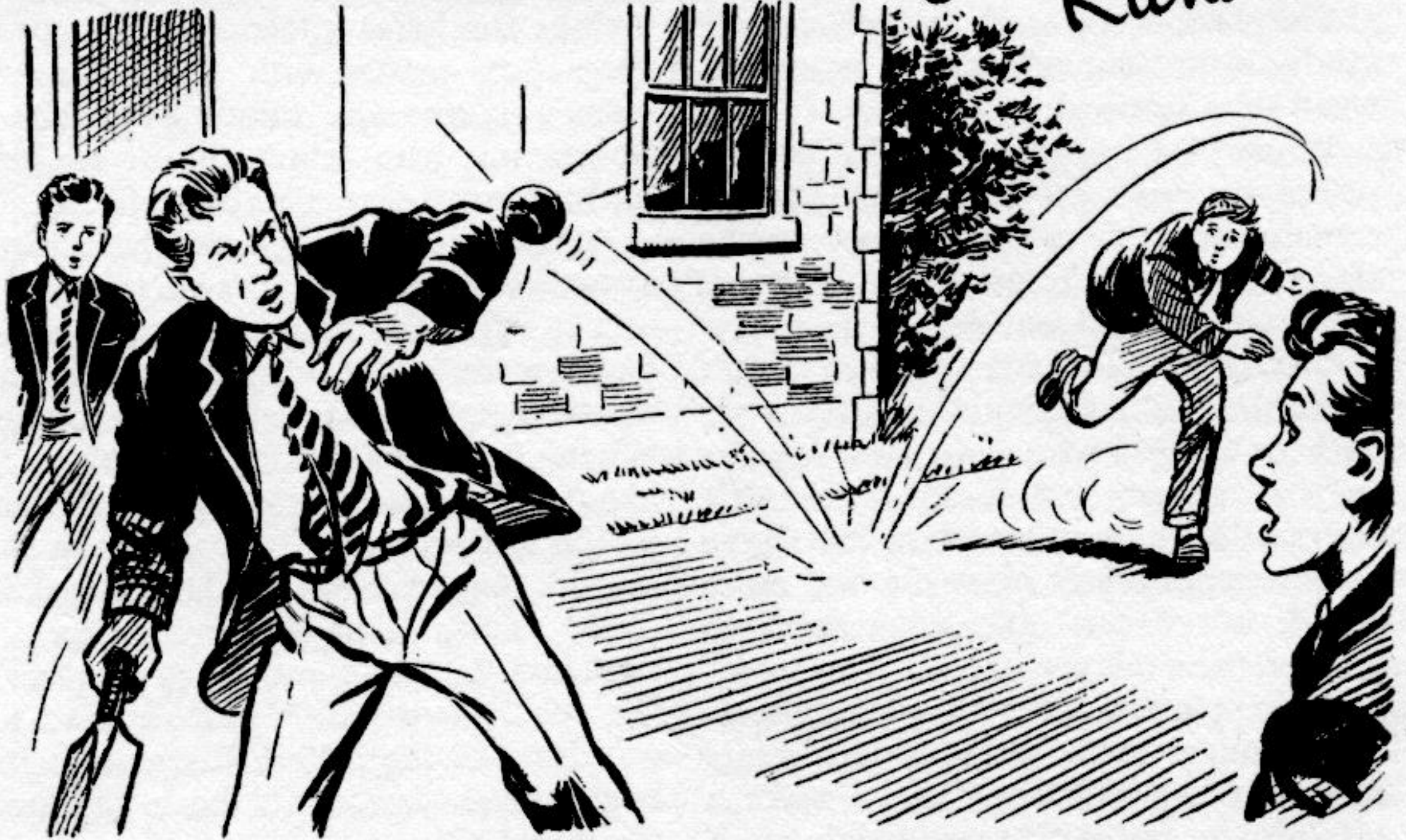


LAST MAN IN!

by Frank Richards



CRICKET is, and always was, a most uncertain game. That is proverbial. But of all uncertain games, seldom was one so uncertain as Felgate's match with Pelham, which for uncertainty, from first to last, really beat the record. The Felgate first-eleven never had such a variety of luck, good and bad. And the fact that it was, finally, Study Four in the Fourth that came to the rescue, was a source of tremendous rejoicing in that study, and was talked of for weeks afterwards in the Pound.

