to ignorance of



After the Newark Factory Fire. New York Learned Nothing from That Disaster.

body's lips, they fall back usually on theory.

“You can not save lives by theory. You must save them by practice. Practical methods applied after a careful study of the existing conditions and then enforced with absolute rigidity.

Enforced—constantly, always, regularly, that is the keynote of safety.

“I have seen so many flurries of excitement when a number of people have been killed by fire result in a measure of accomplishment for a little time after the event only to lapse into the old slovenly methods in a surprisingly short while. The fire menace is constant. The means of holding it in check, the effort to protect helpless persons from it, must be equally constant.

Afraid of a Strike.

“Sometimes there are conditions to be met that lie back of the mere physical state of a building or the sentiments of the owner or the employer of labor in it. I will give an instance which illustrates an important reason for laxity in fire drill.

“I was called in to organize a fire drill in a certain large building on Lower Broadway. I did so and had things working somewhat to my satisfaction. One day I thought I would run down there when neither the man whose workers I had organized nor the workers themselves were expecting me.

“As soon as I arrived I sounded the fire alarm. On one of the floors about twenty men did not respond to the drill or else responded half-heartedly and with grumblings. I brought up their employer and pointed them out to him.

“Why don't you discharge them at

once,” I asked, “and make an example of them?”

“Oh, I couldn't do that,” said he. “All my people would walk out and I'd have a strike on my hands.”

“When workers strike because they are being protected it is time something radical and immediate was done about it.”

The ex-Chief shut his famous jaw with the snap of which firemen and other citizens knew the meaning before he became ex-Chief.

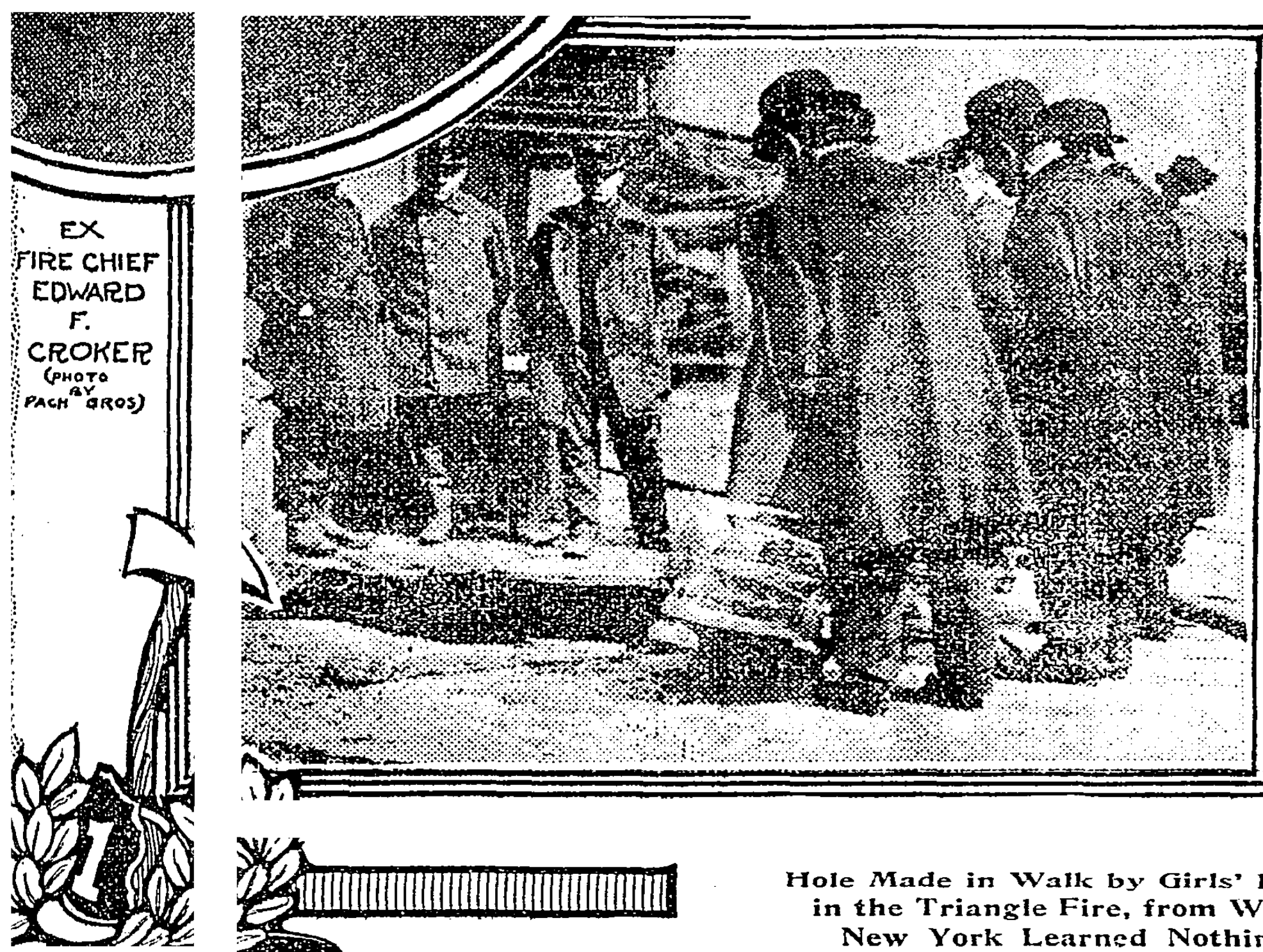
“What do you think are the worst danger points in the city now?” was asked.

“There are danger points almost everywhere,” was the reply. “If you mean what is the district where the greatest loss of life in fires like that of this week might occur, I would say in the lower Fifth Avenue region and its side streets.

