

MAN WANTED



By **FRANK RICHARDS**

BEFORE, during, and after the Cufton match, many Felgate fellows felt like kicking Perkinson of the Fifth. Kicking, indeed, would have been a mild penalty for a fellow who changed into the wrong train on the day of a big Soccer fixture, and dragged another fellow into it with him. Boiling in oil would really have been more suitable.

Tom King, on the other hand, felt more like patting Perkinson on the back—if a Fourth-form junior could ever have dreamed of patting the back of so tremendous a Blood and gamesman as Perkinson of the Fifth. Tom would have been glad to see Perk change into an unlimited series of

wrong trains, all through the Soccer season, if the same result could have accrued. Though really that glorious day at Cufton was as much due to Skip Ruggles as to Perk. It was just luck that Skip played the goat, simultaneously with Perkinson understudying that animal.

It was a bitter winter's day. Snow glistened on the old red roofs of Felgate School, and ridged the branches of the ancient oaks. There was snow in the quad, and snow and ice on the roads. Grim winter weather was not likely to deter Felgate footballers. So long as the ground at Cufton could be played on, that was all they wanted. A crowd watched Langdale, the Felgate

captain, and his merry men, depart for their train at Hodden—a round dozen of them. Only Purring of the Fifth was going with the team: he was Perkinson's special chum. In milder weather, a good many fellows would have pushed out their bikes for the ten miles to Cufton: but icy roads did not tempt them. Even Tom King and Dick Warren, keen as they would have been to watch the first-eleven play Cufton, and hardy cyclists as they were, did not think of it. It was Skip who thought of it.

Which was just like Skip.

If ever there was anything absolutely idiotic to be thought of, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was the man to think of it.

Having thought of it, Skip looked for King and Warren. He found them in Study Four. He looked in with a disapproving fat face.

"Slackers!" said Skip. "Look here, what about pushing out the jiggers, and cutting across to Cufton to see the match?"

"Fathead!" said Tom King, briefly.

"Ass!" said Warren, with equal brevity.

"Only ten miles," said Skip, encouragingly. "Might get there before the team. It's a long way round by rail, changing at Lanshot, and all that. What's ten miles on a jigger?"

"Exactly nine miles and seven furlongs more than you're good for."

Sniff from Skip.

"Well, I'm going," he said. "If you fellows choose to slack about—."

Tom King rose from the window-seat. He was so obviously going to kick Skip, that the fat junior departed with his sentence unfinished. He squeaked back as he went, "Slackers!" and disappeared.

Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged a look. To hang back where Skip led was a moral impossibility. Besides, somebody would be needed to pick Skip up when he skidded and crashed.

"What about it, Dick?" Tom asked.

"Rotten!" answered Warren. "But let's."

They followed Skip down. They found him at the bike-shed, wheeling out his machine. He gave them a cheery fat grin.

"Coming?" he asked. "Good! I won't ride you off your legs, old chaps."

King and Warren were accustomed to being patient with their fat chum, so they did not fall upon him and slay him for that remark. Skip fancied himself on a bike, just as he fancied himself on a football field. He was about as good on the one as on the other. But Skip always had a cheerful and unbounded confidence in himself. He put a fat leg over his machine and started: and King and Warren mounted their bikes and followed on. Ten yards from the gate, Skip discovered that ice on the roads was not a negligible proposition. He skidded, and landed in a frosty hedge.

"Good-bye, Skip!" called out King and Warren together, and they pedalled on, leaving Skip floundering. But it was not good-bye yet. Skip floundered out of the hedge, remounted his machine, and came on. Marvellous to relate, he did a whole mile without further mischance. Then another skid landed Skip in a frozen puddle. His weight, of course, cracked the ice, and Skip sat deep in freezing water, spluttering.

This time, King and Warren dismounted, to drag him out. Skip really needed their help, but he did not seem grateful for it: perhaps because King



—and Skip sat deep in freezing water, spluttering

gripped him by one fat ear, and Warren by the other, to pull him out of that puddle. Skip yelled frantically as he was rescued.

