

The Free Press Short Story

YELLOW

By JACK HENDERSON

I SUPPOSE when you call a boy "Yellow" at school, for a nickname, there is generally a pretty good reason for it. Yellow Sanderson, the fellow I am telling about, always claimed he got the name because he wore a yellow tie the first day he came to Highland Academy.

Little things of that kind often stick to a boy—or a teacher. We have one teacher called "Bugs" because twenty years ago he had a pair of knickerbockers of Scotch tweed. We have another called "Growler" because he growls at you in class. Of course, we don't call them these names to their faces, any more than we call Doctor Driggs by his first name, which is John. But all the fellows have nicknames, like "Sleepy" and "Dutch" and "Red." There is one boy called "Bug," and he hates and loathes it—but not so much as "Yellow" hated his name even while he was earning it.

Sometimes I think it is cruel to mark a boy by a name that he really doesn't deserve. It is less work to call a boy Jack or Tom or Harry than to go to work and invent some unpleasant name like Hippo or Monkeyface for him. But you can't doubt, at times, that some of these school nicknames are deserved.

Yellow was a big, tall, rather delicate and sensitive boy. They tried him at guard on the football team, and he made a good deal of a mess of it. I played a little myself, and had a chance to watch him, and you couldn't say exactly that he quit on any play, but he never seemed to charge as hard as he could. He often missed tackles, too, when just a little more speed would have been all he needed. They did not give Yellow his letter, although he started the last game of the season—our regular annual game with Media School.

Just about ten minutes after the game started, our coach, Mr. Robinson, sent Jackson to take Yellow's place. Yellow came out slowly, and put a blanket around his shoulders, and then sat down. "You might as well get dressed," said Mr. Robinson to him.

Yellow turned red in the face when he heard that, and got up slowly and went into the gym, where we dressed. Then he came out after a while, and sat down somewhere in the grandstand and watched the game. Nobody said anything to him about it, of course, for nobody quite knew why Mr. Robinson had taken him out. He might have been feeling sick that day and unable to do himself justice; or he might have mixed up the signals a few times.

Anyway, we won the game, and nobody seemed much interested in trying to analyze it. Only losing games are ever remembered in great detail. We won just because we had a little more weight and beef than Media and were able to score on them twice. They didn't score at all. All their passes were well covered by our backs, and they didn't have the weight to make an impression on our line.

Next Yellow went out for basketball. He was tall enough for a centre, but he couldn't seem to get the hang of the game very well. I have always said that basketball is a harder and more punishing game than football; it seems to me I am always knocked around harder in basketball than in anything else. Yellow seemed to slow up, during practice. One good poke in the stomach was enough to make him play so cautiously and slowly that he was no use. He was dropped from the squad pretty soon; and maybe he overheard some talk about his lack of courage. We had a short name for courage, which doesn't look pretty if you write it down.

So Yellow began to flock by himself to the Highland monthly, or in dramatics, or in debating. He seemed to have a curious interest in sports. He was like a cat trying to drink hot milk, if you know what I mean. The cat will stick his nose into the milk, and yowl, and jump, and then come back and try it all over again. Yellow was sandless, but he wanted to be an athlete. It didn't surprise me when he joined a boxing class started by Mr. Thomas for all boys not on the basketball, hockey or track squad.

"Wait till that big sandless pup gets a tap on the snout," said my roommate, Stan Blodgett.

"He doesn't have to box if he doesn't want to," I said. "The class is voluntary."

"Well, he'd better keep a mile out of it. Wait till somebody soaks him on the solar plexus."

"What's that?"

"The soft spot where you get your wind knocked out."

"I know what you mean."

by ruffians. The little kids would swing at each other like windmills, so slowly and clumsily that they couldn't do any damage at all. After a while, Mr. Thomas boxed with a bigger fellow, Lester Peters, who knew something about it. This was worth watching, although of course they were only sparring— their hands were held open, so they couldn't hurt each other.

Then, after everybody was excused except Yellow and Lester, and a big fellow named Jackson who had proved too slow for basketball, Mr. Thomas suggested that Yellow and Jackson might box a couple of rounds. At this point we all grew very much interested. We made a few remarks while Yellow was tying his left glove on, and when Mr. Thomas tied his right one we waxed very merry about his chances. Mr. Thomas looked up and told us to save our wit for some other occasion where it would be more appreciated.

We could see as Yellow came out on the floor, that he was very much excited. He always liked the surroundings of athletics, if you allow what I mean—the smell of soiled clothes and chloroform liniment in the dressing room, the shine of the electric lights in the gym, the hush that comes over a crowd before a game, the sound of the cheers. These were things that appealed to him. He wanted to be an athlete, I believe, more than any other boy in school. And as he came out now, for this friendly boxing bout, I could see that he was all wrought up about it. No sooner had he started to box with Jackson than we were all astonished to see how good he was. We had been reading an old book called "Fighting," and we pretended this was a real fight, and not a friendly sparring match for fun and exercise.

"He is going around Jackson like a cooper round a barrel," exclaimed Stan Blodgett.

