

POOR OLD PERK



Skip did not mean to listen. Skip had his faults: but eaves-dropping was not counted among them. Skip wouldn't have heard a word that Croom said to Perkinson, or that Perkinson said to Croom, if he could have helped it: though he was glad afterwards that he had!

But Skip couldn't help it.

Skip, at the moment, was in cover. He was parked on top of the wall of the Head's garden, where it was thick with ivy, and deeply shaded by branches not yet stripped of their leaves by the autumn winds. No eye could have spotted him there: he was as invisible as if he had donned a cloak-of-darkness.

He had reasons for that. There had been a little rift in the lute in Study Four, in the Felgate Fourth. Skip had gone up early to tea, while his chums,

Tom King and Dick Warren, were punting a footer in the quad. Skip had not meant to demolish the whole, total supply of provender in the study. He had just gone on without thinking. But the result was that when King and Warren came up, hungry for tea, in fact famished, hardly a crumb remained. Skip had barely escaped from Study Four with his life. He knew that his chums were looking for him, feeling as unchummy, at the moment, as chums could possibly feel. Judiciously, Skip decided to keep out of sight till they had had time to cool down. So there was Skip, invisible, when there were footsteps under the ivied wall, and Perkinson and Croom of the Fifth Form stopped to talk. Perkinson was the first to speak.

"Look here, Croom, what's it all

about? If you've got anything to say, why the dickens couldn't you say it in the day-room?"

"I'd rather keep it quiet! So would you, I think. Do you want old Kye to know who dropped that bag of soot on his head from the dorm window?"

Skip almost jumped as he heard that. All Felgate had wondered who had done that fell deed. Nobody seemed to know. But Skip guessed now that it was Perkinson, and that Croom knew. It was like Perkinson, really. Old Perk was a wonderful man on the Soccer field. Off it, he was the most unmitigated ass that Felgate had ever produced. Perk was hot-headed: much given to acting first and thinking afterwards, when he thought at all, which was not often. He was in constant rows with his beak: Mr. Kye, master of the Fifth. Evidently, once more, old Perk had acted in haste, to repent at leisure. And Croom knew! Not that that should have mattered: Felgate men did not give one another away. But there seemed something stealthy about Croom now that made Skip wonder. There was a pause before Perkinson answered.

"So you know?"

"I saw you at the window."

"Well, what about it? You're not going sneaking to Kye, I suppose?"

"That depends."

"What?"

"One good turn deserves another." Croom's voice was low, but it came up to a pair of fat ears on top of the wall. "Langdale's picked you for the Dunstan's game tomorrow. I'm a better man than you on the wing——"

"The skipper doesn't seem to think so."

"Never mind that! I know it, if you

don't and he doesn't. I want my chance in the biggest fixture of the season. I want you to stand out and give me the chance."

"Gone mad?"

"Think it over! You won't be playing Soccer tomorrow if Kye knows – you'll be catching the train home. Think it over."