“Had enough?” asked Warren.

“Yah!” was Skip’s only reply to that.

Skip was a sticker, and he stuck. Once more he mounted his faithful steed, and pushed on. As he had promised, he did not ride King and Warren off their legs. So far from that, he zigzagged onward at an extremely moderate pace: and they had to slow down continually, telling him occasionally what they thought of him. It was not an enjoyable ride. It was wet, and muddy, and snowy, and icy, and slippery and skiddy: not at all an attractive occupation on a half-holiday. Had Skip conked out in the first mile or two, King and Warren would probably have chucked it, and turned back with him. But Skip did not conk out till they had done half the distance to Cufton.

By that time Skip was winded to the wide, and, cold as the afternoon was,

bedewed with perspiration, and he had contacted a frozen road six or seven times. Even so, Skip would not have given in if he could have helped it. He had set out to bike over to Cufton: and he was going to bike over to Cufton, if he could. But his last purler had damaged his bike, as well as its rider. Skip collected half a dozen bruises, in spite of which, he hauled his jigger upright again, and essayed to remount. But that jigger, which had had a series of miraculous escapes up till then, had taken the knock at last.

“Oh, crikey!” ejaculated Skip, in dismay, as he discovered that his front wheel was twisted, his mudguards buckled, and one of his pedals looking a little like a corkscrew.

“Coming on?” called back Tom King over his shoulder.

“My jigger’s crocked,” wailed Skip.

They came back and rejoined him. They examined the bike. Obviously, it was no longer a going concern. Skip had to wheel that bike back to Felgate. Like a recalcitrant horse, it could be led but not driven.

Skip looked dolorous.

“This means chucking it!” he said. “We shan’t see the first eleven play, after all. Well, you chaps weren’t keen, so you won’t mind. We’ll take it in turns to wheel the bike, walking back, what?”

His chums looked at him. It was true that they had not been keen on that slippery trip. Skip had dragged them into it. But they had now done over half the distance, and so were not disposed to turn back. Still less were they disposed to walk back, taking turns at wheeling a clinking, clanking jigger. Skip had asked for this, and he was more than welcome to that for which

he had asked. Having looked at him, expressively, King and Warren remounted their machines, and pedalled onward. Skip stared after them.

"I say," he bawled. "I've got to wheel this jigger home! Don't you understand? No good going on now. You're going to lend me a hand with this jigger. I say!"

Skip bawled: but he bawled to deaf ears. They did not even glance back. They had to give careful attention to an icy road, and had none to bestow on Skip. That plump youth watched them till they disappeared in the frosty distance: and then slowly and sadly started to wheel home a dilapidated jigger, which produced many and various musical effects as he wheeled it.

It was necessary to be careful on icy, slippery roads: but King and Warren were able to put on a good deal more speed, minus Skip. They agreed that it was an absolutely rotten ride: but they were not going to "chuck" it at that stage. They sighted Cufton long before Skip, wheeling his jigger, sighted Felgate. As a matter of fact, they arrived at Cufton ahead of the football team coming by train: and they had put up their bikes, and were strolling about, and chatting with Cufton fellows they knew, when Langdale and the other mighty men of the Felgate First arrived. And then, with surprise and concern, they observed the curious circumstance that, of the dozen men who had left Felgate to take the train at Hodden, only ten turned up at Cufton.

II

Langdale fumed.

Old Langdale, captain of Felgate, was the best-tempered fellow in the Sixth Form. But anyone who saw him

in the changing-room at Cufton might have supposed him to be the worst-tempered fellow in the wide world. Really he looked a twin to that Alpine climber, whose brow was set and whose eye beneath flashed like a falchion from its sheath.

"The ass!" said Langdale. "The fat-head! The goat! I always knew he was the biggest idiot at Felgate, except in Soccer. But this——!" Words seemed to fail Arthur Langdale.

