

CLAUDE, Who Was Co-operative

(AND FIFI, WHO FIRE-WATCHED)

A TALE FOR THE TIMES

(No. 8)

Written for "The Listener" by M.B.

WHEN Claude was 10 years old, his father made him read "Letters of a Self-Made Merchant to His Son." And Claude took all its lessons to heart, so that when the time came for him to take his father's place as a Self-Made Merchant he was fully equipped with a set of Business Precepts of the highest order. And one of these precepts involved always treating your employees as you would like them to treat you, so he was always very polite to them, and gave them tea-money whenever he made them work overtime. He was fond of telling his fellow business men how all the members of his firm were one big family, and that all that was needed to solve any labour problem was co-operation between employer and employee. And strangely enough, his system worked quite well and none of his staff ever left him unless somebody offered them better wages elsewhere.

When the regulations about compulsory fire-watching came in, Claude determined to live up to his reputation as a model Employer, so he set aside a nice room for the fire-watchers, equipped with two rimu single beds and mattresses, and one had a yellow satin eiderdown and one had a pink satin eiderdown. And he also installed a gas-ring, so that the fire-watchers could heat some nice nourishing soup for themselves if they felt like it. And it all looked so nice and cosy that Claude almost felt like taking a turn there himself.



"... Bore her down the ladder to safety."

AFTER the fire-watching had been carried on for a week, one of his employees came to Claude and said that it was lonely fire-watching in the long winter evenings, and could they have a radio in their room? So Claude gave them a radio out of his own office, and felt very virtuous about it.

Everything went all right for another week, and then another of his employees

came to him and said he thought the room looked rather bare and not very home-like, and could he do something about it? So Claude had curtains put up, and hung one or two pictures and put a notice on the door outside saying "The Nest." And for another month everybody was perfectly happy.

Then one morning Claude's private secretary, Fifi, came into the office and said that she and her girl-friend were getting a little tired of having hot soup for supper, and would Claude put in a little electric stove so that they could make themselves some hot scones sometimes? And Claude thought he might as well do the job properly, so he built on a little kitchenette with an electric washing-machine and a frigidaire, and also a sitting-room with an electric fire-place.

[T was therefore something of a surprise to him when a fortnight after this he was waited on by a delegation of surly-looking employees. They pointed out to him that it was a flagrant injustice, and probably against the regulations laid down by the Fire-Watchers' Union, to expect people to sleep on the premises at night unless a bathroom was provided, so that such fire-watchers could have a bath before beginning their new day's work, and that unless Claude consented to build on a bathroom within the next week, they would pass a resolution at the next union meeting depriving him of the honorary title of Model Employer. So Claude, bowing to necessity, installed a model bathroom featuring a sunken bath and a decorative goldfish bowl.

FOR the next few months Claude's existence was untroubled. Then came catastrophe. It happened to be one of the many nights when Fifi was doing her fire-watching on the premises. She never shirked her duty in this respect, for Fifi found the fire-watchers' flat much more comfortable than her own boarding house, and sometimes she consented to do everyone else's fire-watching for months at a time. On this particular evening, she had done her washing for the week and then retired to bed early with a book. Soon, however, her book slipped from her hand, and she fell into a dreamless sleep.

She struggled awake in the early hours of the morning. There was an acrid smell in her nostrils. The room was hot, and there were crackling sounds in the next room. Fire! She rushed to the window, threw it up and screamed.

A comforting sight met her eyes. Already the streets were crowded with
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