FIRE DRILL IN THE SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CAREFUL WORK AND TRAINING THAT HAS NOT BEEN WITHOUT REWARD.

A SYSTEM THAT UNDOUBTEDLY SAVED THE LIVES OF MANY PUPILS.

FIRE!

EVERYBODY OUT IN TIME!

READY FOR THE SIGNAL....

LINING UP TO RETURN...

THERE is a certain teacher in our town who is being lionized a great deal lately on account of the part she played in leading 500 youngsters out of a burning schoolhouse. She deserves every bit of the credit she is getting, but don't you suppose she would rather have it in a different form? Instead of crying that "Miss Casey was cool enough to give the fire signal," or "Miss Casey was discerning enough to smell smoke," why doesn't somebody sing Miss Casey's praise for all the weeks and months and years that she has been drilling her school and herself to do what they did automatically on that eventful Wednesday afternoon? The coolness, the promptness, the presence of mind won all the credit, but the greater part of it rightly belonged to the perfected system. It is the same old story of the big occasion getting the praise that belongs to the little day by day persistencies.

For more than half a dozen years the fire drill has been compulsory in San Francisco's schools, and Mr. Kingsbury, our deputy Superintendent, says that the success in clearing the Lafayette School was enough to pay for all those six or more years of drilling and drubbing and rub-a-dub-dubbing that all the schools in San Francisco have been going through—for the sake of that one fire.

There is no State law making the drill compulsory, but a local law exists now in nearly every city, and it has fought its way in San Francisco past protest and argument, and it still stands. The pros are fat with pride now, and the cons deem it advisable to refrain from overmany words until the excitement has died down. Or, perhaps, they will cease altogether from being cons in the thought of the 500 little people who were brought out safely from what might have happened.

It has come about within the past decade that San Francisco has arrived at the conclusion that her school buildings were too inflammable and their stairs too steep for safety in case of fire. After more or less struggle it was decreed that a fire drill should be practiced in every school in the city, and this drill takes place at least twice a month. So if you should wander in at some schoolhouse door on a fire-drill day you might see this sort of thing.

Everybody is busy in the usual way, without the least sign of consciousness that something is about to happen. This is because they really do not know it—the fire alarm is given by the principal at any time that may occur to her, and she aims to have that time always different. When a real fire comes, it is argued, it won't post a bulletin of its arrival in all the rooms.

So you will find Mollie Louise standing to read "Across-the-lonely-beach-we-flit—The—little—sandpiper—and—I." You will find Johnnie multiplying at the blackboard and Jimmie beside him snipping chalk when Miss Pedagogy is busy otherwheres. What noise there is in the room is the stillest kind of noise.

All at once the gong in the central hall, the same well worn gong that has called people in to school day after day, appears to break loose. It clangs and clanks as if imps were tampering with it, and what it screems to the little children and the big children is "Fire." Not one pupil, or teacher perhaps, in the whole building knows whether this means real fire or merely a drill, but that makes no difference. The building is to be emptied in the shortest time possible.

At the first sound of the alarm every child from top to bottom of the building rises to face in the direction of exit, and at the teacher's immediate signal they start to reach the yard. They move as rapidly as is possible short of running, and yet the lines are never broken; the order of three abreast or four abreast, or whatever it may be, is as regular as at any recess or end-of-school hour. Nobody thinks of whispering; there is too much hurry about getting outside. And when it is all over and several hundred children are safe and sound in the street outside, the principal looks at her watch and proudly says, "One minute and a half."

Or one and three-quarters, or whatever the time may be. Not over 2½ minutes does the drill average nowadays in any of the schools, and some of them have as many as sixteen rooms.

If you look about with eyes that are canny you will see that a gentle little rivalry exists between principals in regard to this practice. "Of course this is a large building," deprecates the school mistress, or "the stairs wind a good deal, but still—well, we rather pride ourselves on our fire drill," and she glows a bit with past records and present assurance.

The Hancock School has emptied itself of 600 pupils in 1 minute and 40 seconds. The Horace Mann has taken only 10 seconds more to turn out 950. These are especially fine records, but 2½ minutes is quite enough time for either of them to take under the slowest of circumstances to clear either of the buildings.

Each principal is given free choice as to the giving of fire signals. The usual way is by the gong, but in a few schools the small hand bell is used, and there are those who have a system of electric bells. Three schools—the Hancock, the Agassiz and the Longfellow—give the cry of "fire." It is claimed by the teachers who organized this method that it is the natural one.

Almost all the schools have four exits, so it is a quick matter to pour a stream of children into the street before they can be injured by a fire. It must needs be a rapid one that can get under dangerous headway before everybody is in a place of safety.

There are drills in which shifts are made, so that if one exit be cut off the line of march can be instantly changed. All this sounds simple and easy perhaps. No one in the world but a teacher knows anything of what it means to bring several hundred children to that state of discipline where they shall start instantly at an unexpected signal from whatever they may be doing and go to the street in perfect order and without panic.

When a real fire occurs no amount of discipline can do away with fright, although it can control it. It is fortunate when no pupils know that the fire is real. Then "fire drill" is all that the little folks think of and they are fearless. At the time that the Clement School on Geary street was partly burned a few years ago a little girl from a lower grade fell from sheer fright and lay in the line of exit. Those who were there remember how she looked lying where, in a moment more, she would have been trampled under many hurrying feet. They remember, too, how Matthew Long, "an upstairs boy," ran to her and carried her down the long flight of schoolhouse stairs. He was under 15 then, but he showed the stuff that the man is made of.

There is talk these days of requiring principals to teach in larger buildings than is now required. Perhaps there is no stronger argument against this increase of their responsibilities than arises from the thought of fire.

There have been many objections raised to the drill. Parents have complained that Jennie caught cold going outdoors without her hat and that Willie's studies were interrupted. Then, too, there is the danger of falling in the hurried marching. But the arguments for seem so much greater. No serious falls have ever occurred. And aside from the value in case of real fire there is an immense amount of self-control taught by the drill. One of our principals remembers the two boys who were sent to his school basement to investigate the cause of smoke and came back to report that there had been a fire there and they had put it out. If they had never had all those lessons on emergency and presence of mind, would they not have been more likely to run back shrieking that the building was one fire?

Remember that the Lafayette School burned to the ground and 500 children escaped unhurt.

Best Time for Boys.

"The best time to be a boy the world has ever known is just this time—just at the outstart of a great, vigorous, forceful, wisdom-loving century," writes Dr. David Starr Jordan, president of Leland Stanford Jr. University, in the Saturday Evening Post. "And just the best place to be a boy is right here in the United States, the one part of the earth where a boy can grow up with a reasonable chance of making the most of himself. 'America means opportunity,' says Emerson, and to the right kind of a boy this is the main thing. He does not ask help, he does not need encouragement. All he wants is a chance, and that he can find. There was never a time when men—sober, intelligent, skillful and trustworthy—were so much in demand.

"Now, to the right kind of a boy, a boy with something in him, the best advice that anybody can give is summed up in these two sentences: Keep yourself clean! Go to college!"