"Shades of Tom Crib," said Bill King. "Yellow has reached his bread-basket."

"He has tapped his ruby!"

Bill and Stan laughed when I said this, although it wasn't quite accurate. We saw Yellow plant his left glove squarely on Jackson's nose, but there was no bloodshed. Jackson just shook his head and grinned. A second later, Yellow reached the point of his jaw with a hard-looking uppercut. Jackson stood like a rock, but his grin was beginning to fade.

"Counter," said Mr. Thomas. Yellow looked by this time as if he were a born boxer. He was flickering his left glove into Jackson's face, and then shooting his right into Jackson's nose or chin, sometimes varying this attack with a body blow. All the while, he was walking around Jackson, and forcing Jackson to pivot in order to face him.

It was amazing to see the despised Yellow in this new and tremendous role. "Shoot over the hay-maker," cried Stan. "Stand back and let him fall," added Bill.

"Climb, Jackson," was my advice. "It is the only way you can last out the round."

Jackson's face was now quite red, and he was muffing hard. Fully two minutes had gone by, and he had not struck a blow. At last we saw him draw back his arm, and then launch a hard, ferocious swing that missed Yellow's head by an inch. So hard was the blow that Jackson toppled forward and almost fell down. That, as we knew, was the opportunity for Yellow to dash in with a dangerous punch.

But he did nothing of the kind. His whole expression seemed to change. He even retreated, while Jackson regained his balance. And then Yellow seemed to want to box at long range. His arms were up, but he seemed to be merely tapping; in fact he seemed to be chiefly anxious to dodge Jackson's next blow. And Jackson realized what had happened. He had missed his only punch, but he had frightened Yellow so badly with it that Yellow didn't want to box any more.

Jackson was, as I have said, as slow as mud. But he shuffled forward now, and hit Yellow squarely on the nose. The blow was too high, but Yellow shut his eyes and ducked right into it. Before he could straighten up again Jackson had tapped him lightly in just the place Stan Blodgett had mentioned—the solar plexus.

That was enough for Yellow. He bent double grinding both gloves into his own face. He looked as if he were praying Jackson not to hit him again.

Mr. Thomas called "Time."

We were all so surprised that we left the gallery quietly, and we didn't have much to say about it afterwards in our room. But it was the end of Yellow's career as a boxer.

He played tennis in the spring, and his serve and overhead shots were all good. But he didn't make the team, although we hadn't any good material for it. Three fellows out of the third class, and one kid from the fourth, were the best we could muster. But each and every one of them beat Yellow in the trial matches. He would fade in the fifth set, when you need nerve. He used to stand sometimes and watch the baseball practice with a wistful look on his face—but we all guessed, without being told, that he was afraid to bat.

It takes more sand than a lot of people suppose to face a wild pitcher. Yellow admired the baseball players—the easy, fearless way they went about their work. But he didn't come out for the team.

If there was one fellow we didn't notice and didn't associate with, that fellow was Yellow. He was just like a ghost; you could almost see through him, and it didn't make any difference whether he was in the crowd or not.

Then Prize Day came around, and we all got our diplomas, including Yellow. Every fellow is cheered when he goes up on the platform to get his diploma, but the cheers for Yellow were so feeble that a mosquito would hardly have heard them. That evening, after a big supper and a lot of singing and speechmaking, we were supposed to pack our trunks and be ready for an early start in the morning.

I don't know to this day, and nobody knows, how the fire started. They say it began in the boiler room, somehow, and was spreading all through the wall before the night watchman discovered it. We sleep in one long building at Highland, a big dormitory for all classes, and the dorm is something like an army barracks, if you know what I mean. There are big rooms for the kids, and small ones adjoining them for the masters, and only the first class has individual bedrooms on the top floor. At one end of the top floor is a set of rooms used for an infirmary, with a special staircase of its own.

"We were all tired that night, and when the siren hooted, and people began to run and shout in the corridors, it was some time before most of us were awake. The smallest boys, being on the two lower floors, were all taken out safely by the masters. By this time the smoke was thick in our rooms on the upper floors, and the flames were swinging around fiercely in places. Most of us came down by the fire escapes, which was a very easy thing to do. But Yellow hadn't been asleep at all—I think he was lying awake—and realizing bitterly that a failure he had been. The last night of school is often a bitter one for a fellow who has not made good. Maybe Yellow was wishing then that some big chance would come for him to show courage after all.

Yellow was certainly, according to all accounts, the first fellow out of bed on our floor. Just one look down the staircase, and out of the window, told him all he needed to know. He ran down the corridor, pounding at all the doors and yelling "Fire." Then he walked down the stairs, which he could very easily do, as they were not yet in a blaze.

After a while, we were all on the grounds at a safe distance from the building. All of the teachers were herding us there, and keeping us from trying to dash in and save things. It was a fine, warm, cloudy night, and I will never forget the picture that the old "barrack" made as it became a tower of fire from basement to roof. When one end of the roof fell in, and we heard the whole top floor go crashing down into the basement at that end of the building, we could hardly keep from cheering. Everybody safe, everybody looking at the finest spectacle he had ever seen—well, that is the kind of fire you can enjoy.

