

THREE LIVES LOST. FATAL FIRE AT PORT CHALMERS

MOTHER AND CHILD BURNED TO DEATH YOUNG GIRL FATALLY INJURED

A most distressing catastrophe took place at Port Chalmers at an early hour on Sunday, when a fire broke out in a two-storey wooden house in George street, and, having blazed with unrestrained fury, left nothing but a black gap where the building had stood, and the partially incinerated bodies of a woman and a child to tell its dreadful tale.

The alarm was given about 5.10 o'clock by Constable Smart, and he and two young men named Bailey and Reeves proceeded to the scene of the fire. Here they discovered William Haberfield, the lessee of the house, and his sister-in-law, Kathleen Hine Rehu, aged 11 years, lying scorched and maimed upon the pavement beneath the flame-filled windows.

Dr Borrie arrived with all despatch, and found Haberfield to be badly scorched about the face and arms. Two arteries had been severed, as if by broken glass, and he had sustained severe scalp wounds and other lacerations. The girl, Kathleen Rehu, was found to be so shockingly burnt as to render recovery hopeless.

The man and girl were carried unconscious to a neighbouring stable, where they were attended to prior to their removal to Dunedin Hospital, the journey being made in an ambulance, as there were no trains available.

FIGHTING THE FLAMES.

The brigade, under Captain Smith, was quickly on the scene, and inquiries made by the captain of the onlookers elicited the reply that everybody was out of the burning building. Acting on this, the brigade confined its efforts to the extinguishing of the flames, and it was not until this was nearly accomplished that it became known that Mrs Haberfield and her child were in the blazing structure.

By this time a crowd had collected, and an exclamation of horror ran from mouth to mouth. Frantic efforts were made by both firemen and the crowd to get the fire under, and so successful were their efforts that soon a search party was able to enter the smouldering ruin. Here in the bedroom was a pitiful sight. The mother, clasping her four-year-old son tightly in her arms, lay crouched in a corner. The woman had evidently tried to shield the child's body with her own, for she was charred all down the right side, and the child, which was under her left breast, though dead, was only blistered.

THREE LIVES LOST.

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The bodies of mother and child were carried in melancholy procession to the morgue amid a crowd of sobbing women, and strong men weeping unashamed.

THE FATHER'S STORY.

With his face hidden by a mask of lint, and evidently suffering from grief and pain, William Haberfield lay in the Hospital last evening, and in reply to an inquiry from a nurse said feebly that he felt well enough to talk.

"I came from the Bluff about three weeks ago," he said, "to work at the new graving dock at the Port. My poor wife only arrived last Thursday, and we only took that house for the time being. I came back from stone-crushing at the dock at 9 o'clock on Saturday night. The wife and the little son had gone to bed; so I made myself a cup of tea, and having carefully extinguished the fire—I am always most careful about fire—I went up to bed at about 10. I and the wife talked about our prospects till about midnight. We had no light burning, and I fell off to sleep.

"I remember nothing more till I was awakened by a loud crackling, and saw a volume of suffocating smoke coming in at the bedroom door. Jumping out of bed, I found a great column of fire roaring up the staircase, writhing round the banisters and licking the paper on the walls. Our escape was cut off, and as the smoke was suffocating I ran to the window, and, smashing the glass, looked out.

"There was not a soul in sight. Tongues of flame were darting in at the door. There was not a moment to be lost, and, shouting to the wife to throw the children down to me and then follow herself, I jumped out of the window. I was crazed with agony, and do not remember reaching the ground.

"All the windows glowed red with the fire that raged within, and I kept crying out 'Oh, my wife and child'—but no one seemed to hear me. I shouted up to her to make haste with the children, but there was no reply; only the smoke rolling heavily through the broken glass.

"Then I scaled the side of the house. How I managed it I cannot tell. I was mad with grief and fear for my wife and the children. I reached the sill, and beat in the sash with my fists, and as I did so felt something wet and warm spurt from my wrists into my face. I have since found it was a severed artery.