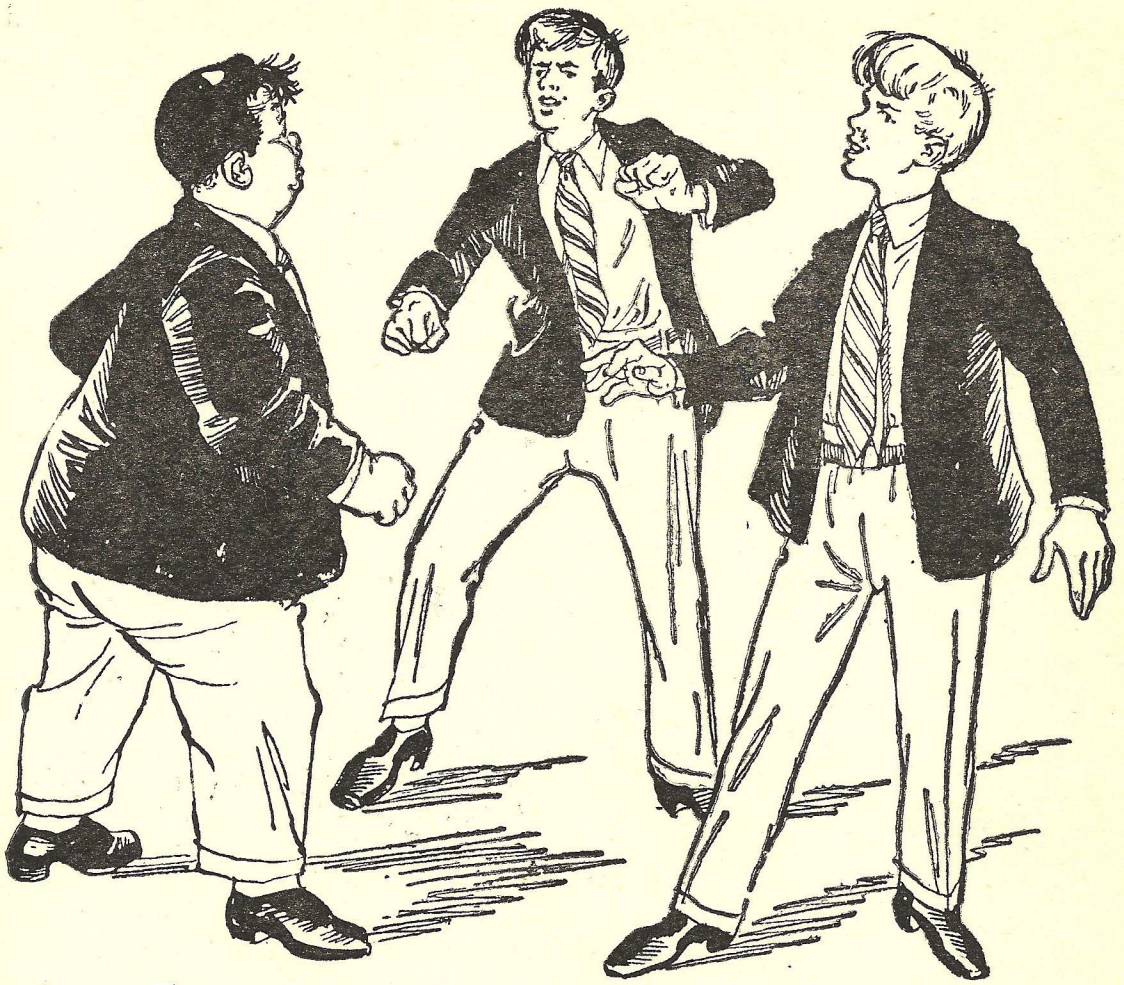
With that, Croom walked away.

Perkinson remained standing where he was. Skip, peering down, saw his face, with a quite stunned look on it. Often had Percival Perkinson's hot temper and unthinking fatheadedness landed him in a scrape. This time it had landed him deep.

"The rotter!" Skip heard him mutter. Then he too walked away, and Skip saw no more of either of them.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Skip.

For quite a long time, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles remained parked on the wall, thinking over what he had inadvertently heard. This was, Skip thought, pretty awful. Croom was almost, though not quite, the best winger Felgate could put into the field: and everybody knew how sore he felt when Langdale, the captain of Felgate, passed him over for Perkinson in the team for the Dunstan's game. Good footballer as he was, there was little of the sportsman in Croom: he couldn't or wouldn't "take it" when he was passed over for a better man: he couldn't get it down that any man could possibly be better than himself. He had said, angrily and openly, in the senior day-room, that Langdale had picked Perk because he liked the fellow, and didn't like Croom – a remark that did not make him popular, for everyone knew that old Langdale was fair play personified. Croom had been bitter about it – he was



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an acid sort of fellow. But this – this was the limit. Something, Skip thought, ought to be done about this. He decided, at last, to consult his chums, and descended from his covert: and, not without some trepidation, rolled into the House and went up to Study Four.