“Many of the so-called ‘loft buildings’ which have sprung up in the streets just off Fifth Avenue, from below Fourteenth to Forty-sixth, are in reality sweat shops. They contain the same class of workers that used to swarm in the lower east side and are still to be found there in great numbers.

“These buildings run ten, fifteen and twenty stories high. During working hours some of them house two thousand or more workers, men and women.

“Most of them comply with law as to exits, escapes, outward-opening doors and so forth. But that does not mean safety for those thousands. Let a quick fire start in them and let one or two persons lose their heads and there could easily be a disaster that would make anything the city has known seem insignificant.



Hole Made in Walk by Girls' Bodies in the Triangle Fire, from Which New York Learned Nothing.



the matters with which legislation should be immediately concerned, I believe, is that of the neat condition of the workshop or factory. It must be neat; not for the sake of looks, but for the sake of lives.

“As to concrete suggestions to increase safety in buildings, these, I believe, are a few of the utmost importance:

“True fireproof construction.

“Regular fire drills, planned in relation to exit facilities and rigidly lived up to at least twice a month, with punishment or dismissal for laxity, and, perhaps, reward for promptness and efficiency.

“Exits of sufficient number to empty each floor rapidly and without undue crowding.

“Wherever possible, fire escapes in the form of bridges to adjoining buildings. These I believe to be the most effective escapes in the world, for the occupants of the building on fire can readily pass by means of them to a building entirely unaffected without going either up or down, and an important consideration—they know that they can do this, and are thus relieved of dread.

“All escapes level with the floor which they are intended to serve and without obstructions separating them from it, such as window sills, door sills, and the like.

“Doors opening outward, and, of course, unlocked.

“Floors, tables, and machines clear of litter or inflammable material to the last possible degree consistent with the work in hand.

“A well-drilled private fire brigade working independently of the drill.

“Constant supervision.

“Constant watchfulness.

“New York Has Not Learned Lesson.”

“Unless these and other measures are put in force and kept in force, New York may see a tragedy any day more horrible than anything it has yet known. It has not learned its lesson. It must not be surprised to pay the price.”

In his book, “Fire Prevention,” published a few months ago, ex-Chief Croker outlined an imaginary fire which was startlingly like in effect the one at Binghamton on Tuesday. This is what he said, speaking of the ease with which fire drills could be organized:

“Let us take, for example, a typical loft building, such as now exist by the hundreds in Manhattan. It is, say, ten stories high. There are four tenants. One occupies the first two stories with a feather business; wholesale salesrooms on the first floor, manufacturing going on the second. The next two floors are occupied by a milliner, who uses both as workshops. Above him for three floors are the cutting and sewing rooms of a cloakmaker, while the three upper stories are occupied by a manufacturer of shirt waists, who uses them all as workrooms. With some shifting of the location of the various trades there

are scores of buildings occupied in just the above way in New York City and in many of our other large cities the country over.

“Let us see what happens in such a building under present conditions at the outbreak of fire. The blaze starts, let us say, on the fourth floor, in a pile of braided straw which is being worked into hats.

“A girl sitting at the nearest machine or table sees it. She leaps up and yells ‘Fire!’ shrieking as hard as she can. In the space of a breath the room is in pandemonium. The girls—sixty or seventy of them—are all on their feet, jamming one another against the rows of machines, yelling, trampling on one another in their frantic efforts to get to the exit they ordinarily use, an elevator or a staircase.

“In the flimsy material the fire is spreading fast. * * * On the floors above and below that in which the fire is panic also holds sway; the garment workers, the feather workers, the shirtwaist workers, remembering other horrors, stamped without any cause, like sheep determined to be slaughtered. The doors—many of which probably open inward and some of which may be locked, because of greed of the employer who must inspect each worker as she goes out at night to see that no thread of material is carried home—are scenes of human ferocity too horrible to tell.

“By the time the first piece of fire apparatus comes rushing up in response to an alarm, sent in by a policeman or passer-by—that is within five minutes after the first shriek of ‘Fire!’—fantastic bundles which look like great bolts of cloth but are in fact women and girls, are whirling and twisting down from the windows from which they jumped or have been pushed, to the stone pavement fifty or more feet below.

“On the floor where the fire started the heat from the now roaring furnace of light material is intense, and the unfortunates who cannot reach the windows are shriveled up in its breath like so many pieces of paper.

Quite Another Matter.

“I do not believe that any one will argue the shame or the wickedness of conditions which allow such calamities to be possible. That is not the question. The question is, what is to be done to change these conditions and make them impossible? For an illustration let us take the same suppositions case as before. The same sort of fire starts in the same way, in the same place.

“Perhaps the same thing happens up to the point where the original girl cries ‘Fire!’ But thereafter all things are different.

“Every girl stands stock still at her machine until the leader of her squad or division moves forward, and she in turn does not move forward until the division between her and the nearest exit has begun to move; then she walks—not runs—ahead and the girls under leadership follow in single file. Not one stops or falls out of line, either to get her coat or for any other purpose, but all march steadily and without pause, through the door that opens outward and is not locked, down the stairway—or down the fire-escape or up to the roof, as the case may be, until the floor is clear.

Foreman on the Job.

“Meantime the foreman of the floor, the manager, or whoever is in chief authority, seeing that there is indeed a fire, has broken the glass of the building alarm box or sent in a telephone call for the Fire Department, and, if there are other men on the floor or there is a private fire department, has taken charge of the work of fighting the blaze and very likely has extinguished it by the time the first engine comes rolling up. At any rate his work has been of material assistance to the department in keeping the blaze down and dampening its ardor.

“The result is no loss of life and a money loss comparatively trifling. The employees may even be able to return to work in an hour or two when all traces of the fire are out and the work of cleaning up has been finished.”