

SKIP'S GOAL



Frank Richards

THE strange disappearance of Percival Perkinson, of the Fifth Form, amazed and bothered all Felgate. From Langdale, the captain of the school, down to the smallest and inkiest fag in the Second Form, everyone wondered what on earth had become of Perkinson. That he was absent of his own accord seemed impossible, for he was due to play in the St. Jim's match that afternoon, and Perk would rather have missed a first prize in Premium Bonds than a Soccer match. Yet he had disappeared, just as if, like Mercury in the Aeneid, he had dissolved into thin air.

Felgate fellows wondered and surmised. Skip Ruggles of the Fourth, who had rather a romantic turn in his fat mind, suggested brightly that per-

haps he had run away to sea, a suggestion to which his chums, Tom King and Dick Warren, replied with one voice, "Fathead!"

But where was Perkinson? He had been in form with the Fifth that morning, looking much as usual. He had had a spot of bother with his form-master, Kye, his head being full of Soccer with little space left for Livy, but that was nothing out of the common. His pal, Purrings, was questioned by everyone, but all Purrings knew was that Perk had gone out after class, certainly intending to return in time for tiffin. But he had not returned for tiffin; his place at the Fifth-Form table had been vacant. No fellow under the rank of prefect was allowed to cut tiffin, so that looked like another spot



of bother for Perk when he did come in, after dinner. But he did not come in after dinner.

Then Langdale began to look, and feel, anxious. Certainly, there was still plenty of time for Perkinson to turn up before the St. Jim's men arrived for Soccer. But why had he not turned up already and what did it all mean? Perk was not a man who could be spared when a big fixture was on. He was easily the best winger at Felgate and only the very best men were of any use against St. Jim's. Perkinson was wanted to take goals, of which there was likely to be a lack if he stayed disappeared. Langdale, Denver, Loring, Cadby, and the rest of the First Eleven asked one another where the dickens Perk was, and what he fancied he was up to. But

nobody knew the answers. All they knew was that he had walked out of Felgate and disappeared into space.

Of course, accidents might happen. A fellow might get in the way of a car, or tumble into one of the old chalk pits on Hodden Heath, or even be tossed by a bull. Some fellows began to wonder whether Perk, when he did at last reappear, would be carried home on a gate. In which case, of course, there would be a lot of sympathy for Perk. At the moment, however, there was chiefly exasperation among the Soccer men, and they were feeling much more disposed to boot Perk than to sympathise with him, as the time drew nearer and nearer for play, and Perk was still absent.

Tom King and Dick Warren were discussing the mystery in the quad, when Skip rolled up, with a cheery, fat face, and a bundle under a fat arm. King and Warren were deeply concerned about Perk, and about the St. Jim's match. As juniors they had no part in such tremendous events, but they liked old Perk - everybody liked old Perk except perhaps Mr. Kye - and they wanted Felgate to beat the visiting team, which was quite doubtful if Perk did not turn up. So their faces were very serious, in contrast to Skip's beaming countenance.

"Something must have happened to him," Tom was saying.

"But what?" asked Warren.

"Goodness knows. It looks as if he's going to cut the game, and he wouldn't if he could help it."

"I say——" bleated Skip. "It's all right, you chaps."

Often and often, King and Warren passed their fat chum's remarks by like the idle wind which they regarded not.

But now they both turned to him eagerly.

"Has he come in, then?" asked Tom.

"Eh! Who?" inquired Skip.

"Perkinson, you fat ass! You said it was all right."

"Oh! I meant about the picnic."

"The picnic!" hooted Warren.

"Yes! Have you forgotten about the picnic?" asked Skip. He tapped the bundle under his arm. "I've got all the stuff."

"You ass!"

"You clown!"