Wrathful voices greeted him, as he put a fat head into that study.

“Here he is!”

“Collar the fat cormorant.”

Tom King and Dick Warren were finishing a frugal tea of odds and ends borrowed from other studies. They jumped up at sight of Skip, prepared to

deal with him faithfully. But what Skip had to tell them turned aside wrath: and they did not massacre Stanley St. Leger Ruggles as he richly deserved.

2

“Perkinson’s out!”

“Not Perk!”

“Yes, Perk!”

It was more than a spot of excitement at Felgate. All the school knew, on Wednesday morning: and all wondered. Perkinson of the Fifth, the best winger that Felgate had ever had, out of the

eleven, with Dunstan's coming over that afternoon! Old Langdale would as soon have been expected to leave Denver out of goal, or himself out of the front line. Perk simply had to play. And he was out – for no apparent reason.

Many fellows knew that there had been a rather stormy interview in Langdale's study. The Felgate captain, naturally, did not know what to make of it: and his temper had risen. Perk was fit – fit as a fiddle – it never occurred to him to make out that he wasn't. Right up to the last day he had been as keen as mustard. There was hardly a senior man at Felgate who was not keen to play Dunstan's: it was a feather in any man's cap to have been picked. Yet Perk was standing out – for no reason that was known. He came into Langdale's study looking sheepish and miserable to tell him. Langdale could hardly believe his ears.

"Stand out?" he said. "What do you mean? You're not standing out."

"I – I must!" faltered Perkinson.

"Why?"

No answer. Perkinson couldn't tell him why. Langdale was a prefect: and it would have been his duty to report Perk, if he had known what Croom could have told him. Soccer was washed out for Perk anyway: he couldn't play Soccer if he was sitting in the train for home. He only stared miserably at Langdale without answering.

"Rot!" said Langdale. "You're playing. Don't say any more."

But Perk did say more: he repeated himself. There were several minutes of argument, Langdale growing angrier and angrier. But he had to yield the point. He couldn't make a man play if a man wouldn't.

"Lucky we've got Croom!" said Langdale at last. "He's not your form, but he's the next best – lucky we've got him: he won't let us down, at any rate, as you've done."

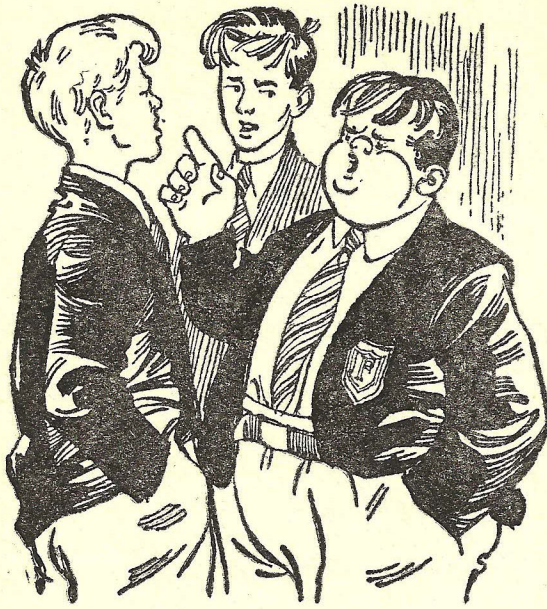
"I'd hate to let you down, Langdale, but – but——"

"That will do. You're out, and Croom's in! Now get out of my study."

Perkinson almost crawled out of the study.

So it came about that a pencil was drawn through P. Perkinson, in the first-eleven list, and R. Croom substituted. Perkinson could have groaned when he saw it. R. Croom viewed it with mixed feelings. He had won his point – he was in and Perk was out. The better man was in: he had, by rather unusual methods, rectified his skipper's mistake! That was how Croom looked at it: or tried hard to look at it. He could not feel quite satisfied with those unusual methods: in fact he felt frightfully mean about it, but was he going to play second fiddle to a fathead like Perkinson – a fellow who hadn't even sense enough to take a "jaw" from his beak without dropping a bag on his head? He was not. Croom could not feel quite easy: but he was going to play for Felgate in the Dunstan's match: nothing was going to alter that. What Felgaters would have thought of him, had they known, he shivered to think. But nobody was going to know: Perkinson couldn't say a word, with the "sack" looming over him if it came out about bagging Kye. Certainly it was not likely to occur to Croom that three juniors in the Fourth Form knew.

