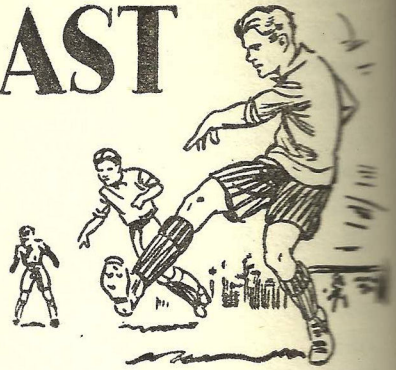


PERKINSON'S LAST MATCH



by *FRANK RICHARDS*
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PERKINSON, of the Felgate Fifth, breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He stood with his hands shoved deep in his trousers pockets, facing Langdale, captain of Felgate, in his study. Perkinson was trying to keep his temper, but he found it hard work. Perkinson, in fact, was not much accustomed to keeping his temper. That temper of his was hot and hasty: and even his best pal in his own form, Purring, often found Perk liable to fly off the handle. He was generally sorry afterwards: but that did not always undo the effect of a hot-headed outbreak.

But even Perkinson, with all his heat and haste, realised that it wouldn't do to slang the captain of the school in his own study. Langdale, after all, was captain and Head of the Games, and in the Felgate world of Soccer his word was law. He might be a thumping fool—at the moment, Perk was convinced that he was—but he was still the Great Panjandrum of Soccer at Felgate.

So Perkinson tried hard, very hard, to keep his temper. It was not easy, when he had to listen to Langdale

telling him that, that footling fozzler, Cadby of the Sixth, had been picked to play at outside right—a place in the Felgate team which Perk had come to regard as his own personal property as if by divine right.

True, nobody but Perkinson looked on Cadby as a footling fozzler. Really and truly Cadby was a first-class winger. Everybody at Felgate knew that Langdale was doubtful between the two, so much so that he had postponed his decision almost till the last moment—the day of the match with Dunstan's.

But now the fiat had gone forth. Cadby was going to play in the Dunstan's game—and Perkinson was not. Fellows had told Perk that "it might turn out so—but he simply could not believe it. Now he had to, when Langdale himself told him.

Perkinson's face was flushed. His eyes were glinting. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Langdale that he was an ass, a dud, a miserable apology for a football captain, a fathead who didn't know as much about a man's form at footer as Skip Ruggles of the Fourth, or Boot of the Third. And to follow that up with a definite statement

that he, Percival Perkinson, was fed up to the back teeth with such a rotten dud of a skipper, and that he wouldn't be found dead in his team if he stayed on at Felgate for a hundred years!

Langdale was speaking quite calmly, as if quite unaware of the hurricanes and tornadoes raging inside Perk.

"Sorry, old man, but there it is! I hate to leave you out—you're the best winger we've got, bar Cadby—"

"Bar Cadby! articulated Perkinson, "I can make rings round Cadby, or any other man in the Sixth, and if you don't know it, Langdale, then—"

Langdale gave him a quiet look, and interrupted.

"Better leave it at that, old man," he said, drily.

Perkinson had just enough self-control left, to leave it at that. He turned, without another word, and tramped out of the study. He closed the door after him, with a bang that woke most of the echoes along the Sixth-Form studies.

His pal, Purringe, met him at the end of the passage.

"What's the verdict, Perk?" he asked.

Perkinson choked.

"That idiot Langdale—!" He said no more, but that was enough. He tramped out into the quadrangle, leaving Purringe emitting a low whistle.

Several fellows stared at Perkinson as he came out of the House.

Heedless of winks and smiles, Perkinson strode on. He tramped under the oaks by the school wall, his hands in his pockets, his brows knitted in a frown. He had to think this over, and he wanted to be alone to think it over.

It was not the sort of thing a fellow could stand—not the sort of thing that Perkinson of the Fifth could stand, anyway—though what else a fellow was to do, was not very clear.

But even in that rather secluded spot, Perkinson did not find himself alone. There were three Fourth-Form juniors under one of the trees, and Perkinson stared round angrily as he heard their voices. He was not in a mood to be bothered by noisy juniors.

