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FIRES AND FIREBUGS.

In calling attention to the fact that so-called independent adjusters are frequently responsible for frauds upon fire insurance companies, and consequently for the excessive fire waste, Fire Commissioner Latulippe, of Montreal, showed himself a good deal wiser than his *confrère* of New York City, Mr. Johnson. The latter gentleman, it will be remembered, recently discovered by some topsy-turvy process of reasoning that the real culprits where the excessive fire insurance waste is concerned, are the fire companies themselves who have to pay up for it. It is about time that someone in authority spoke up about the so-called independent adjuster and steps were taken to curb his activity. But that activity in the direction of fraudulent settlements can, however, hardly be a matter for surprise when we have dignified judges explaining that it is not their custom when dealing with claims against insurance companies to whittle them down to too fine a point. This sort of thing, though the authors of it would probably be horrified to know it, is a direct encouragement to fraudulent claims upon the fire companies. And from fraudulent claims to arson is not a very long step for some people with lean purses and easy consciences.

Apparently, Montreal has lately had inflicted upon it the activities of a gang of firebugs and the Canadian Fire Underwriters' Association have now offered a reward of \$500 for evidence leading to the conviction of incendiaries. The fires resulting from the activities of these individuals are not, generally speaking, at all large affairs. A small blaze with a negligible amount of damage, for which a claim of a hundred or two dollars from an insurance company can be safely made appears to be a favorite method of operation. For motive all one wants is a family hard-up for ready cash and with accommodating consciences. According to the Montreal Fire Commissioner, of the fires during the last fifteen days in August, now under investigation, there are many in which the signs point unmistakably to incendiaries. It is to be hoped that as a result of the activities now being undertaken, some of these gentry will be enabled to enjoy a prolonged period of repose from their present activities.

However, satisfactory as it may be to put an end to the energetic efforts of these gentry for the time being, the catching of a few fire-bugs is not likely to put an end to frauds upon the insurance companies. The "ambulance-chasers" will still go on

their way putting in generous claims for policyholders whose curtains or counterpane has been singed, and dividing the proceeds. And the great big public will go serenely on its way, blissfully unconscious that it is itself paying these fat commissions to the "ambulance-chasers" through its fire insurance premiums. For that, in fact, is what the thing comes to. The fire companies are merely intermediaries. They collect the fire insurance tax, and they disburse it. The more they are required to pay out the more they collect. The great big public grumbles at the height of its fire insurance premiums, foolishly unaware that it is itself responsible for their height, and that if it had the sense to insist on the strict restrictive laws in regard to fires which are adopted in Europe, that its fire loss and fire premiums would come down with a run. It is to be feared that unless the present campaign of education in fire prevention and reduction is backed up by some sweeping extensions of the State police power in regard to fires that its results will be disappointing. As was admirably pointed out recently by Mr. Frank Lock, the United States manager of the Atlas, the great volume of the fire loss has no relation whatever to incendiarism, while temperamental hazard, meaning recklessness and a perverted public sentiment, is the largest individual factor in the fire waste. Mr. Lock, whose opinion in this matter is entitled to respect, states after an exhaustive study of this matter, that a fair estimate based upon all available data is that the number of suspicious or known incendiary fires of all kinds does not exceed a percentage of 3.50 of the total number of fires. Even for the sake of argument taking one-half of the "cause unknown" fires as of incendiary origin, this only brings up to 12.79 the total proportion of incendiary fires to all fires in the United States and Canada—a very liberal estimate. While, in Mr. Lock's opinion, climatic conditions, the cheapness of timber and the carelessness of the population are causes which prevent on this side the Atlantic, European standards of fire waste, yet remedies can be found in fire marshal laws, in the qualification of agents and public adjusters, a record and investigation of all fires, restriction of the amount of insurance on small properties, the amendment of the penal code, co-operation by the authorities with the insurance companies in fraudulent cases, fines or imprisonment for carelessness or criminality and the adoption of proper building codes. In brief, that is, what is required is the extension of the State's police power.