

# BOYS AND GIRLS

## Life in the North-West

BY GORDON McLAREN.

[This is one of a number of stories that were written three years ago in a 'Witness' Boys' Page competition. The writer, who was a very young competitor, received the prize of a silver watch. While he greatly lacked experience in story-telling, yet his three successive pictures of conditions attending life in the North-West showed he had powers of observation.—Ed.]

### CHAPTER I.—FIGHTING A PRAIRIE FIRE.

It was a bleak, windy day in October when Mr. Doncaster hitched his horses to his waggon, and started with his wife to the small town of B—, eight miles distant.

After giving several cautions to the children, such as to be careful about fire in the stovepipes, Mrs. Doncaster stepped into the waggon, and as the horses started, Mr. Doncaster shouted back, 'Bill, if by any chance a prairie fire should come, hitch up the colts and plough a guard; don't be alarmed, because it's not at all likely.'

The children went back into the house, and from the window watched the waggon rumble down the stony road.

Mr. Doncaster had come from Oxford County, Ont., twelve years before, to make a home for himself in the Prairie Province. Fortune had smiled on the Doncasters' home, and six years after they had come to Manitoba they were in a fair way towards doing well.

But suddenly a great misfortune happened. A prairie fire had burnt to the ground all the Doncasters' possessions, including their grain which was stacked ready for threshing, and they had to begin anew.

Then there had been drought for four years, but for the next two years there had been splendid crops so that the Doncasters were well off.

There were five children in the family; Bill was the eldest and was sixteen years old. He was very strong for a boy of his age. Dan was twelve, Maggie ten, Charlie eight, while little Molly was only four.

Mr. and Mrs. Doncaster had been gone nearly an hour when Bill went to cut some firewood. He had cut about half-an-hour when he came to a stick that was very hard and knotty. He gave it several cuts but he did not succeed in cutting it in two. At last he hit it with all his might; the stick rolled over, and the axe slipped, cutting an ugly gash in his shin. He at once called out, 'Dan! Maggie! Charlie! come quick, I've cut my leg!' Dan, from the window, saw Bill rolling on the ground in agony. He immediately rushed out and tied his handkerchief loosely around Bill's leg, above the knee; he then put a stick inside the loop and twisted it up as tight as it would go. Maggie brought a blanket and they carried Bill upstairs into his room. Maggie bandaged up the wound, having first bathed it with cold water. After doing some chores, Dan and Charlie then went to pull turnips in the garden. They worked till noon, had dinner, and then resumed their task. They had been busy about an hour when suddenly Charlie exclaimed, 'Oh, Dan, look out by Warner's, see that big black smoke! I believe it's a prairie fire!' Dan looked to the North-West and saw a thick, black smoke which grew larger and blacker and began to move.

'I wonder what idiot set a fire in this wind,' Dan said.

'Oh, I guess it was Warner,' Charlie answered.

'Most likely,' Dan replied, 'he is always setting fires, he ought to be sent to jail.'

There was a heavy wind blowing from the north-west, and it was evident to Dan that it would not take long for the fire to reach their home. So he started to the stable. On the way he saw Maggie getting a pail of water. He called out, 'Maggie, there's a prairie fire coming and we'll have to fight it; I'm going to harness the colts. What's Bill doing?'

'He is asleep,' Maggie answered, 'are you going to plough a guard?'

'Yes,' Dan replied, 'we mustn't wake Bill up.'

'No we won't,' said Maggie, going into the house, while Dan went on to the stable where the colts were kept.

The colts were very wild and high-spirited. He succeeded in getting the harness on Pete, but, when he approached Bess, she gave him such a kick in the ribs that he rolled on the ground and for a moment could not rise. When he at last arose it was evident to him that no time was to be lost trying to harness the colts, so he left them and began to put harness on an old ox called Jim. After he had harnessed the ox he hitched him to the plough.

To the north of the Doncasters' home was a broad, deep creek. Its banks were steep, rugged bluffs often sixty feet high and covered with green poplars. To the east was a thick row of trees and a large garden, while on the south, west, and north-west was

leading the ox while Dan held the handles of the plough. While Maggie and Dan were thus employed Charlie had gone into the granary and got three bran sacks. He carried them to the pump where he gave them a good soaking; he then took them to the west side of the guard and next hunted up an old manure fork on which he stuck a large thick sod. These he likewise took to the pump and wet the sod.

Maggie and Dan had worked for about ten minutes and were nearing the north end of the guard when suddenly Dan exclaimed: 'There's no use, Maggie, we can't save the place at this rate; the fire isn't two miles away and we haven't got nine furrows ploughed. You and Charlie unhitch Jim and I'll go and start a back fire west of the stubble.'

In spite of Maggie's remonstrations Dan started off.

It was a grand and inspiring spectacle, the flames shot high into the air and broke into thousands of sparks which shot ahead of the crackling flames. The fire roared and crackled and the smoke rose high into the sky.

When Dan reached the limit of the stubble the fire was hardly a mile away. He lit several matches but none of them would burn. At last he discovered his pockets contained only two more matches; he lit one, but it went out. He pulled a large heap of grass and struck the last match, but it went out also.



PULLED A HEAP OF GRASS AND STRUCK THE LAST MATCH.

a field of stubble which extended nearly a quarter of a mile to the west. The house was to the east of the barn and stables. Near the barn the creek took a sharp turn to the north. The creek was enclosed by a large pasture.

After giving several pictures to little Molly and telling her to be quiet and not wake Bill, Maggie joined Dan at the stable and they began to plough a guard on the south and west sides of the buildings, Maggie

Dan sprang to his feet in despair and ran off at top speed to the guard. The smoke was blinding and his side hurt him severely, but still he dashed on. The fire roared and crackled behind him and every moment the smoke became more dense; at last he reached the guard. Charlie had given his sod another thorough soaking.

By the time Dan reached the guard the fire had reached the spot where he had started from. Still it came on roaring and