Other members of the team were equally incensed. Chard, and Denver, and Loring, and Cadby, and the rest, all stated what they thought of Perkinson of the Fifth: and everything they thought of him was frightfully uncomplimentary. At Lanshot Junction they had all—from the right train—seen Perkinson rushing for the wrong train, dragging Purring with him. It was too late to stop him: Perkinson and Purring were in that train, and gone, before anything could be done. Langdale, instead of arriving at Cufton with a man to spare, arrived there a man short. Ten Felgate men were yearning to kick Perkinson, giving him the whole benefit of the weight of their football boots. But Perk was far away—where, nobody knew, or cared much, since he was not at Cufton.

"We shall have to borrow a man here!" said Denver, gloomily.

"Nothing else for it!" growled Chard. "That ass Perk——!"

Langdale growled angrily. He did not want to borrow a Cufton man to play Cufton. He stared savagely from the window: perhaps in a faint hope that Perkinson might, somehow or anyhow, have come after all. He was not likely to see anything of Perk, who was, in those very moments, speeding in a non-



"The ass!" said Langdale

stop express in the direction of Brighton. But, to his surprise, he saw two Felgate fellows chatting with a group of Cufton juniors.

He stared at Tom King and Dick Warren. He had not expected followers from Felgate on such a day. But those two, evidently, had come over to watch the game. Langdale stared at them: and the angry frown faded from his face, and was replaced by a very thoughtful look.

"I wonder——!" he said slowly.

He did not wonder long. He threw open the window, and called:

"King! Come here."

Tom King and Dick Warren glanced

round. Tom cut across to the window. He wondered what the Felgate captain wanted. Certainly he did not dream of guessing.

Langdale eyed him keenly. Tom King was a junior: but he was, undoubtedly, the best man at Soccer in the Lower School at Felgate. He looked—as he was—as fit as a fiddle. He was sturdy: though nowhere near the size and weight of First-eleven men. But it was a case of any port in a storm. Langdale made up his mind.

"You're wanted, King," he said, crisply. "We're a man short, and I don't want to borrow a Cufton man. You're wanted to play. Man wanted, see?"

Tom jumped almost clear of Cufton.

"I——play for the First!" he gasped.

"Yes, you! Get in here—we've got Perkinson's things, and you'll have to manage in them somehow. Don't waste time staring, you young ass. Get a move on."

Tom King gasped for breath. But his eyes danced. Play for the First-eleven! It was a dream beyond all dreams. He did not waste time staring. He cut into the changing-room, throwing a word to Warren over his shoulder.

"Langdale wants me to play! Ain't it gorgeous?"

"Oh, suffering cats!" ejaculated Dick Warren. He cut in after his chum, to help him change.

First-eleven men stared, and shook their heads. But old Langdale's word was law. Perkinson's things hung rather loose on Tom: perhaps more than rather. He did not care a bean for that. He was going to play Soccer for Felgate First: he was going to take Perkinson's place at outside right: and he was going to play the game of his life: he wasn't

going to let old Langdale down, who had picked a junior to play in the place of a missing senior man. He couldn't, perhaps, hope for goals against Cufton: that was beyond the limits even of a dream: but he was going to keep his end up: he was going to show these senior men that they knew something about Soccer in the Fourth Form. Dick Warren, as delighted as his chum, helped him into Perk's roomy outfit, and scrounged boots from a junior Cuftonian. When the Felgate men sallied forth for the game, nine members of the team felt dubious about the new recruit, and Langdale perhaps a little dubious too: but Tom King was walking on air!

III

Tom King lined up with the Felgaters, feeling on top of the world. He noted, without minding in the least, that some of the Cufton crowd smiled. He was aware that he must have looked a little like a minnow among the whales—all the more so because Loring, at inside right, was a very tall fellow—he was called Lanky Loring at Felgate. He towered over Tom, and the contrast was perhaps a little striking. But Tom did not care. If his legs were not so long as Loring's, at least he was very quick and active on them: and he had a sure foot and an unerring eye. And in spite of the fact that the Felgaters felt that they had a weak spot on the right wing, it was Felgate that scored first.