They were Tom King, Dick Warren, and "Skip" Ruggles, the pals of Study Four in the Fourth. At the moment, they did not look very pally. Tom King was grasping Skip by one arm, Dick Warren by the other, apparently with the intention of knocking his head on the trunk of the tree—a proceeding to which Skip was raising strenuous objections.

"Here, leggo," hooted Skip. "Tain' my fault, is it? I tell you I forgot." Skip's plump face was indignant.

"You fat ass," said Tom King, "You shouldn't forget."

"You'll be forgetting your own name next." said Dick Warren.

"Well, a fellow can't remember everything," said Skip, "Chuck it, see?"

But Skip's comrades did not chuck it. They were incensed. Skip had been trusted to post a letter dealing with a matter of the first importance—no less than a junior football fixture. And he had forgotten to post it. Skip often forgot things—in fact, he generally forgot things. His memory bore a remarkable resemblance to a sieve. His comrades usually bore with him with

more or less patience. Now their patience seemed to have run out.

Tap! tap!

“Oh! Oooooh!” roared Skip, as the fattest head at Felgate tapped on the trunk. “Look here, you ticks—I say—Whoooooh!”

“Stop that ragging, you fags!” came an angry hoot from Perkinson. “Get out of this before I boot you.”

King and Warren looked round, in indignant surprise. Perkinson was a great gamesman: but in other matters he was nobody—he was not a prefect: he was not even in the Sixth. He had no more right to give orders to the Fourth, than the Fourth had to give orders to him. On the other hand, he was a big powerful fellow, who could have taken a junior in either hand, and knocked their heads together, without an effort. He was not a fellow who could be told, by Lower boys, where he got off. King and Warren gave him a stare, in which, they hoped, they expressed how very little they thought of him—and walked away, leaving Skip rubbing a fat head with a fat hand.

Perkinson resumed his moody, angry pacing and angry reflections. The more he thought of that interview in the captain’s study, the fiercer his temper grew. Like the ancient prophet, he was not only angry, but felt that he did well to be angry. He was sorry now that he hadn’t let out at Langdale. Who, after all, was Langdale, to turn down the best winger at Felgate, and put a footling foozler in his place? What sort of a Sir Oracle did he esteem himself? Now, if Perk had been still standing in that study, he would not



The fattest head at Felgate tapped on the trunk

have exercised self-restraint—he would have told Langdale exactly what he thought of him. And why shouldn’t he now? At the top of a wave of resentment, Perk decided that he would! He stared round again—Ruggles of the Fourth was still there, rubbing his head.

“Here, Ruggles,” snapped Perkinson.

“I—I’m just going, Perkinson,” stammered Skip.

“Don’t go, you fat chump. I want you to take a note to Langdale.”

“Oh, all right, Perkinson.”

“Wait a minute,” snapped Perk.

Skip waited a minute. He was willing to oblige Perkinson: he admired his Soccer, if he didn’t admire his temper.

Perkinson dragged a note-book and pencil from his pocket. He selected a

blank page and wrote on it—hurriedly, hotly, just as the spirit moved him. It was such a message as no captain of Felgate, certainly, had ever received from a man in the Fifth, since the ancient school had had a local habitation and a name.

Dear Langdale,

I've thought over the rot you talked in your study, and I've made up my mind never to play Soccer for Felgate again so long as you're captain. I wish you joy of your footling fozzlers. You don't know as much about Soccer as a kid in the Second.

Percival Perkinson.

That, Perkinson thought, would make the Great Panjandrum sit up and

take notice! He had never been talked to like that before. It was high time he was! And he meant every word of it, and meant to stand by what he had written—not that he would have much choice about it, after Langdale had read his note!

With a grim brow and a glinting eye, Perkinson folded that note, stuck a snip of stamp-edging on it to keep it folded, and handed it to Skip.

"Take that straight to Langdale in his study! he yapped.

"All right, Perkinson."

Skip slipped the note into his pocket, and started for the House. But he was not able to go straight to Langdale's study as Perkinson had directed him. He found his affectionate chums waiting for him—at a safe distance from Perkinson—and they pounced upon him, and amid yells of protest from Skip, resumed the process of tapping his head as a punishment for forgetfulness, and a warning to mend his forgetful ways.