Study Four, of course, had nothing whatever to do with first-eleven cricket. Tom King was a batsman of renown in the Lower School: Dick Warren great with the leather: Skip Ruggles was a rabbit, of no account in any game. But good bat as Tom King was,

good bowler as Warren was, all they had to do with great games-men like Langdale and Perkinson, and Denver, was to field at the nets, or stand round and cheer when the great men played on Big Side. And they did not expect to do even that at the Pelham match, for Pelham was at a good distance from Felgate, and railway fares were high. At a shorter distance Study Four might have followed the team on their bikes: but Pelham was far out of the radius. So though it was a whole holiday that day, Tom King and Co. had no idea of seeing the game at Pelham, and had to be content with the prospect of cheering Langdale and his men when they came home victorious - if they did!

There was, in fact, a considerable "if".

Right up to the date, Felgate men were confident. They did not consider exactly that they had it in the bag: for Pelham were known to be good men at the summer game. But old Langdale, captain of Felgate, was at the top of his form: Perkinson of the Fifth had never seemed so mighty a hitter: Loring never so deadly a bowler, and the rest were right up to the mark. Pelham had pulled it off, last time, on the Felgate ground: now that defeat was going to be wiped out: few if any doubted it.

Then the uncertainties set in.

Skip Ruggles, demonstrating to his chums in the quad what he fancied was bowling, inadvertently landed a cricket ball, with a fearful jolt, on Denver's elbow. It was merely an accident, and Skip was sorry for it – still sorrier later, when almost every fellow in the Fourth kicked him for what he done. Denver, with a gammy arm, was out of the cricket, and had to be replaced by a lesser light.

The next bad news was that Perkinson of the Fifth, having cheeked his beak in the form-room, had been given detention for that whole holiday. That, everyone agreed, was just like Perkinson: who could always be relied upon to do the wrong thing at the wrong time. In vain old Langdale pointed out to Mr. Kye that Perkinson, cheeky ass as he was, was sorely needed at Pelham: Kye was adamant. Cricket, no doubt, was cricket: but discipline was discipline: and so Perkinson's number was up. Again a first-class man had to be replaced by a lesser light.

Still, Felgate men were fairly sanguine, when the day came, and twelve good men and true packed into the train at Hodden. But, as the poet has remarked, thus bad begins but worse

remains behind. They had to change at Fordham Junction, and there was a surging crowd at the junction, which was perhaps the reason why Cadby and Paynter somehow got into the London express instead of the train for Pelham. Langdale did not even know what had happened, till, counting heads at Pelham, he counted only ten. Cadby and Paynter had simply disappeared, just as if they had vanished into thin air like Mercury in the Aeneid.

And then, indeed, did old Langdale feel like the Raven's unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster. He could, of course, borrow a man from Pelham: but he did not want to borrow a man from Pelham. He would gladly have kicked Cadby and Paynter, whatever had become of them: but they were far out of reach of his foot, and anyhow that would not have mended matters. And then——”

That was where Study Four came in.

II

“Like a lift?” asked Selwyn.

Tom King paused before replying.

He was not precisely pally with Eric Selwyn, of the Shell. Selwyn, quite a good fellow in his own way, was given to swank. He could box, he could swim, he could sprint: and fellows in the Pound often heard, from Selwyn himself, how jolly well he could do these things. He could play a good game at cricket, though King of the Fourth could have played his head off – a circumstance that Selwyn would never have dreamed of admitting. His people were wealthy, and sometimes, on a half-holiday, a car would come down to Felgate to take Selwyn and his friends for a run: quite a nice car,



"We'll beat the train hollow," said Selwyn. "Like to come?"

with a very creditable chauffeur attached. Selwyn loved to roll off in that car, feeling – and looking! – rather superior to the common herd. On this particular morning, it being a whole holiday, the car came early: Dunn and Waters of the Shell were already sitting in it, and Selwyn was about to step in, when he spotted Tom King and called to him.

It was good-natured of Selwyn, though there was undoubtedly a spot of patronage in his manner. There was a seat available, and plenty of fellows would have been quite willing to fill it. But Tom hesitated. He had no use for Selwyn's swank: he did not like a spot of patronage: and he did not enjoy

conversation with Selwyn – which was generally all about Selwyn and the things he could do so jolly well. He was on his own when Selwyn called: Skip was enjoying life in the tuck-shop, and Dick Warren had leave home for the day, and was gone. He was thinking of a pick-up game on Little Side when Selwyn hailed him. As a matter of preference, he would rather have pushed out his bike and followed Langdale and his merry men to Pelham, but that was not practicable, owing to the distance. After all, a run in a car on a sunny summer's day was attractive.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Pelham!"

"Pelham!" repeated Tom.

"We shall get there before the team, in the car!" said Selwyn. "Beat the train hollow. Like to come?"

That settled it for Tom King.