"Choking and blinded, I staggered into the room, and trod right on the prostrate body of the little girl. My head seemed bursting, and I could not breathe.

"I thought I heard voices in the street below, so, seizing the child, I threw her out of the window in the hope that someone might be waiting below to catch her.

"There were no signs of my wife or the little boy. I was on the point of suffocating, and reeling to the window I fell out of it, and remembered no more. Oh, my poor wife and child! Burnt to death. It is too horrible, and will drive me crazy."

Here the nurse reappeared with some milk, which was given to the unfortunate

"It was an old house," Haberfield resumed, "the oldest house in Port Chalmers, I believe. There was no fire escape. It was infested with rats from top to bottom, and they might have caused the fire by dragging away loose matches. "That's the only reason I can give for it; for, as I said before, I am always specially careful about fire. We had made such plans, and this is the end of it. The wife and boy will not be feeling the pain that I am in; that's one good thing. She came from Moeraki, poor girl, and she and the boy will go back there to be buried. I am in the Druids Lodge, I'm thankful to say."

THE GIRL'S DEATH.

When interviewed, Haberfield seemed in great bodily pain from burns, cuts, and bruises, and broken-hearted by the terrible death of his wife and her child. He had not, for very pity's sake, yet been told of the death of his little sister-in-law, Kathleen Rehu, to whom he was greatly attached. She was brought into the Hospital with Haberfield yesterday; but her injuries were so shocking that her recovery was hopeless from the first, and she died at 6.45 last evening, all witnesses agreeing that it was a merciful release.

William Haberfield is 27 years old. His grandfather arrived at Moeraki in 1836, and married a Maori woman. Haberfield is a respectable, hard-working man, and was devoted to his wife and family. His condition is grave, but not absolutely dangerous. Since being admitted to the Hospital his temperature has risen from 96 to 101 degrees.

Haberfield's parents reside at Green Hills, near the Bluff. Mrs Haberfield was a Miss Ruby Rehu, of Moeraki, and her little sister, Kathleen Rehu, was staying with the Haberfields on a visit. Mrs Haberfield had been married before, and the child that was burnt with her yesterday morning was the youngest child of her first husband.

A NEIGHBOUR INTERVIEWED.

Mr Crawley, licensee of the Marine Hotel, opposite the scene of the fire, interviewed yesterday, said:—

"I was awakened about 5 o'clock this morning by a great crackling noise as of timber burning. My room was all lit up with the reflection, and I jumped to the window, and, raising the blind, looked out. Then someone in the street yelled out in a frenzied voice: 'Come out! Come out!' and thinking my hotel was on fire I raised my boarders and rushed into the street in time to hear a dull thud from the other side. It was my impression that someone had jumped out of the window, a distance of about 15ft, and this was soon verified, for I saw men carrying the forms of Mr Haberfield and little Miss Rehu across the street to a stable, which is but a few doors from my house.

"By this time the brigade had arrived together with a large crowd of people. I remember noticing that the first on the scene after the alarm was given was the captain of the brigade, who must, indeed, have hurried to reach the spot in the time he did.

"Soon a fearful rumour was circulated that Mrs Haberfield and her infant son were still in the fire, and the brigade and onlookers worked with a frenzied will to try, though well they knew it was hopeless, to save the lives of the unfortunate pair.

"It was soon over, and our worst fears were realised, for mother and child were found, terribly burned, near the window in the bedroom."

THE HOUSE.

The house was a double-storeyed one of wood, with three bedrooms upstairs. The distance from sill to pavement is about 15ft, and considering what Haberfield went through the marvel is that he was not killed outright. The building is owned by Mr John Watson, draper, of Port Chalmers, and is insured, but the amount was not available yesterday. The bottom of the structure was fitted as a shop, but was only used by Messrs Lane and Co. to store mineral waters, etc.

The houses on each side of the burned building were considerably damaged by fire, and it is probable that both will have to be pulled down.