Perkinson, striding under the oaks, felt a grim satisfaction. He had done it now, and he was jolly glad that he had done it, Langdale would know what one fellow, at least, thought of him. He would rather chuck Soccer altogether, than stand that sort of thing! If Perkinson had been of a classical turn, he might have said "Jacta est alea!" Not being of a classical turn, he said "That's that." And it was not till he had cooled down, an hour or so later, that Perkinson began to feel a twinge of regret that "that" was "that."



"Don't go, you fat chump!"

II

PERKINSON came out of the House after dinner, just as Cadby slipped on the banana-skin. Bananas, in austere times, were not frequent: still, that rare and refreshing fruit was sometimes seen at Felgate, and Skip of the Fourth had had a banana that morning. It was like Skip of the Fourth to drop the skin, without noticing it, just where somebody was likely to step on it. It was Cadby who stepped on it, and slipped, near the House steps.

Perkinson hardly noticed that little accident. He was deep in his own thoughts—troublesome thoughts. As usual, after acting in haste, Perkinson had repented at leisure. By dinner time the true awfulness of what he had done, had dawned upon his mind. He had cheeked the captain of the school, hurled defiance in his teeth, as it were: and so far as Felgate Soccer was concerned, had pretty thoroughly burned his boats behind him. He had pushed himself out of football, and life without football was, to Perkinson, a dreary desert, weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable. Even that was not all. Could the Felgate captain take such defiance lying down? He might call a Prefects' Meeting and report Perk for roll—for surely there had never been a more flagrant sample of "roll" than the note Perk had written? That would mean a prefect's beating—a fearful humiliation for a man in the Fifth, a tremendous "Blood" like Perkinson. Neither was that all, for when it came out, all Felgate would be down on him—they would think him no sportsman—he would be condemned on all sides.

Just before dinner, Perkinson confided to his chum, Purring, what he had done, and asked what he thought. Purring almost fell down.

"Well, you ghastly ass!" was all Purring could say.

At dinner, Perkinson had cast surreptitious glances towards the high table where the prefects sat, stealing a look or two at Langdale. The Felgate captain looked much the same as usual: and Perk wondered whether he was going to keep that note to himself, and say nothing about it. That would be a relief—better than a row, though it would still leave Perkinson out of Soccer. Obviously, after what Perk had written in that note, the Felgate captain could, and would, never play him in a football match again. And Perkinson had realised by this time that his own statement that he would never play for Felgate again so long as Langdale was captain, was just hot air—merely that, and nothing more. He would have eaten his own hasty words, gladly, if Langdale could have forgotten them. But, of course, Langdale couldn't.

Perkinson of the Fifth was about the miserablest man in Felgate, or out of it, when he came down the House steps after dinner, and noticed Cadby spin over on the banana-skin, and crash. He heeded little—that tick Cadby could crash all over the school as often as he liked without Perkinson caring a boiled bean. Perk walked on, regardless. But he came to a stop when Selwyn of the Shell tapped him on the arm, and said;

"Gratters, Perkinson."

Perkinson stared at him.

"What the dickens do you mean?" he asked, gruffly, "Gratters for what! I suppose you've seen that my name's out of the team."

"Then you haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" yapped Perkinson irritably.

"That it's in again," said Selwyn.

Perkinson gave an almost convulsive jump. He stared at Selwyn with bulging eyes.

"Didn't you see Cadby come that purler outside the House?" asked Selwyn. "He's crocked his knee—knocked right out—they had to help him in. He won't be able to play Soccer for a couple of weeks at least."

"Oh!" gasped Perkinson.

"Cadby's out," said Selwyn. "You're in again old man, so gratters."

"But—but it can't be," stammered Perkinson, "Langdale wouldn't put me in—"

Yet Selwyn had stated, as a fact, that his name was in the list again. A gleam of hope came to Perkinson. It was barely possible that Langdale hadn't read that note—that unforgivable note—yet. The bearer might have caught him at a busy moment—he might have shoved it in his pocket to read later—was that it? It was possible, at least—if unlikely—and Perkinson, at length, directed his steps back to the house, and stopped to look at the notice-board.

He drew a deep, deep breath at what he saw.

There it was—a line drawn through Cadby's name, and under it his own written—P. Perkinson—in Langdale's own fist.