Skip blinked at his two chums, in surprise and indignation. Evidently, in their concern for Perk and the St. Jim's match, they had completely forgotten that a picnic on Hodden Heath was scheduled for that afternoon, taking advantage of a particularly fine autumn day which was also a half-holiday. Skip had not forgotten: Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was never likely to forget any function that included foodstuffs. But so far from being pleased by the reminder, King and Warren fairly hooted at him.

"I say, what are you calling a fellow names for?" demanded the indignant Skip. "I tell you it's all right. They've let me have tick at the tuck shop, see? I've got all the stuff we want - a cake, jam tarts, doughnuts, ginger beer, and oranges, and——"

"Fathead!"

"Ditherer!"

Instead of being impressed, or at least interested, by that tempting list of comestibles, King and Warren continued to hoot at him.

"But what's the matter?" bleated Skip. "We fixed up the picnic for this afternoon, didn't we? And we——"

"Who wants a picnic now?"

"You and your picnics!"

"Perkinson's missing——"

"Something's happened to him——"

"The First-Eleven match is a goner if he doesn't turn up——"

"And it looks as if he won't——"

Thus King and Warren, both speaking at the same time. Plainly, they had had no use for picnics, in such a time of stress.

"But I've got all the stuff!" pleaded Skip.

"Take it away and boil it."

"And boil your silly head at the same time."

"Hallo, there's Purrings coming out - let's go and ask him if there's any news of Perk."

Tom King and Dick Warren, turning their backs on Ruggles, hurried away. Skip stared after them. Then he glared after them. Then he bawled after them:

"Look here, it won't help Perk to cut our picnic. Look here, I don't see cutting that picnic! Will you listen to a chap? If you jolly well don't come, I'll jolly well go on my own, and mind, I'll jolly well scoff the lot! Mind, I mean that!"

Evidently not caring one straw whether Skip "scoffed the lot" or not, King and Warren left him to waste his sweetness on the desert air. Skip, thus deserted by his pals, sniffed with indignation. Skip was quite concerned about Perk, like other fellows, but he saw no reason why that should stand in the way of the picnic. Neither was he going to let it. Having sniffed, he rolled after King and Warren, and bawled:

"Look here, coming or not?"

"Not, ass!"

"Not, fathead!"

Those answers came over shoulders. This time Skip snorted instead of

sniffing. Having snorted, he rolled out of gates with his bundle, and that was that!

Nobody cared. Nobody was interested in Skip Ruggles. Everybody was interested in the missing Perk. Fellows looked up at the clock-tower, and counted the minutes. And when the St. Jim's men arrived in their motor-coach, Langdale said gloomily to Purrings:

"That ass Perkinson's still out! You'll have to play, Purrings." And Purrings, glad enough to play, though he would have been gladder still had Perk turned up, went into the changing room with the rest.

II

"Help!"

Skip Ruggles stared round over the wide expanse of Hodden Heath.

Skip was not looking so sunny as usual. He had marched off indignantly to picnic on his own, as his chums had turned him down. But picnicking on his own was not the enjoyable function to which he had been looking forward. True, there was solace in the sticky contents of his bundle. But he wanted the company of his friends as well. However, he wandered across the heath, looking for a comfortable spot to camp down for his solitary picnic. And then that cry, faint in the distance, came to his ears.

"Help!"

He could see no one. Hodden Heath was a lonely place, and nobody was about. But some invisible person was shouting for help, and after a few moments' cogitation, Skip's fat brain assimilated what it meant. Some un- wary wayfarer had tumbled into one of



"Help!" Skip Ruggles stared round over the wide expanse of Hodden Heath.

the old chalk pits with which the heath was spotted. That was why he was shouting for help, and why he couldn't be seen.

"Help!"

"Coming!" bawled Skip.

He picked his way among the gorse, warily, in the direction of the shout. If someone was in need of help, Skip Ruggles was the fellow to render aid, if he could. But he proceeded very warily. He did not want to tumble in himself.