"Goal!" yelled Dick Warren, most eager of onlookers. "Good old Tom!"

It was Langdale who put it in. Langdale, at centre-forward, was a man of men on the Soccer field. But Tom had a hand—or rather a foot—in it. Almost

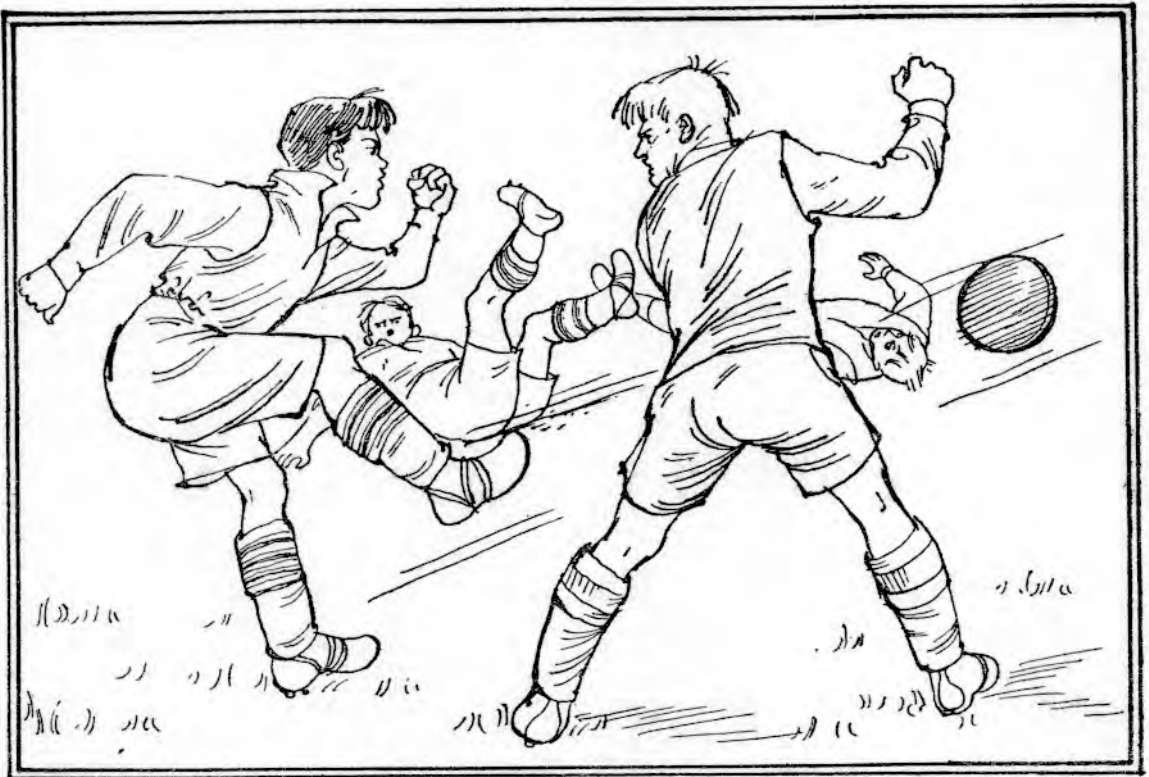
on the touch-line, and with a heavy Cufton half rushing him down, Tom King cut the ball in to inside right. The next moment he was flying. But as he went down, he knew that Loring had the pass, and was despatching it to centre a second before a hefty Cufton shoulder sent him tottering. Lanky Loring's long legs stretched out on the earth: but Langdale had the leather, and the Cufton goalkeeper hardly saw it coming before it was there.

It was first blood to Felgate, and very encouraging to begin with. But after that, the game was hard and fast, with nothing to come for a long time. Perkinson of the Fifth, had he been in his place, would no doubt have provided that extra spot of quality which would have weighed the scales in Felgate's favour. It was a fact that King of the Fourth was rather lost among the big men at close quarters, and that weight would tell. But he was full of pluck, and full of beans: and if a heavy Cufton shoulder laid him low, he was up again like a jack-in-the-box, as if like Antaeus of old he derived new strength from contact with his mother earth. And it was another fact, that his wind was as sound as a bell: and at the end of a gruelling half, he still looked as fresh as paint. But that half ended with a goal for Cufton: and when the whistle went the score was equal.