But those three juniors did. Other fellows wondered why Perk had done it, and why, having done it of his own



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accord, he hung about looking as dismal and disconsolate as if he were going to be hanged. But Tom King, Dick Warren, and Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, when they looked at Perk in the quad after dinner, knew why he was deep in the deepest depths of pessimism: loafing dismally under the oaks with his hands stuck in his pockets. King and Warren had found it rather hard to credit what Skip had told them, but subsequent happenings had confirmed it: Perkinson was out of the eleven, and Croom was in, and Perk looking the miserablest man in the county of Herts.

"Croom must be a pretty fair rotter!" said Dick Warren, watching the dismal Perk from a distance.

"The limit!" said Tom King. "Pretty thick if he gets away with it."

"We could show him up!" said Skip.

"And get that ass Perk sacked! Forget it."

"What an ass the man is!" said

Warren. "This isn't the first time he's asked for it. Not as much sense as a bunny-rabbit! But—he ought to be playing for Felgate this afternoon, and it's a rotten shame."

Tom wrinkled thoughtful brows.

"He had to toe the line," he said. "He had to stand out anyway—he would be sacked like a shot if Croom gave him away: he wouldn't be here when Dunstan's come over. But—but——"

"Something ought to be done," said Skip.

"Well, what?" asked Warren.

Skip couldn't answer that. He was indignant, and felt that something ought to be done about it. But his fat brain couldn't think of anything. Dick Warren was equally at a loss. He would gladly have punched Croom in the eye, if it had been practical politics for a Fourth-form junior to punch a Fifth-form man in the eye. But even had it been practicable, it was no present help in time of need. All they could do for poor old Perk was to keep it dark that they knew he had bagged Kye. Perkinson would probably have kicked them, hard, had he been aware that they had the cheek to think of him as "poor old Perk"—he, a tremendous blood and games-man, they inconsiderable juniors. But that was exactly how they thought of the fathead of the Fifth: and they would have helped him out, if they could have. But how could they?

It was Tom King who evolved the idea: and he did not evolve it until it was perilously near time for Dunstan's to arrive. But he did evolve it at last. Perhaps the sight of Croom, looking out of his study window, with a sour smile directed at Perkinson in the distance, helped him.

"Come on!" said Tom, suddenly. He started for the House. Warren and Ruggles followed him, wondering. He explained, in whispers, as they went: and Dick Warren jumped, and ejaculated "Oh, crumbs!", and Skip almost fell down in astonishment, and gasped "Oh, crikey!" But they followed him into the House.

3

Croom turned from his window, as his study door opened, and three juniors came in. He stared at them blankly. Tom King came in with Warren, Skip Ruggles rolling on behind, shutting the door after he was in. Croom could only stare. Why three Fourth-form juniors, whom he hardly knew, had barged suddenly into his study was a mystery to him.

"What the dickens do you want?" he snapped.

"You!" said Tom King.

"What?"

Croom of the Fifth might have wondered whether he was dreaming, at what happened next. It was getting near time to go along to the changing room, and certainly it had not occurred to Croom that anything might happen to delay him. But something did. What happened was that Tom King and Dick Warren jumped at him rather like a pair of young tigers. The amazed Croom found himself suddenly upended on his study floor, so suddenly that he had no time to resist. He was struggling the next moment — on his back, with Tom King's knee planted on his chest and Warren grasping his wrists.

At the same moment, Skip turned the key in the study door. Then, with a

grinning fat face, he joined his chums in handling Croom.