He came on the pit quite suddenly – a yawning gap in the earth, more than half-hidden by thickets. It was not surprising that someone in a hurry, taking a short cut through the thickets, had slipped in. Skip might have done so himself, but for the warning shouts. As it was, he stopped on the verge, dropped his bundle, dropped on his hands and knees, and peered down over a sheer edge.

Then he almost tumbled in, in his astonishment.

"Perk!" he gasped.

Skip, all inadvertently, had solved the mystery of Perkinson's strange and mysterious disappearance. There was Percival Perkinson, of the Fifth, staring up at Ruggles of the Fourth from the bottom of the chalk pit.

III

"Perk!" repeated Skip, blankly.

There he was. His face was red, except where it was daubed white with chalk. He was chalky from head to foot – smothered with it. The pit was not more than nine or ten feet deep, and the tumble did not seem to have done any damage. But the sides were steep, sheer, and there was no hold on the slippery chalk. Perk looked as if he had made many attempts to climb out,

but he had failed. He stood with feet squelching in chalky mud, wet from the last rain, and stared up at Skip's fat face.

"Oh! You!" he exclaimed. "Young Ruggles, isn't it? Think you can help me out of this? I've been here for hours. Yelling all the time, but nobody came. Here, young Ruggles, you reach down, and I'll reach up, and we might manage it."

Skip manfully reached down, lying on his plump chest. Perkinson reached up. But their finger-tips hardly met. Perkinson groaned.

"I've got to get back for the Soccer! Why couldn't somebody else come along, instead of a little fat ass like you! Oh, dash!"

"I – I've tried to help!"

"Fat lot of good!"

"I – I say, I'll cut off to Hodden, and get a man to come with a rope——"

"Hodden's a mile away! Too late for the game! I've got to let old Langdale down! Oh, dash! Anybody but you – such a little, fat ass – oh, dash!"

That was not gratifying, to a fellow who had done his best, and who couldn't help being short and fat. But Skip could understand Perkinson's feelings – sticking there in the chalk pit while the St. Jim's match was played without him. Instead of resenting those ungratifying words, Skip was all sympathy. And suddenly a bright idea flashed into his fat brain. According to his chums, King and Warren, Skip's brain seldom worked, and when it did, it produced no results. But on this occasion Skip's fat wits shone – in fact, they scintillated.

"I say, Perkinson!" he gasped. "I say, suppose I come down——"

"Lot of use that would be, you young

fathead! Think you could bunk my weight up?" snorted Perkinson.

"Oh! No! But——" Skip spluttered with excitement. "Suppose I stand close to the side, and you get on my shoulders——"

"Wha-a-at?" Perk stuttered.

"Then you could climb out," said Skip, eagerly.

Perkinson stared at him blankly.

"That would leave you stuck here, in this mud," he said.

"I don't care, so long as you get back to play St. Jim's."

"Eh! What! Oh, my hat! If you mean it——"

Skip answered that, by slipping over the edge and dropping. He landed with a muddy splash. Perk glanced anxiously at his watch.

"Just about time, if I burn the wind," he breathed. "Get up! What are you sitting in that mud for? Like it?" Perkinson's strong grasp heaved Skip to his feet. "Now, stand close to the chalk here, and brace yourself——I'm a good weight——don't crumple up if you can help it."

"Go it! said Skip, manfully.

It was a matter only of seconds. But they were awful seconds to Skip. He did not crumple up. But never had he felt so like crumpling. When Perk's feet were on his shoulders, Skip very nearly shut up like a pocket-knife. But not quite. Then the awful weight left him, as Perk grasped the edge of the pit and clambered out. Skip tottered, and sat down in chalky mud, gurgling.

Perkinson looked down at him.

"You'll get wet," he called out, "Why don't you stand up?"

"Urrrggh!" gasped Skip, "I say, tell Tom King to come with a rope. And——and——"



"And what – quick!" Moments were precious to Perkinson.

"Chuck that bundle down, will you?" Skip remembered the foodstuffs.

