



PERKINSON'S PLIGHT

THAT Perkinson of the Fifth had to play cricket that day, was fixed and settled and certain. The laws of the Medes and Persians could not have been more immutable. It was a Form match, Fifth v Sixth: and the Sixth boasted such mighty men as Langdale, Denver, and Loring. But Percival Perkinson was as mighty a man with the willow as any of them. With Perk in the ranks, the Fifth could hold their own, and even hope for victory: but without him——!

Campion, the captain of the Felgate Fifth, would rather have left out himself than Perks. He would rather have left out two other men, or three! So Perkinson's Georgic came as a devastating jolt. In the Fifth-form at Felgate, as by the yellow Tiber of old, there was tumult and affright!

It came about in this wise.

Three Fourth-form juniors – Tom King, Dick Warren, and Skip Ruggles – were in the quad, in break, with a cricket ball. The ball was in Skip's fat hand. A cricket ball in Skip's hand was not so dangerous as an H-bomb: but ran it rather close. Skip was demonstrating how he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, would handle a ball, if he had a chance – which he never had! – of bowling in a junior game. His chums were grinning. Skip really knew as much about bowling as he knew about banking or bacteriology: and if a cricket ball left Skip's hand, nobody knew where it might go, Skip least of all. Then Perkinson of the Fifth came along.

Perkinson was frowning. He was not in a good temper. He had had a spot of

bother in his form-room, with his beak, Mr. Kye. Spots of bother with his beak not uncommonly came Perk's way. Kye, in his opinion, was a stuffy old ass, who knew nothing and cared nothing about games. In Kye's opinion, Perk was a dense and obstinate fellow, who gave much too much thought to games, and much too little to his studies. Perk had been through it that morning: he had, in fact, been thinking of the Form match to come, and Kye's voice to him had been nothing but an irritating drone. Kye had not taken it kindly.

Perk was a thoroughly good fellow, but he had one fault – a hot and hasty temper, liable to fly off the handle at a moment's notice. Often and often did Perk act in haste and repent at leisure. In the form-room, he had barely restrained himself from telling Kye what he thought of him and his imperfect subjunctives. Imperfect subjunctives – when a fellow was thinking of knocking up a century against the Sixth! It was not surprising that Perk was in an exasperated mood when he came on Tom King and Co, in the quad. And it was unfortunate that Skip Ruggles, who by some mysterious decree of Fate always did the wrong thing at the wrong moment, was in his way.

Skip, as he swung a fat arm with the round red ball clutched in fat fingers, had no intention of letting the ball escape. It escaped of its own accord, and flew. Where it went, Skip did not know for one moment: but the next, he knew, as Perkinson uttered a loud yell, and clapped a hand to his waistcoat.

“Oh, my hat!” ejaculated Tom King.

“Oh! You ass!” breathed Dick Warren.

“I say, where's that ball?” gasped Skip. “Oh, crikey!” He blinked at the Fifth-form man, rubbing the place where the ball had landed. “I – I say, Perkinson, I – I never meant——”

He got no further. A mighty hand grasped him. His head contacted one of the old Felgate oaks. It contacted it hard. Bang! bang! bang! Tom King and Dick Warren looked on sadly. If ever a fellow had asked to have his fat head banged, Skip had. Perk, fresh from his spot of bother with Kye, perhaps found some solace in banging Skip's head. But Skip, at the receiving end, found none: and his frantic yells woke every echo in the old quad at Felgate. They reached many ears – among others, those of Mr. Kye, master of the Fifth, who came rolling up in wrath.

“Perkinson! Stop that instantly.”

Perkinson, at the voice of his beak, stopped it instantly, but he gave Kye a rather glowering look. Skip ceased to yell. He rubbed a fat head and gasped for breath. Mr. Kye fixed his eyes on Perk with an almost deadly look. He had not seen the incident of the cricket ball. All he had seen was, a senior man, of his form, banging a junior's head. And he was already out of patience with Perkinson.

“You must learn to keep your temper, Perkinson.”