Croom required some handling. He was a rather powerful fellow. He could not begin to guess what this amazing rag meant: but he was almost foaming with fury. There were several hectic minutes in Croom's study.

But he really had no chance. The juniors had him down, and they kept him down. Tom King made room for Skip, who sat on his chest. That did it! Skip's extensive weight would have pinned down the stoutest man at Felgate. Croom had to take it.

"You — you — you — !" he spluttered, "I'll skin you for this! Have you gone crackers? What do you mean? Get off, do you hear? I've got to get to the changing room — I shall be wanted soon——"

"Not today!" grinned Dick Warren.

"You young fool, you know I'm playing for School this afternoon——"

"Are you?" chuckled Warren.

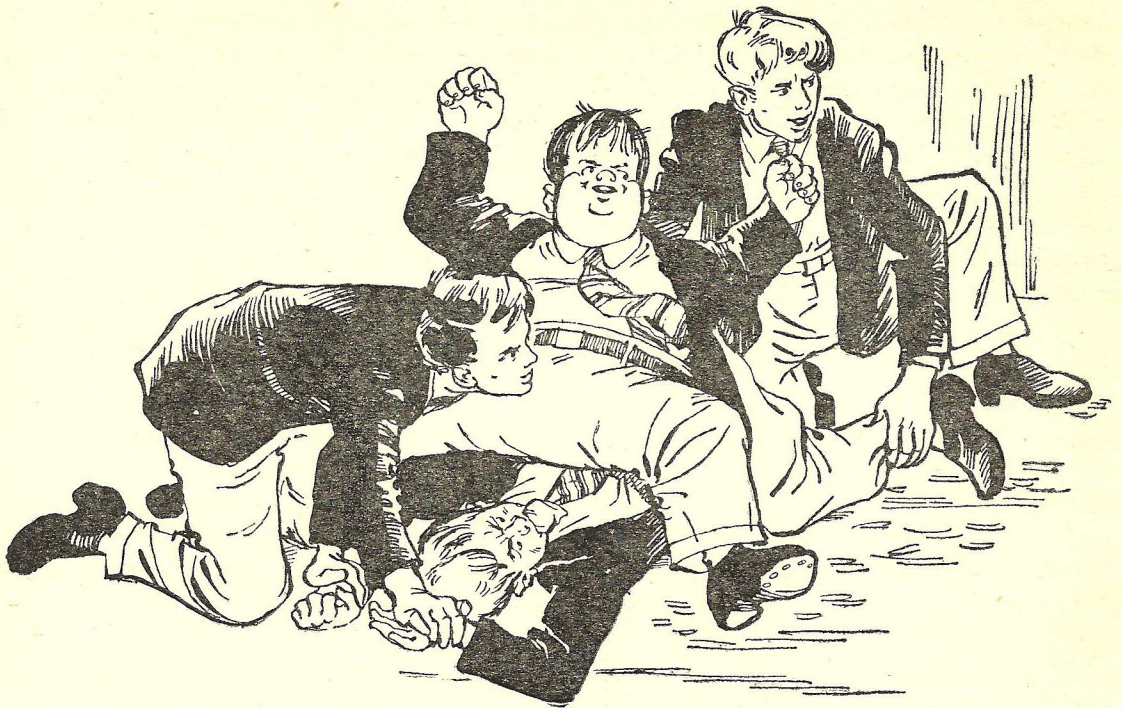
Croom heaved under the three, like the stormy ocean. But he heaved in vain. He collapsed breathless after a tremendous effort.

"Let me go, or I'll yell for help!" he panted.

"Will you?"

Dick Warren produced a duster from his pocket. Croom's mouth opened for a yell. Warren crammed the duster into it. The Fifth-form man gurgled horribly. But he did not yell.

Minutes elapsed. Croom, helpless, could do nothing but chew at the duster. The three grinned down at him. But their grip did not relax for a moment. There were sounds, at last, from a distance, which indicated that Dunstan's had arrived. Croom made one more frantic effort. He made it in



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vain. Then there were footsteps outside the study. Warren crammed the duster home, to make sure that Croom did not become talkative. There was a bang at the door.