If there was one thing he really did want that day, it was to watch the first-eleven play Pelham. Selwyn's invitation, even with its spot of patronage, came as a windfall.

"Jolly glad to," said Tom.

"Hop in!"

Tom King hopped in.

"We've got leave out of bounds, of course," said Selwyn. Morney, master of the Shell, always gave Selwyn leave out of bounds on such occasions. "Drop in at Pelham and see the game started, what? Then a run round, and lunch somewhere, and might drop in again and see the finish. I'd like to give 'em a yell, if they pull it off."

"Same here," agreed Tom.

The car rolled out of Felgate.

Tom King, as matter of choice, would have preferred to hang on at Pelham the whole day, and see the game through from start to finish. But as Selwyn's guest he did not like to suggest that. Still, it was something to see old Langdale and his men started, and perhaps to see them finish: and anyhow it was a pleasant run through Hertfordshire's green and pleasant land. So Tom's face, in the car, was very cheerful: and he listened as patiently as Dunn and Waters to Selwyn talking about himself and the many and various things that he could do.

Actually, the car did not beat the train hollow, and the Felgate First – in its depleted state – was already at Pelham, when Selwyn and Co. arrived there. The game had not started: but Pelham fellows were gathering on the cricket ground: and Langdale and

some of his men could be seen at the pavilion in deep consultation about something. What that something was, Selwyn and Co. soon learned: the Felgate team had arrived a man short, and Langdale had not yet decided what to do about it.

"By gum!" said Selwyn. "I wonder ——" He whistled.

"It's rotten luck," said Tom.

"I wonder——!" repeated Selwyn. He whistled again. "Look here, old Langdale's a man short. Might be a chance for me."

"You!" ejaculated Tom King. He stared at Eric Selwyn. Dunn and Waters stared at him, too. Swank came as naturally to Selwyn as breathing, but this was rather the limit.

"After all, who's the best cricketer in the Lower School?" asked Selwyn.

Tom King might have replied, quite truthfully, "I am". However, he did not make that reply. He only stared. If Selwyn liked to fancy himself the best cricketer in the Lower School at Felgate, he was welcome to get on with it, so far as Tom was concerned.

"They want a man," said Selwyn, argumentatively. "Well, I'm here, as it happens. They want a senior man, of course: but – dash it all, you fellows know how I bat, and bowl too, if you come to that. I could borrow some flannels here. I wonder——"

Dunn and Waters exchanged a wink, unseen by Selwyn. Tom King smiled. Old Langdale might be in a jam: but it did not seem to Tom that he was likely to see a way out of it by playing Selwyn in the place of a missing man. Selwyn perhaps did not feel very sure about it. But if Tom King could play his head off at cricket, he could play Tom's off at self-esteem.

"I'll jolly well speak to Langdale, and chance it!" said Selwyn. "If old Langdale takes me on, you fellows can run round in the car, and come back for me, afterwards."

He left them, with that.

III

"Langdale! I say!"

"Eh! What?"



"Cut off!" said Langdale, turning his back.

Langdale, Loring, and some of the others, were discussing the position, when Selwyn edged in at the pavilion. Langdale looked round at him. He had not expected to see Felgate fellows at Pelham: but he was not interested. He

gave Selwyn a wave of the hand in dismissal.

"Don't bother now," he said.

"They're saying somebody missed the train, and you're a man short," said Selwyn: not to be dismissed by a wave of the hand.

"Yes: yes: go away."

"If you think I'd be any use——"

"What?"

"I'd be jolly glad, if you think so, Langdale. I came over with some friends in the car, as it happens, and——"

"You young ass!" said Langdale, gruffly.

"I know I'm not up to first-eleven form." This was unusually modest, from Selwyn. "But I'm pretty good, Langdale, and I fancy I could keep my end up."

"Cut off!" said Langdale, turning his back.

Apparently the Felgate captain did not regard Eric Selwyn as a useful way out of the jam! No doubt his opinion of Selwyn, as a cricketer, did not come within miles of Selwyn's own. No doubt he knew — as Selwyn did not — that first-aid from such a recruit would only produce, in the way of results, a pair of spectacles for Felgate, which would not have helped much.

Selwyn, with rather pink cheeks, turned away. He had wondered whether this might be a chance for him. He ceased to wonder now. It was not the ghost of a chance. But as he turned to take a crestfallen departure, Langdale suddenly turned back towards him.

"Hold on, kid!" he exclaimed.

"Yes!" said Selwyn, eagerly. Had Langdale thought better of it?

"Did you say you came over with some other fellows in a car?"

"Yes: three other chaps——"

"Any senior man?"