I doubt if even Doctor Driggs, the head master, minded the fire very much because the building was fully insured and the school was intending to replace it anyway. Just as soon as the roof was called by classes, and it was known that every boy was accounted for, Dr. Driggs seemed to become perfectly quiet. The fire crept along from the wrecked south end of the building toward the north end, where the infirmary was. The local firemen were squirting on it, now, but they had no possible chance of saving any of it and were principally busy wetting down the roofs of the other buildings for fear of sparks.

We were watching the fire creep along. First there would be a swirl of smoke at a window, then the smoke would just pour out of it, and then tongues of fire would follow. It was a most gorgeous sight. Only the north end of the building was standing, and the firemen had come down off its roof, when there suddenly appeared a small, white-clad figure in the centre of the last window on the top floor.

All this time, the boys had been kept together in classes, and as soon as the figure was seen the teachers began to call the roll again. Through the roar of the flames, you could hear the boys answering "Here!" to their names.

Suddenly there came a voice: "That's my brother, Joe."

It was Jackson—slow, dull-witted Jackson—who suddenly remembered that his little brother had been invited to spend the night at school and had been put into an infirmary room. It seemed incredible that Jackson had forgotten all about it until that moment. But he was the kind that never remembers anything until the last moment, and often not then!

Flames were rolling out of the windows except the last two or three, in which the smoke was beginning to swirl. Little Joe Jackson, only ten years old, stood in the last window. We all saw him clambering out on the window sill.

"Don't jump!" called a stern voice— I think it was Doctor Driggs. Five or six firemen rushed forward with a ladder and tried to put it against the red-hot side of the building. The flames beat them back. Others ran around to the rear, hoping that it would be possible to climb that way. It was evident that the north end of the building would collapse, like the other end, in a few minutes more.

Mr. Robinson, the football coach, ran forward and held out his arms, calling for the boys nearest him to bring a blanket which might serve as a life-

reaching far forward to grasp the rain pipe that led down at the corner of the building. It was a long reach, but he just made it.

Then, hand under hand, with little Joe's weight threatening every moment to tear him loose, Yellow came slowly down that rain pipe, into a sheet of flame. It was one of those things that cannot be done, but he did it. The rain pipe tore loose from the wall, when he still had twenty feet to go, and carried him cut in a great curve away from the blazing wall. And that saved him. He hit the ground with a thump that knocked him unconscious, and his clothes were all charred and burned. Little Joe was not hurt at all; he had fallen on top of Yellow, and except for the fright he was as good as new.

We all went home in the morning. Yellow stayed behind, in Doctor Driggs' house. He was swathed from head to foot in bandages, so that he looked like a mummy, and was entirely unable to move. But he could hear. He heard the cheer we gave him when the buses came, and we all went away. Nobody was ever so badly hurt that he couldn't have heard that cheer!

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"The farmers of the Canadian prairie provinces have during the past two decades directed their efforts chiefly towards the production and export of wheat. Economic and other circumstances until recently probably warranted wheat farming as the major agricultural interest, but conditions have changed and now wheat farming yields little profit. Farmers are, therefore, turning much attention to live stock production and its co-requisite forage crop farming. This move has been largely forced, not only by economic conditions but also by such other conditions as extensive weed infestation, soil drifting and reduced yields.

"As a result of this greatly increasing interest in forage crops, the problem of seed supplies has become a matter of considerable concern. The prairie provinces, and indeed all Canada, have in the past imported large amounts of forage crop seeds although our agronomic conditions are quite suitable for the production of most of our requirements. This situation," writes Mr. C. M. Stewart, of the Dominion Seed Branch, in the July number of Scientific Agriculture, "has led me to the conviction, and this is my thesis on this occasion, that forage crop seed production should be very appreciably increased in these provinces, at least to the extent of supplying their own increasing requirements insofar as this may be economically practicable. By growing our own seeds we can be assured of supplies of hardy and approved suitable varieties. Further, we can avoid sending large sums of money outside the provinces for imported seeds and so increase the incomes of our farmers, who undertake to produce these seeds for us.

"It is actually the case that the prairie provinces produce, in relation to their area and suitability for grass production, a smaller amount of grassland products than any other similar area in the world. The ill effects of farming without grass—producing cereal crops interspersed with bare fallows—is patent to all observers. Weed and soil problems, together with economic conditions that need not be discussed now, render it imperative that the prairie farming system be changed and that larger areas of forage crops be grown."

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Did You Ever Stop to Think?

By Edson R. Waite, Shawnee, Oklahoma

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"Through the newspaper the merchant has localized and concentrated circulation, permitting a hold upon public attention within a confined trading area. The newspaper invites immediate attention and permits flexibility in planning and carrying out advertising schedules.

"The newspaper, with proper management, should have a real place of influence in a community and as such make it perhaps the most effective advertising medium.

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