"You there, Croom?" It was Denver's voice. "What the thump are you sporting your oak for, Croom? Forgotten the match? Langdale's sent me to look for you. Can't you open this door?"

Dead silence in the study. Croom would have given much, just to utter one shout. But he could not utter even a whisper. Three juniors were as still as mice. Another impatient bang came at the door. Then another voice - Loring's.

"Where's Croom, Denver?"

"Goodness knows! Must have gone out - his door's locked, and I can't get an answer. If we can't find him, that ass Perk will have to play - you look

for Perkinson, while I look for Croom."

Footsteps hurried away.

Tom King and Co. exchanged blissful glances. Denver had gone elsewhere to look for Croom: he was not likely to find him. Croom wriggled spasmodically. If looks could have slain, Felgate would have lost three members of its Fourth Form on the spot. Fortunately, looks couldn't! Croom realised, at last, what this incomprehensible rag meant. These young rascals meant to keep him out of the Dunstan's game. And they were going to get by with it, too. It was anguish to Croom. After all his cunning, after an act that had made him feel the meanest man in the universe, he was going to lose the prize, and Perkinson was going to play after all. For, of course, Perkinson would play if Croom did not turn up. He had had to give up his place to

Croom: but he was available if a man was missing – and a man was going to be missing – Croom himself!

Once more Croom heaved frantically. Once more he was pinned down breathless. It was uncommon – very uncommon – for Tom King and Co. to miss a First-Eleven match, and sit it out in a study. But on this occasion they did – they sat it out in Croom’s study – on Croom!

4

“Langdale!”

The captain of Felgate was red with wrath, in the changing room, when Perkinson panted in. He gave Perk a glare.

“I hear that Croom’s gone out, and cut the match——!” panted Perk.

“Yes – let us down as you did——!” snorted Langdale.

“If you want me——”

“Changed your mind again, you footling ass?” yapped Langdale.

“I – I – I couldn’t help – I – I mean, if Croom’s cut, you’ll want a man – and – if you want me——”

“Get into your things, and don’t burble at me.”

Gladly, Perkinson of the Fifth got into his things. Why Croom, after diddling him out of the team, had cut the match, was a puzzle. Perk could only conclude that Croom had thought better of it: that he wasn’t, after all, such a mean rotter as he had fancied himself. Anyhow, Croom wasn’t there, and Perk was: and that was that.

Perk was walking on air when he went into the field with the Felgate men, and they lined up to play Dunstan’s. Never had Perk enjoyed a game of Soccer more: and never had he

played so tremendous a game. He seemed to have wings on the wing! Off the football field, Perk might be the biggest ass at Felgate or anywhere else: on it he was worth his weight in gold. Dunstan’s were good men and true, and played a good, hard game: and they might have pulled it off had not Felgate had just a little bit extra. But they had – owing to the circumstance that three juniors were sitting on Croom in his study, and that Percival Perkinson was in his rightful place. Everybody agreed that it was due to Perkinson that the Felgate score was finally two to one: and nobody guessed that it was more justly due to three Fourth-form fellows who were sitting on Croom!

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“You young asses!” said Langdale.

Tom King and Co. hardly knew what would happen, afterwards. They hardly cared. They had to come up before the captain of Felgate for what they had done. Tom explained meekly:

“You see, we thought Perkinson would play if Croom wasn’t there. And we jolly well knew you wanted him, Langdale.”

Tom could add no details.

“You young asses!” repeated Langdale. He almost laughed. “I shall have to whop you, you know that.”

Langdale had a sinewy hand. It was well known, in the Lower School at Felgate, that old Langdale could whop! But on this occasion the vigour seemed to have deserted his good right arm. Tom King and Co. were neither looking, nor feeling, whopped when they walked out of Langdale’s study: but even if it had been six of the best, they would still have been glad that they had done their best for Poor Old Perk!