

MR. J. GARDNER THOMPSON.

Owing to the retirement of Mr. G. F. C. Smith, after over half a century's service with the Liverpool & London & Globe Insurance Company, which is referred to more fully in this issue, the sole management of the Company's business in Canada, devolved up Mr. J. Gardner Thompson, on the 1st inst.

Mr. Thompson, who is still a young man, has had a splendid training in the fire insurance business, is endowed with all the qualifications which make a successful fire insurance underwriter. It is his intention to largely extend the operations of the Liverpool & London & Globe in the Dominion.

Among the recent appointments made is that of Mr. Fred. W. Pace, as Superintendent at Winnipeg, for Manitoba and the Northwest Territories.

THE CHICAGO THEATRE FIRE AND ITS LESSON.

Chicago has again been desolated by fire, differing, however, from the historic one in this respect, the calamity of 1871 was the destruction of property; the recent one the destruction of human beings. Probably, by no catastrophe of a like nature, were ever so many lives lost in so short a space of time, certainly, none under such circumstances of horror. So many of the victims being women, girls and young children, makes the tragedy intensely pathetic. Of all classes of public buildings, theatres have the blackest record for holocausts and fires. The most famous of all such structures, the Globe Theatre, London, of which Shakespeare was a proprietor, was burnt in 1613. The list since then is a long one, but in no case was the loss of life so appalling in number, or so awful in circumstances. That many were smothered by smoke, many burnt to death, is known, but the greater portion had life trampled out of them by their fellow creatures in a mad rush to escape from the threatening doom. In such a crush even strong men are as powerless as a sheaf of wheat in the grasp of a threshing machine. One can only hope that death to the victims came suddenly to end their mental agony and physical torture.

It is impossible to consider the causes of this fearful tragedy patiently. There was nothing accidental, nothing incapable of being foreseen, nothing which could not have been provided against. The very record of theatre fires is more than enough to justify civic authorities in taking the sternest measures to protect the public from all chances of such a calamity as the stampede of an audience when alarmed by fire. Merely passing by-laws respecting protective measures in regard to this and other public dangers is too generally considered the whole duty of a city corporation. Complaints and protests of the Press, and of individual citizens against the flagrant non-observance of such by-laws, as a rule are treated with the contempt of silence, even when such neglect is being constantly demonstrated to be not only

criminal by leading to gratuitous fatalities, but costly by entailing suits for damages against a negligent city. Here, as an example, the by-law requiring side-walks to be made safe for pedestrians is ignored by those who are paid to see the local laws observed and empowered to enforce such observance.

The Chicago horror is a similar case of official neglect. The city's by-law respecting the protection of audiences, seems to have been adequate for preventing such a calamity, but with the prevalent non-chalance of civic officials, the by-law was left to work itself, as though it were a conscious, self-acting machine. If it were not adequate, why was it left in its imperfection to be a delusion and a snare to the citizens? Chicago has a fair proportion of highly intelligent citizens who knew that the by-law as to providing for the safety of audiences in buildings was not enforced. It was not a case of "everybody's business" being "nobody's business." The city had officials specifically charged with the duty of enforcing the laws, and of making the laws sufficient for public protection. Upon them rests the responsibility of sacrificing some six hundred lives.

It is alleged that the calamity would not have occurred had the asbestos curtain worked properly by descending from its supports to the stage. On the 28th of last October a similar defect in an asbestos curtain caused a Philadelphia theatre to be destroyed by fire, on the 20th November THE CHRONICLE warned against this danger. Surely that event was warning enough to have roused the Chicago officials from their apathy, and to have also compelled the theatre officials to have their curtain put into working order. But no! the lives of over a thousand men, women and children were of no moment compared with indulgence in reckless indifference to duty and the sacred claims of humanity.

It is true, there are dangers of fire arising from temporary heating and lighting arrangements in a theatre, and of a fire spreading in it, owing to the inflammable nature of decorative and other equipments. These dangers, however, are so familiar to theatre managers and servants, also to actors and other performers, and are so easily provided against by a little trouble and expense, that, with intelligent care, the care inspired by a due sense of responsibility for human life, a theatre would be no more exposed to fire than an ordinary dwelling-house. If theatre officials will not exercise such care, if theatre proprietors or lessees will not incur such expense, they ought to be compelled to do so or suffer a heavy penalty. As matters now stand, the penalty of their neglect falls upon their patrons.

For the bereaved sufferers, for the injured by the Chicago tragedy, we feel the deepest sympathy and commiseration. Some of the public audience rooms in this city ought to be provided with more and more accessible exits, as several such halls would be exceedingly dangerous were an audience to be seized with alarm by a cry of fire.