

PRAIRIE FIRE

Little Betty Hudson woke up on the morning of her birthday and saw she was alone in the room. Mother was already up. The middle of her pillow showed a deep, round, pressed-in place and the covers were thrown in crooked heaps.

Betty slid from her small bed and her bare feet padded across the floor to the hallway. She looked to see if her older brothers, Rog and Ben, were still upstairs. But their bed was empty too. No need looking for Cliff, the oldest, he got up early, like papa did. The little towhead went sharply sidewise to hear of sounds downstairs. It brought one tightly braided pigtail to standing straight up. *She heard nothing from below.*

She could hear nothing from below. An impish grin suddenly spread over her childish features. She knew - "birthday" surprises! They were all just waiting for her to come down, when they would grab her quick and thump her - "one - two - three - four - one to grow on - one to marry - one to be happy". On the dining-room table she could see a pink frosted cake that Mommy promised to bake, maybe with candles on top to blow. Here Betty's head nodded hard, reassuring herself. They had found nine eggs in the hen nests yesterday, and that was plenty, Mommy said. Just last night she had said all that while they stood outside looking at the prairie fire. It made everything on the yard, the strawbarn, privy, and hen-house show as light as day. Then Mommy's hand in hers had gone limp while they watched the bright red fire upon the dark sky. Betty had to shake her hand to make her talk more. But when she did, it wasn't about the cake or the candles at all. "That fire is 'way across the river," she ^{had} said, "the wind can only blow the smoke here and that won't hurt anybody." Betty guessed she was somewhat afraid,

Had she heard her mother's moan of fear upon rising in the night to view that fiery sky once more, she would have known for certain. But Betty had slept the deep sleep of childhood during all the disturbances of the night.

Now she ran to the clothes closet where her best red cashmere dress hung. She could dress herself. Somehow the dress was brought down from it's peg and then