

## Remembrances of the Victoria Hall Disaster 1883

William Codling, born in 1876 in Winlaton, Co. Durham, was an eye witness to the disaster at the Victoria Hall, Sunderland, in June 1883. Codling, who was six or seven years old at the time, went from his home in Glebe Cleft Villas, Bishopwearmouth, to an entertainment at Victoria Hall, overlooking Mowbray Park, Sunderland, with his younger sister Sarah.

*It began something in this wise. A man delivered a handful of bills outside the school doors on the Friday night setting forth the entertainment in glowing terms and we were all wild to go. After much persuasion the necessary consent was obtained and my sister & I together with a dozen more out of our street were found waiting admission that fatal Saturday afternoon the 16th June 1883. Some of us went into the pit, others of us paid our pennies & hurried up the stairs. By good fortune I was in the very front row. This was indeed doubly fortunate, for besides having a better view of the performance, when it came to the race for death I would be among the last. The conjurer performed his tricks and at the close of the entertainment stepped to the front of the stage with a basket of toys and began throwing them among the people in the pit. We in the gallery howled with rage. At this the conjurer informed us that a man was already on his way up the stairs with a basket of toys for us. So we obligingly rose en masse and went down the stairs to meet him. I raced up the gallery as fast as I could, scrambled with the crowd through the doorway and jolted my way down two flights of stairs. Here the crowd was so compressed that there was no more racing but we moved forward together, shoulder to shoulder. Soon we were most uncomfortably packed but still going down. Suddenly I felt that I was treading upon someone lying on the stairs and I cried in horror to those behind "Keep back, keep back! There's someone down." It was no use, I passed slowly over and onwards with the mass and before long I passed over others without emotion. At last we came to a dead stop, but still those behind came crowding on, and though we cried to them to get back some looked straight in front, bewildered, while others said they couldn't. I was at the side of the stairs with only one boy between me and the handrail. Chancing to look at this boy at this juncture I recognised despite his white face a slight acquaintance of the name of Fox. I don't suppose I had spoken to the lad half a dozen times but I verily believe that had my arms not been pinioned to my side I should have embraced him. "Hello Fox" I shouted in his ear, "Is that you?" And he admitted that it was. I hardly knew whether to laugh or cry, but I did neither, I only became politely observant of our surroundings. We looked down the sea of heads and waving arms to where all seemed to be swallowed up in blackness. It put me in mind of the Railway Station and I asked Fox if it was the Railway Station but his answer was inaudible. He drew my attention to the fact that several chaps further down were getting a ride on the other folks' shoulders and we laughed together at some of their funny antics. One lad I remember yet had the whole of his body above the swaying mass and waved his straw hat wildly in the air as he struggled in agony. Fox and I thought he was very funny. All around us were white bewildered faces, wails of distress, and piteous questionings where none could answer. Fox thought the toys would be all done when it came to our turn and he said he wouldn't care if he could only get out. I asked him if he thought we could sit in underneath the banister till the crowd went away and he tried to get down but couldn't.*

*At that we surrendered ourselves to philosophic reasoning and dreamy apathy. Then the pressure above began to lessen, a report spread that the toys were being distributed in the gallery and those behind having made a feeble rush upwards, back we tottered across that*

*path of death. At the first landing we were met by some men and taken out of doors into the open air, where was assembled a crowd of frightened people drawn together by wild rumours. Soon men began to come down the steps bearing in their arms lifeless burdens, and from the crowd came a wail of grief, while some of them ran off to tell the terrible news which unnerved the whole town, and which in a few hours sent a thrill of horror through the whole of Britain. I had not thought the affair was serious and now I looked on spellbound as body after body was brought out and laid in a row upon the pavement. One woman, I remember, came out carrying a child which she had gone in to seek while behind her came a sympathetic man bearing another. The woman came down the steps with agonised face and dishevelled hair and shouted fiercely to the crowd "Get back! Get back! and let them have air." "Ah! my good woman," said the man who bore her other burden, while tears rolled down his cheeks, "Ah! they will never need air more." I hung about a bit to see if anyone would bring out my sister; but as she did not come, I thought the best plan would be to go and tell my mother, so I made for home. When I had got some distance on my road I came upon a man and woman who had just met. "Have you anybody in the Victoria Hall this afternoon" asked the woman. "No" answered the man, "What for?" "Hinny", she said impressively, "if there's one killed there, there's fifty." She thought she was exaggerating but she fell far short, for when all came to be reckoned up the number reached almost two hundred. When nearly home I saw my father hurrying towards me with white face and an apron round his waist. Very relieved indeed he was to see me. He had heard of the calamity while at work and had hurried home to see if my sister & I had gone to the hall. At home he found my sister, who had been in the pit and knew nothing of the disaster, and was coming in search of me when I met him. Of the party that went from our street only one was killed, a young girl who had not been long amongst us. In our house there was joy and thanksgiving, and one old neighbour, since dead, laid his hand on my head and told me that my death had not yet been decreed. But in many homes there was misery and desolation, many a heart was stricken with woe, and many a mother as she bent in sorrow over a loved one so strangely still, felt that indeed the ways of God are not as our ways.*

### **William Codling jr.**

In fact 183 children were crushed to death in the tragedy.

The Codling family later moved to Newcastle, and went on to have three more children. William wrote this account in December 1894. Later he was a prolific writer and traveller, and a youth worker, including serving as grand superintendent of juvenile work for the Grand Lodge of Good Templars.

The original of Codling's account is deposited in the archives and special collections section of the University of Sunderland library, thanks to his great-niece Mrs Celia Costello.

For more information on the disaster, see Sunderland City Council's fact sheet:

[http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/public/editable/themes/lifelonglearning/Local\\_studies\\_fact\\_sheets/Fact%20Sheet%205.pdf](http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/public/editable/themes/lifelonglearning/Local_studies_fact_sheets/Fact%20Sheet%205.pdf)

For a list of victims see:

<http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/DUR/Sunderland/VictoriaHall.html>

There is a contemporary poem and further detail in:

<http://www.mcgonagallonline.org.uk/poems/lpgsunderland.htm>