

CHARACTERS

Persistent ghost



By
Tom
Paterson

Today Craigflower School is honored as one of Victoria's leading landmarks, as befitting its claim to being one of the first schools established west of the Great Lakes. Preserved for posterity through the efforts of the Native Sons and Daughters of B.C., it reposes beside the Gorge, attracting numerous visitors to its museum in summer.

But, 60-odd years ago, it was little more than a ruin. Retired after the second Craigflower School was built across the street, in 1911, the aging schoolhouse had been reduced to the role of

cottage for the new school's caretaker, Hugh Palliser. He and his family had emigrated from Yorkshire, England, that year, moving into the old school.

It is to Mr. Palliser, in fact, that we are indebted for much of Craigflower School's original contents, he having salvaged desks and furniture from the bush where they had been thrown to rot.

It also is due to Mr. Palliser that the provincial archives contains a fascinating account concerning Craigflower School which most historians have overlooked—that of its ghost!

GHOSTLY SIGNS

Mr. Palliser's encounter with the unearthly visitor began with the discovery of a skeleton by a contractor digging a hole in the former schoolyard during repairs to the Craigflower bridge. Upon telling caretaker Palliser of his find, both men had returned to the hole, deciding the ancient remains to be Indian. Placing the skull and bones in a box, Palliser packed the grizzly prize to his woodshed, a lean-to built onto the kit-

chen. His youngest daughter was interested in that sort of thing and he would show her the bones when she returned from school. Then he had forgotten the strange find as he continued his chores.

That evening, after the supper dishes had been cleared, the family gathered about the glowing stove, as customary, Mr. and Mrs. Palliser to read, the children to do their homework. The evening passed quickly, as usual, until the latch of the door to the lean-to clicked loudly, attracting all eyes. Surprised, the family watched the door slowly swing wide, and a chill draft invaded the warm kitchen. But no one entered.

Thinking he had left the outside door open, Palliser strode into the darkened shed. When he returned, a puzzled frown creased his forehead as he told his wife that the door was locked tight.

He examined the kitchen door, constructed of boards nailed edge to edge by three crossbars, its iron hinges and thumb latch seemed in order. When he pushed it shut, the latch snapped into place.



Historic Craigflower School . . .knew a ghost!

Then the incident was forgotten, the family resumed its routine. But not for long. It was as they made ready to retire that Palliser again heard the distinctive click of the latch being raised. As he stared, in amazement, the door again swung open, allowing a cold draft to penetrate the kitchen.

Snatching up a lantern, he charged into the woodshed, flashing the light into every shadow. Nothing. Again he checked the outer door: it was locked.

Near speechless with wonder, he retreated to the kitchen, then paused to circle the lean-to with the light once more—almost dropping the lantern when its glow fell upon the skull. It lay in the box where he had placed it that afternoon, hideous, empty eyes staring at him, jawbone curled back in an evil, toothless grin.

The macabre effect lasted but a second and, shrugging off the eerie sensation, Palliser went to bed. There were no further incidents that night.

ERIE VIGIL

The next evening, he bundled his family to bed early. Then, lantern within easy reach, he waited pensively by the stove. For hours he maintained his lonely vigil, taking his eyes from the door only to feed the fire. Then . . .he heard it!

As he watched, the latch

slowly lifted. Leaping to the door, he jerked it wide, to be met by that deathly cold wind. His lantern stabbed the dark, sweeping the shelves of preserves, tools, the neatly stacked firewood. No one was there, nothing moved. He rattled the outside door. It was locked.

Then he saw it— that hideous, gloating skull. Its evil grin seemed almost alive. Grabbing a shovel and

the box of bones, Palliser stumbled out into the night. Somewhere beneath the ancient, gnarled maples of the old schoolyard, he returned the accursed bones to the earth, where Hugh Palliser buried the skeleton he never told. But he did say that his kitchen door never again rattled and opened to the invisible hand of his ghostly caller. ●