Perk breathed very hard. His pal in the Fifth, Purrings, often advised him to keep his temper: and his reply generally was “Oh, shut up!” Soresly was he tempted to make that reply to Mr. Kye. He almost had to bite the words back. Luckily, he did bite them back.

“You, a senior boy – such ruffianism – in the quadrangle, under all eyes——”

Kye fairly boomed, "Perkinson, you will do a Georgic this afternoon. You will bring it to my study before preparation."

Perkinson almost fell down.

A Georgic - that afternoon - when he had to play cricket!

"I - I - I can't——!" he stuttered.

That put the lid on. Kye's face became almost purple.

"What? What? What? Perkinson, unless you bring that Georgic to my study before preparation, you will be sent up to the headmaster. Dr. Leicester will deal with you!"

Kye rolled on, fuming. Perkinson stared after him, blankly, and almost limped away. His temper had faded out: he was feeling limp. A Georgic to write out - and Virgil, the author thereof, had never learned what Shakespeare could have told him, that brevity is the soul of wit: the briefest Georgic was five hundred and fourteen lines! A fellow with a Georgic to write, on a half holiday, obviously couldn't play cricket. It was a sad and sorrowful Perkinson: and it was a sad and sorrowful Fifth, when they heard the awful news: and perhaps it was not surprising that Perk, being the unreflecting, hot-headed ass he was, desperately made up his mind that he was jolly well going to play cricket and leave Kye to whistle for his Georgic!

II

"COME on, Skip!"

"Oh! Yes. I - I was thinking——"

"Draw it mild!" said both Skip's chums together, incredulously.

Skip was in Study Four, his plump form almost overflowing the armchair, when King and Warren looked for him

after dinner. His fat brow was wrinkled. Occasionally he rubbed a fat head, where some aches still lingered: Perk, that morning, had banged not wisely but too well.

"I mean, about Perkinson!" said Skip. "It's rough on him."

"Horrid rough!" agreed Tom. "The Fifth are all in a stew about it. But come on, Skip - if we're going to the circus at Hodden, we've got to start now."

"But I was thinking——"

"Don't tell us the same funny story twice!" implored Warren.

"Kye's wild with him," went on Skip, unheeding. "He thinks Perkinson just flew off the handle, and banged a fellow's head because he was in a temper. He's been in rows over his silly temper before. But this time - well, that ball banging on his tummy was enough to make a chap a bit excited, really. Of course I never meant it, but he got it - right on the tum-tum. Very likely it gave him a pain——"

"Very!" chuckled Tom King.

"Think it might make a difference if Kye knew?" asked Skip. "It's rough on Perkinson, sticking in his study doing a real stinker like a Georgic, when he's wanted at cricket. He ain't a bad chap, with all his silly temper - and I did jolt him with that cricket ball. Kye thinks he was just letting his temper rip: but if he knew——"

Skip blinked inquiringly at his study mates. They grinned at him affectionately. Skip Ruggles might be - indeed, was - the biggest ass at Felgate or anywhere else: but he was all good-nature. Even with an odd ache or two lingering in his fat head, he was sorry for Perkinson's awful plight, and thinking of helping him out if he could.



"It's about Perkinson, sir," faltered Skip

"Good old fat chump!" said Warren. "Might make a difference, if Kye knew. But if we're going to the circus——"

"You fellows start, and I'll follow on," said Skip. "I – I think I'll look for old Kye – it might do some good."

"Might!" agreed Tom King. "Come on as soon as you can, old fathead, and we'll keep a place for you. Come on, Dick."

Tom King and Dick Warren left Study Four. Skip, in the armchair, continued to think, for a while, before he moved. Old Kye was rather fierce – he might snap a fellow's head off: interviewing him was rather like bearding the lion in his den, the Douglas in his hall! But Skip, after due cogitation, felt that it was up to him: and at length, he detached himself from the armchair,

and rolled out of Study Four, and made his way to Masters' Studies.

"Well?"

Mr. Kye shot that monosyllable at Skip like a bullet, when he tapped and timidly entered the Fifth-form master's study. Kye was going through a heap of Form papers, and he did not want interruptions – especially by juniors in a form with which he had nothing to do. His brows beetled at Ruggles, who half repented that he had come. But he was there now, and he got on with it.