Langdale gave him a pat on the shoulder, in the interval.

"Keep it up!" he said: just as if Tom had done some wonders already. Which was all Tom needed, if he needed anything, to screw him up to top pitch. After that he would have died a dozen times for old Langdale.

In the second half, Cufton came down like wolves on the fold. Again



Tom had a second, and he made the most of it

and again Felgate had to pack their goal and content themselves with defence: and Denver, between the posts, was given all the exercise he wanted, and perhaps a little more. But Denver was a great man in goal: and with cheerful equanimity he put paid to shot after shot: while the Cufton custodian at the other end stamped about to keep his feet warm. The Cufton man was given some exercise later, but he too appeared to be equal to all demands. And as the half wore to its end, it looked like a draw to come: and gallantly as Tom King was playing up in Perkinson's place, Felgate men yearned to kick Perk for getting into that wrong train. Never had Perkinson been so badly wanted: and his comrades would gladly and joyfully have booted him all round Cufton, all round

Felgate, and then back again. They did not know what was coming—till it came!

It came almost on the tick of time. Langdale and Co. determined that it should not be a draw if they could help it, were attacking with all their might. But if the attack was hot, the defence was sound: the ball went in from Langdale, only to be headed out: it went in again, only to meet a ready fist: and yet again, only to spin away like a bullet from the vigorous foot. And it came to Tom right out on the wing.

After it came a Cufton rush. Tom had a second, and he made the most of it. He did not stop to think—it was no time for thinking. He knew, rather than saw, that Langdale, colliding with a Cufton forward, was over on his back: that Loring, contacting a Cufton

shoulder, was down and waving his long legs in the air, and that the left winger had no earthly chance of taking a pass. And, in the second that was granted him, he put all his beef into a long shot for goal. The next moment earth and sky were spinning round him: but the leather was whizzing on its way, swift and true as a rifle-shot: and the Cufton custodian jumped at it a split second too late!

“Goal!” shrieked Dick Warren. He waved his cap, frantically, catching a Cuftonian, on his right, in the eye, and another Cuftonian, on his left, in the ear. But what did he care for Cuftonian eyes and ears? “Goal! Goal! Goal! Hurray!”

The whistle went.

Tom King tottered to his feet. He realised that it was a goal, that the game was over, and that Felgate had won. Langdale careered up, to give him a smack on the shoulder that almost floored him again. Loring gave him a joyful dig in the ribs. Chard smacked his other shoulder. He was a little dizzy, but more on top of the world than ever, as he went to the changing room: Dick Warren almost hugging him as he went.

IV

They found Skip in Study Four when they came back to Felgate, and were greeted by a strong scent of embrocation. Skip was attending to the numberless bumps and bruises he had collected on that bike ride. He was not looking joyful. But his fat face brightened when he was told what had happened at Cufton. It was great glory for Study Four: of which Skip, as a member of the study, had a reflected share.

“And it couldn’t have happened, if



Skip was attending to the numberless bumps and bruises he had collected on that bike ride

that Ass Perkinson hadn’t buzzed into the wrong train at Lanshot!” said Warren.

“You mean, it couldn’t have happened if I hadn’t fairly dragged you fellows out to bike over to Cufton!” hooted Skip.

Tom King laughed.

“Quite!” he agreed. “It couldn’t have happened, if both the biggest asses at Felgate hadn’t played the goat at the same time.”

When Perkinson and Purring came in, rather late, many Felgate fellows had something to say to Perk: and nothing that they said could have been very pleasing to Perk’s ears. But Tom King, at all events, was not disposed to join in the slanging chorus: he was, indeed, feeling quite affectionate towards Perkinson of the Fifth: for was it not owing to Perk that at Cufton there had been a Man Wanted!