"Oh!" Selwyn realised that Langdale hadn't changed his mind. He was only hoping that some senior might, happily, have come over in that car. Any man in the Felgate Sixth would have been welcome to Langdale now – even Pook. "Oh!" said Selwyn. "No! Only Dunn and Waters of my form, and young King of the Fourth——"

"King!" repeated Langdale.

He seemed quite struck by that name: Selwyn could not imagine why. He stood for a long moment in thought, while Selwyn waited for more. When more came it surprised him.

"Tell young King to come here," said Langdale.

"You want to see him?"

"Haven't I said so, you young ass! Send him here at once."

"Oh! All right."

Selwyn departed, wondering again – this time whether he was dreaming! Langdale, in such a jam, had no use for Selwyn's services. Could he imaginably have any use for King's? It turned out that he could.

Tom King was on the spot within two minutes. In those two minutes Langdale had been speaking hurriedly to the other men, most of whom looked surprised and dubious when he had done so. When Tom arrived, the Felgate captain scanned him with a scrutinising eye.

"Feeling fit, King?" he asked.

"Eh! What? Yes! Fit as a fiddle," answered Tom, never dreaming what was coming.

"We want a man," said Langdale. "You're only a junior, King, but I know your form. You're the best bat in the Lower School, and useful in the

field. I can borrow some things for you here. Like to play?"

Tom King jumped.

"Like to!" he repeated.

Langdale smiled.

"That's that, then!" he said.

And that was that! Selwyn of the Shell found some difficulty in believing his eyes, when he saw Tom King of the Fourth, in flannels, go into the field with the Felgate First, when Pelham took the first knock. He rolled off in his car, in disgust. So he did not see Tom make a quite useful catch off Loring's bowling: and another, later, which sent the Pelham skipper home.



Tom made a useful catch off Loring's bowling.

And he did not see – as perhaps he might have liked to see – Tom at the wicket, when he came on at the tip of the Felgate tail, and Evans, the Pelham fast bowler, bowled him for a duck.

IV

“Last man in!”

Tom King, of course, was last man. It was something little short of a miracle that he was playing cricket for Felgate First at all: and naturally he was last on the batting list. In Felgate’s first innings he had scored an inglorious duck. Now he girded up his loins, so to speak, for the final ordeal, hoping for better things. Quite a lot depended on

it – nothing short of the difference between victory and defeat. That was what it had come to: for after the varying fortunes of an uncertain game, the Pelham score stood at 120, and the Felgate at 117: Felgate wanted three to tie, four to win: and last man had the bowling. Langdale, at the other end, could no doubt have knocked up that four, if he had had the bowling. But he hadn’t; it was coming to his Fourth-form recruit, and if that recruit repeated his former score, the game was up. And it was Evans who was bowling again for Pelham: Evans, who had knocked over poor Tom’s wicket like a skittle in his first innings.



Langdale gave Tom an encouraging wave of the hand.

The Felgate men, perhaps forgetting the proverbial uncertainty of the game, had little doubt that it was all over bar shouting – and that Pelham were going to do the shouting. They could have kicked Denver for getting that gammy arm, and Perkinson for getting that detention. Either of them could and would have pulled the game out of the fire. All that King of the Fourth could do, was to trot out to the wicket, and trot back again after it had been skittled. So it seemed.

Langdale gave Tom an encouraging wave of the hand as he came out. That probably helped Tom King to brace up to the ordeal. Anyhow he was going to do his best, and no fellow could do more. He was cool as a cucumber, watchful as a cat, as Evans sent down a fast ball. Felgate men, at the pavilion, watched to see the wicket skittled.

They did not see it skittled. They heard the click of willow meeting

leather. They saw Tom start to run and Langdale wave him back. There was no need to run!

“Holy smoke!” said Loring. “Is that a boundary, or are we fast asleep and dreaming?”

It was a boundary!

V

Cricket, as we began this story by remarking, is a most uncertain game. The uncertainties in that particular game had been almost innumerable. A man crooked, a man detained: two men lost en route: the mere chance of Selwyn’s car, and of Tom King getting a lift in it: the desperate resource of playing a Fourth-form man in a first-eleven fixture, and finally, the winning hit by that unusual recruit – it was quite a record. But the end was victory: and all was well that ended well: and great was the glory that accrued to Study Four!

TWENTY QUESTIONS

(Answers on page 160)

1. Before the kick-off in a First Division match, the referee went up to one of the goalkeepers who was wearing a yellow jersey and instructed him to change it for one of a different colour. Was this because:

- (a) it clashed with the shirt colours of the opposing team;
- (b) it might clash with the ball which, on this occasion, was orange;