"It's about Perkinson, sir," faltered Skip.

"What? what? If Perkinson has been ill-using you again——" It was a rumble of coming thunder!

"Oh! No, no, sir!" gasped Skip, in a great hurry. "I mean, it was all my

fault, sir – I – I – I banged Perk – I mean Perkinson – with a cricket ball, and that was why he banged my head – I never meant to, sir, but – but it wasn't just temper – he had an awful bang on the tummy – I mean the – the waist-coat, and got rather excited, and – and – that was why, sir——”

Mr. Kye stared at Skip. That plump youth half expected to be bundled neck and crop out of the study. To his immense relief, Kye's brows ceased to beetle: even a faint smile dawned on his expressive countenance. Kye, though fierce, was a reasonable man. When he spoke, his voice was almost kindly.

“Tell me exactly what occurred, Ruggles.”

And Skip, thus encouraged, told him, hoping for the best.

III

“KEEP your temper, Perk——”

“Oh, shut up!” roared Perkinson.

It was his usual reply, when Purring advised him to keep his temper. Such advice was quite useless to Perk at the moment. His temper was white-hot. Quite little things would sometimes set that temper off: and his present plight was a big thing: Perk's temper had been on the boil ever since Kye had awarded him that Georgic, and now it was boiling over. In their study, in the Fifth, Purring was arguing with him, trying to make Perk see reason. It was a quite futile attempt.

“I'm going to play cricket!” said Perk. “Think I can let Champion down? Think I can let the Form down? Think I'm going to let those Sixth-form fat-heads swank that they can walk all over the Fifth? Am I wanted in the game or not?”

“Yes – but——”

“Kye can whistle for his Georgic!”

“He'll be wild——”

“Let him!”

“It means going up to the Head.”

“Let it!”

“But look here, old chap, do be reasonable. You simply can't defy a beak like that——”

“Can't I?” said Perkinson. He seemed to think that he could. “Didn't you hear me say that Kye can whistle for his Georgic? Deaf?”

“Look here——”

Then came an interruption. A fat face looked in at the doorway of the study. Purring stared at it. Perkinson glared at it. Ruggles, the cause of all the trouble, was looking into Perkinson's study, and there was a cheery smile on his fat face. The sight of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, to Perk, was, just then, like that of a red rag to a bull. His glare was almost homicidal.

“I say, Perkinson——!” bleated Skip. Smack!

Perkinson reached him with one long stride. The smack that he landed on Skip's left ear sent Skip staggering to starboard. It was immediately followed by another smack, on his right ear, which tottered him to port. Skip sagged to and fro in pained bewilderment.

“Oh, crikey! Ow! I say, Perkinson, I came here to say – yaroooh! Ow! Wow! Oh, jiminy!”

Smack! smack! smack!

What Skip had come there to say, Perk did not know and did not want to know. All he seemed to want was to smack Skip's fat head, and he smacked it right and left: till Skip, yelling frantically, fled for his fat life. Perkinson turned back into the study, breathing rather hard after his exertions, but feeling better.



Skip, yelling frantically fled for his life

"Time to get down and change, Purring," he said. "Coming?"

"Perk, old man, you can't——"

"Pack it up!"

Perk, whether he could or not, did. His dismayed chum followed him down to change for cricket. Fifth-form men greeted him with enthusiasm. Perkinson was wanted – badly wanted – in the side: his Georgic had dismayed the whole form. If old Perk had the nerve to play cricket just the same, and leave Kye to whistle for his Georgic, his comrades were not the men to say him nay. Champion looked a little serious.

"This means a frightful row with Kye, old man," he said.

"I've had rows with Kye before," said Perk.

"Yes: but——"

"I'm playing."

"All right! Jolly glad to have you," said Champion. "But——"

"Buts" were of no use to Perkinson. He disregarded "buts". So it came about that Perkinson played cricket for the Fifth, and there was no Georgic for Kye, whether he whistled for it or not!

