

PORT CHALMERS FIRE.

ADDITIONAL DETAILS.

THE BATTLE WITH THE

FLAMES

THE INQUEST ADJOURNED

Only an inspection of the burned-out premises can convey to the mind the terrible predicament in which Mr and Mrs Haberfield found themselves when the fire broke in upon their slumbers early on Sunday morning. The house was a small wooden one of two storeys, and very old. The ground floor consisted of a shop, kitchen, etc., and there were three small bedrooms upstairs, to which access was gained by means of a narrow staircase. The Haberfields awoke to find the whole of the rear portion in flames, which had already consumed the stairs, and were filling the bedroom with dense and suffocating smoke. The street was deserted; no help was at hand, and the only possible means of escape was by the window.

A calm person with all his wits about him would have thrown the mattress and bedding on to the pavement below, and then dropped his wife and the children on them, leaning out of the window and holding their hands at arms' length to break their fall as much as possible; or else knotted a couple of blankets, by which a descent could have been made. Waking suddenly, suffocating from smoke, and with an awful death threatening to overwhelm them every moment, Mr and Mrs Haberfield naturally lost their heads. When the former leapt from the window he fully expected his wife to drop the children into his arms, and then to follow herself. Choked and blinded, she evidently fainted away close to the window, and Haberfield started to clamber up the side of the burning house. This must have been an extremely difficult feat, and only possible to a person endued by frenzy with a double strength. Blood plentifully splashed on the sill of the bedroom and on the blackened wall shows how Haberfield severed the veins in his wrists with the broken glass as he strove to drag himself in at the window. It is thought that, when he threw Miss Rehu out, and then fell out himself, he alighted on her prostrate body, thus unintentionally inflicting injuries still more grievous.

The first to enter the burning building were Lieutenant Osborne and William Dougherty, of the Fire Brigade. The latter had instructions to look in the bed for the woman and child. The bed-clothes were smouldering, but there was no one there, and at first it seemed that no one was in the apartment. Hose in hand, Dougherty stood sending a stream of water on walls and ceiling, when his attention was caught by a heap of blackened, smoking debris. He turned his hose on to it, and gradually the force of the water laid bare the figure of a woman. The bodies were swathed in blankets and lowered to the ground.

A circumstance typical of the terrible

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irony of fate came into prominence at daylight. While these awful scenes were being enacted, and two lives lost in the flames, a lamplighter's ladder lay in a right-of-way two doors off. It has lain there every night for years, and had anyone been near and reared it against the window it would have meant absolute salvation for the ill-fated household.

A sensational incident in connection with the tragedy is that the adjoining house, also old, and of wood, and practically built on to the ruined dwelling, is used as a paint and oil store. Just above all this inflammable material two elderly ladies, Mrs Clark and Miss Hempsey, live in attics. The windows are extremely narrow, and it is impossible to open them on account of two flagstaves which are erected right in front of them. Had this paint shop caught the building would have gone like a puff of smoke, and the windows being practically barred the occupants must inevitably have been roasted alive.

The firemen believe that Mrs Haberfield and her little son must have been burned to death before the alarm was given; so that even if the blazing building had been entered immediately on their arrival there would have been no chance of saving them.

It appears that the house, with others, had been practically condemned some time ago, but no orders had been issued for its demolition. There was a splendid pressure of water (150lb), and this, together with the strenuous efforts of the brigade, undoubtedly saved the buildings on either side.

Mr Haberfield is progressing as well as can be expected, under the circumstances, but his recovery must necessarily be slow.

A neighbour, who resides about 50 yards away from the scene of the fire, states that he was aroused by the firebell, and about three minutes later he was assisting two members of the Fire Brigade, who were struggling manfully to pull the reel through a patch of new metal. He says he knew there was a ladder lying about 20 yards away, but word was passed along that there was no one in the building, consequently he directed his efforts towards assisting in subduing the flames. He states: "I was fairly knocked out to find that after I had been slaving away like mad for half an hour to get the fire under someone came through the crowd and said there was a woman and child in the burning building." When I appeared on the scene the whole house was ablaze at the rear, but the flames were not coming through the front windows. If we had known that there was anyone in the building we would have had them out in no time with the aid of that ladder. Whoever did it would have been assuredly burnt a bit, but what of that? Both the mother and child would have been got out of that burning building just the same, and who knows but what they might have been resuscitated by the doctor? I tell you, it makes me sick to think about it."

The building was insured in the Alliance for £75. The adjoining building, owned by John Connell, who resides in Dunedin, was damaged, but not very extensively. The partition upstairs was burned through, and a sheet of iron was pulled off the roof to get the hose in to prevent the fire spreading. John Hempsey, an elderly man, and his two sisters, who live in this house, had their furniture and belongings (which are not insured) very much damaged by the water. Mr Robert Wilmott, a painter, has his showroom in the shop in front, and the water, pouring through the ceiling, damaged his stock, including a quantity of paperhangings. The stock was insured in the State office for £100, but the damage is less than that amount.

THE INQUEST.

An inquest on the bodies of Ruby Haberfield and her four-year-old son, Jacob Takepurira Tahaki, was opened before the coroner, Mr C. C. Graham, and a jury of six, at Port Chalmers yesterday afternoon. The jurymen were Messrs James Weir (foreman), E. Godfred, W. G. Fail, C. Stevenson, Nicholas Dodds, and J. B. Shanks.

Sergeant Mullany stated that he knew the deceased woman by sight. The Haberfields occupied the upper storey and part of the back of the ground floor of the house.

To the Coroner: He did not know how the bodies were lying, as he was not present when they were found. Nothing was known as to the cause of the fire except the statement of William Haberfield, already published. The Fire Brigade was on the scene with great promptitude, and everything possible was done to extinguish the fire without delay. The window was about 15ft from the ground.

The Coroner said he regretted having to call the jury together again, but Mr Haberfield was not in a fit state to give evidence, nor was he likely to be for some time. They would consider themselves bound by a surety of £50 each to appear again when called on. Meanwhile the inquest would be adjourned sine die.

At a meeting of the Druids' Bohemian Club, held last evening, it was decided that the hon. secretary (Bro. J. H. S. Dixon) be instructed to approach the secretary of the All Nations Lodge (Port Chalmers), U.A.O.D., and offer the services of the club in providing a benefit concert in aid of Bro. Haberfield in connection with his recent sad bereavement and loss.

In all probability a benefit concert will be given to Bro. Haberfield at Port Chalmers at an early date.