He was in! Five or six fellows gathered round him, congratulating. It was rough luck for Cadby—but good luck for Perk, jolly good luck.

Perkinson hardly heard them, as he stared at the list. Obviously, now, Langdale hadn't read that note—it must still be in his pocket unread. The blow would fall sooner or later—it was only a matter of time before Langdale did read the note that exiled Perkinson from Felgate footer. If he read it before the St. Dunstan's men arrived, Perk's name would go out of that list fast enough. If he did not remember it till after the match, Perk would play—his last Soccer match for Felgate. From the bottom of his heart, Perkinson longed that Langdale wouldn't read that rotten note till after the game.

It was an hour yet before Dunstan's were due—and never had an hour seemed so long to Percival Perkinson. There were, as usual, only sixty minutes in it—but each minute seemed, to Perk, to drag its weary length by like a wounded snake.

It was better when they went to the changing room. Once in football rig, Langdale couldn't come across that note, if it was in his pocket. Perkinson's heart was lighter—he was safe for the match now, at any rate. It would be his last match—he knew that. Langdale would drop him like a hot potato when he read that note. But all the more because he knew it was going to be his last match, Perkinson was going to make the most of it. It was Felgate's biggest fixture—and he was going to play the game of his life: and if he had to say goodbye to Felgate footer



He forgot everything but the game.

afterwards, as undoubtedly would be the case, then he would depart from the Felgate Soccer world trailing clouds of glory, as it were.

Perkinson tried to put "afterwards" out of his mind, when they lined up against St. Dunstan's. And as soon as the ball was kicked off, he succeeded. Dunstan's were a hefty team, good men all: there was no room in a fellow's mind for anything but Soccer when he was playing against Dunstan's. Perk did not even remember his desire to show all Felgate he was as good as Cadby, if not better, and that they were as strong on the right wing, as if Cadby had never slipped on that banana skin, or stronger. He forgot everything but the game: and from the moment the ball rolled, he lived and

breathed only Soccer.

Dunstan's had the upper hand in the first half. The red stripes of Dunstan's seemed always over the line and the blue shirts of Felgate falling back towards goal. Denver of the Sixth, between the sticks, had to save again and again: and at length he failed to save, and the ball went into the net, amid a roar from Dunstan's supporters who had come over to see their men win. And try as hard as they might, Felgate could not equalize by the time the whistle went for the interval. When they sucked the lemons Dunstan's were still that goal to the good: and many men on both sides were panting after a gruelling half.

In the second half Dunstan's rushed the game as before: but this time they found foes more worthy of their steel. All Felgate shouted, as the home forwards came on in line, with the short passing which Felgate particularly favoured in the game, and there was a tremendous roar when the ball went in from Langdale's foot.

"One all," said Tom King to Dick Warren, among the mob of cheering juniors, "We'll beat them yet!"

"Hollow!" agreed Warren.

Which no doubt would have encouraged the mighty men of the First Eleven had they heard it!

But it was no easy task to beat Dunstan's hollow. Once more they swarmed in the home half, the red stripes scattering the blue shirts. But once more Felgate rallied, and drove them bootless home. The game went on ding-dong, with hard play on both sides: and fellows in the crowd began

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to glance up at the clock-tower, and wonder whether it was going to be a draw after all.

"Three minutes to go!" said Tom King at last.

"Lots can happen in three minutes!" said Warren, "Look at Perkinson—ain't he just lightning?"

It was a close finish. Felgate, with a last determined effort, came through. Langdale, centre-forward, had the ball at his toe, and it looked like a goal till he crashed over under a charge. But Purringe, inside-right, captured the ball, and passed out to Perkinson as he, in his turn, crashed. Perkinson, as Warren justly declared, was lightning—he eluded a charge that ought to have grounded him, as if by magic—he went through the halves like a knife through butter—and as the backs pounced, he kicked—there was nobody to take a pass, and he kicked from right out on the wing—the last shot in the locker, for it was fairly on the stroke of time. Dunstan's goalie was seen to leap frantically, missing the whizzing leather by half-an-inch—and Felgate School almost rocked under the roar of glee as it landed safely home.

"Goal!"

"Perkinson ! Perkinson!"