IV

PERCIVAL PERKINSON was accustomed to enjoy a game of cricket, from the minute stumps were pitched, to the moment they were drawn. He loved the game – he revelled in it – on the cricket field, the dense and inattentive Perk who so often irritated Kye in the form-room, came to life, as it were, and sparkled. But on this occasion, though he played a good game, Perk did not enjoy it. As was not uncommon with Perkinson, lagging reflection followed hasty hot-headed action. It was borne in upon his mind, even while he wielded the willow, what an awfully serious

thing he was doing, and how awfully serious the outcome might be.

A fellow at school couldn't defy his beak. Perk had told Purringe that he could, and perhaps fancied so: but he knew, at the bottom of his heart, that he couldn't. Kye had said plainly that if that Georgic was not handed in on time, he would be sent up to the Head: and Kye was a man of his word. A vision of Dr. Leicester's stern face in his study danced before Perk's eyes, as Denver of the Sixth sent down the ball: and perhaps that was why Perk missed it. And when, a little later, in the field, the ball from Langdale's bat came his way, it chanced that Mr. Kye, walking with Charne, gave the game a look-in: and Perk glimpsed him, in the distance, and the leather grazed his finger-tips and dropped. Suppose Kye called him, to ask about that Georgic!

Kye did not: he watched the game for a few minutes, and then walked on with Charne. But he left Perk feeling very shaken.

However, he pulled up in the Fifth's second innings. In for a penny, in for a pound, he told himself desperately: he was going to justify the side's faith in him, even if the Head sacked him for defying Kye. Somehow, with a tremendous effort, he beat down the haunting worry on his mind, keeping it at arm's length, as it were. He succeeded: and that innings was a glorious one. Sixth-form bowlers spent themselves in vain against an impregnable wicket, while the runs came fast, and crept on towards the century amid cheers and claps. Many Felgate men, like Tom King and Co. had gone to the circus at Hodden that afternoon: but there was a big crowd on Big Side, and they woke the echoes when 100

went up for Perk. Even Langdale did not come near that figure, when the Sixth took their second knock. Fifth-form men roared, and shouted, and stamped, and tossed caps into the air, when finis came, and the Fifth had won that match by a dozen runs.

Perk, the centurion, was the hero of the hour – or would have been if circumstances had not been as they unfortunately were. As it was, Perk crept away from a crowd of jubilant Fifth-form men, and sought the solitude of his study: feeling like anything but a conquering hero. Purringe followed him in, as worried as Perk. That Georgic, more or less dismissed while the cricket was on, came back to roost now, as it were.

"I – I – I wonder what the Head'll do!" said Perkinson, for the umpteenth time, as he restlessly paced the study. "Might be the sack."

Purringe did not reply: but his look showed that he thought it likely. What could a headmaster do, when a senior man deliberately defied his beak? Often and often had a hasty and wilful temper landed Perk in a jam.

"If you'd keep your temper, old man——!" sighed Purringe.

This time Perk did not tell him to shut up. He was feeling too dispirited and down and out. His century on Big Side was as ashes in his mouth, knowing that at any moment now, Kye might inquire after that Georgic, and march him off to the Head. He rambled dismally about the study.

"Hallo, what's that?" said Purringe, suddenly.

"What's what?"

"There's a note on the table – addressed to you."

"Bother it."



Perk jumped. "Oh!" he gasped

Perk, in his present dismal and apprehensive frame of mind, was not interested in notes left for him on his table. If only, as Purring said, he had kept his temper — if he hadn't banged that young ass Ruggles's head for what was, after all, an accident — if he hadn't taken the bit between his teeth and defied Kye — if — if — if — However, he picked up the note at last, and looked at it.

Then he jumped.

"Oh!" he gasped.

"What——?" began Purring.

"Look!"

Purring looked.

The note was written in a scrawling hand and imperfect spelling. It ran:

Dear Perkinson,

I coodn't give you Kye's message with you smacking my head and not letting a fellow speek. So I thought I would rite it and leeve it on your table before I went to the circus. I toled Kye why you banged my head this morning, and he said I was to tell you, from him, that you needn't do that Jorgic.

S. St. L. Ruggles.

"Well, my hat!" said Purring.

Perkinson did not speak. Perhaps his feelings were too deep for words.