The bundle splashed into the mud. Perkinson vanished, running for Felgate as he had seldom run on the cinder-path. Skip Ruggles extricated himself from clinging mud, and opened the bundle.

IV

Tom King dashed into the changing-room, his face ablaze with excitement.

"Langdale!" he gasped.

The Felgate captain gave him a glare. Other senior men frowned at him. It was not for a junior to hurtle into their august company in that way.

"You cheeky young ass!" began Langdale.

"He's come in!"

"Eh! What?"

"Perkinson – just come in!" gasped Tom.

"Oh! Good! Where is he? What——"

"Here he comes."

All eyes turned on Perkinson as he came breathlessly in. The Felgate men stared at a figure clothed in muddy chalk as in a garment. Seldom, or never, had a Felgate senior been seen in such a state. But it was Perkinson: and he was back in time – just in time. Purring, who was changing, had one leg out of his trousers. He shoved it in again.

"I say, Langdale, I'm awfully sorry," gasped Perkinson, "I'll tell you how it was——"

"You can pack that up till after the match. Get changed," rapped Langdale.

Perkinson packed it up and got changed. He had a few words with Tom King while he was changing – a few

words that made Tom's eyes open wide. Then he marched into the field with the team – what time Tom King and Dick Warren, having provided themselves with a stout box-robe, started for Hodden Heath.

V

"Skip, you old ass!"

"Skip, you old clown!"

The words were not complimentary. But the adjective "old" made all the difference. Skip grinned up at two faces looking down into the chalk pit.

Truth to tell, he did not feel much like grinning. His feet were almost frozen in the wet mud. His teeth were chattering. He was wet and muddy and chalky and cold and felt generally rotten. Even the sticky things in the bundle had not been much of a comfort, though Skip had been as good as his word, and "scoffed" the lot. He felt as if he had been in that wet, damp, cold pit for a century or so. Never had he been so glad to see his chums' faces. He contrived to grin up at them.

"I say, got a rope?" he squeaked.

"Think we'd come without one, fat-head?"

"I say, was Perkinson in time?"

"Just in time. Catch hold!"

The rope slithered down. Skip tied the end round his fat person, and Tom King and Dick Warren dragged him up. Up went Skip, bumping on rough chalk. It was not an easy pull, even for two sturdy fellows; Skip Ruggles's weight was no light matter. But they hooked him out at last, and he sprawled on the earth, landed like a fat fish, and struggling for wind.

"Perkinson told us, Skip," said Tom. "It was frightfully decent of you, old chap."

“Urrrrggh!” gurgled Skip.

“Jolly decent, sticking there in the mud to let Perk get back for the game,” said Warren.

“Gurrrrrggh!”

“Now brace up, and we’ll cut back and see the finish of the match. Never mind about that dashed picnic——”

“Urrgh! That’s all right – I’ve had it,” gasped Skip. “I told you fellows——”

If King and Warren had been thinking about the picnic, they had to forget it. But as a matter of fact they were only thinking about the St. Jim’s match, and how Perk would shape after his wild adventures on Hodden Heath. They dragged Skip to his feet, and started at a trot.

Skip did not feel much like running, with the contents of the bundle packed away in his fat inside. It was a tough run for Skip, and long before it was over, he wished he had left a few of

those sticky things in the bundle. But with his loyal chums holding fast to a fat arm each, he had to keep on the go. They arrived at Felgate, and plunged into the crowd on the football ground, just as a roar went up:

“Goal!”

“Good old Perk!”

“Goal!”

The whistle went. They learned later that it had been no-end of a game, hard and fast from start to finish, St. Jim’s and Felgate fairly matched till the very end, when Perkinson put the leather in from the wing. Perk had taken the winning goal, and everyone was cheering Perk. But it was quite certain that, but for the loyal devotion of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, Perk never would have kicked the winning shot, and Tom King and Dick Warren maintained that really and truly, and taking one consideration with another, it was Skip’s Goal!