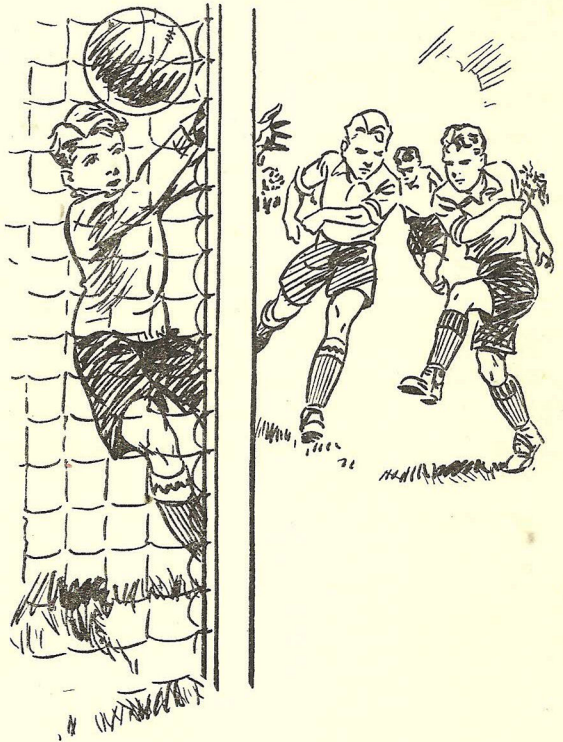
"Goal!"

And the whistle blew.

III

IN the changing room, Perkinson could stand it no longer. Everybody was beaming on him—Langdale most of all. Perkinson's goal had saved the match—it had beaten St. Dunstan's—it had crowned Felgate with victory—

Perk was a man whom all Felgate delighted to honour. And all the while, it was heavy on his mind that, at any moment, Langdale might come on that rotten note in his pocket, and all would be changed. Perk had played his last game for Felgate—and a glorious game it had been—and after that final goal, he knew, there never would be any question of leaving him out for Cadby, even when Cadby recovered: he was safe for the season, but for that rotten, miserable note in Langdale's pocket. It was like the sword of Damocles over his head, and Perkinson, feeling that he could stand the suspense no longer, went up to Langdale.



Missing the whizzing leather by half an inch.

"Look here," he blurted, "I'm sorry about that note."

"What note?" asked Langdale.

"Didn't you get a note from me this morning?"

"Eh! Not that I remember."

"Oh!" gasped Perkinson, blankly, "Oh, all right."

He got out of the changing-room as quickly as he could, and hurried up to Study Four in the Fourth. The denizens of that study were all at home, celebrating the great victory of the First Eleven. Tom King had contributed a pie, Dick Warren a cake, and the plump Skip a keen appetite. They stared round as Perkinson kicked open the door and came in.

"Here, young Ruggles," said Perkinson.

"Here I am," said Skip.

"Did you take my note to Langdale this morning?"

Skip jumped.

"Oh, scissors!" he gasped. His fat hand went to his pocket, "Oh, I say!—I'm sorry, Perkinson—I forgot—"

Perkinson breathed deep.

"You—you see, these fellows were ragging," stammered Skip in great contrition, "I—I was going to Langdale's study, Perkinson, honest Injun—but these chaps started ragging, and—

after I got away from them, I—I forgot."

Skip dragged a crumpled note from his pocket.

"I say, I'm awfully sorry, Perkinson—I say, I'll cut down this minute and take it straight to Langdale—"

"Give it to me," said Perkinson.

Why Perkinson, a hot-tempered fellow, took Skip's inexcusable forgetfulness so calmly, Study Four never knew. They naturally expected him to fly off the handle. But he did not. Indeed, amazing as it was, he seemed to look relieved, and indeed pleased. He tossed the undelivered note into the study fire, watched it consume there, and left the study, with a smile on his face.

King and Warren looked at Skip.

"Well you ass!" said King. "I wonder Perkinson didn't boot you."

"You chump!" said Warren, "I wonder he didn't lynch you."

But there was really no cause for wonder, if the chums of the Fourth had known the circumstances. Perkinson went down from Study Four like a fellow walking on air. The clouds had rolled by—and the Dunstan's game was not, after all, Perkinson's Last Match.

THE END