ERIC and the STRIPED HORROR



To Anne Williams, Pam Pollitt and
Gordon Dickens and the splendid team
of the Shropshire Library Services

ERIC
and the
STRIPED HORROR

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ONE

Eric Braithwaite opened his eyes and saw his teacher leaning over him.

'I know you're half asleep,' The Bodge growled, 'so I'll repeat it especially for you.'

'Me, sir? I wasn't asleep – honest! I was thinking . . . about the final . . . and our strategies.'

The Bodge was not impressed – not even by the word 'strategies'. 'I shouldn't get too excited about football if I were you.'





‘But we’re going to win, sir. It’ll be the first time ever we’ve beaten that lot at Woodthorne.’

Whispered cheers went up round the room and grinning faces turned in Eric’s direction.

‘We’ll get the County Cup and we’ll be dead famous,’ he babbled. ‘On the telly and everything. We’ll give interviews, sir, and they’ll all want our autographs. I’ve always wanted to be a famous footballer . . .’

‘STOP!’ yelled The Bodge. ‘You won’t be winning anything, my lad, unless you do well in tomorrow’s test.’ And he stormed to the front of the class.

‘Test?’ echoed Eric. ‘What test?’

And he turned to his mate, Wesley, expecting an answer.

The Bodge’s face was slowly changing to a deep shade of purple as it always did when he was in a temper.

‘The rest of the class ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE TEST!’ he shouted.

‘So would you if you hadn’t been asleep. NOW LISTEN! Tomorrow morning you’ll be having a test covering all this term’s work.’

Eric wondered why he was making such a big deal about it. It was just another test, wasn’t it? Unless there was a catch somewhere.

There was.

‘Anyone getting less than forty out of a hundred,’ The Bodge continued, ‘will have extra tuition from the Head.’

Eric groaned. He would probably be one of them. Spending hours with Mrs Cracker – known as the Big Cheese – would be grim. He’d faint with the pong of her perfume. She had two: ‘Essence of Old Socks’ and ‘Souvenir de Gorgonzola’.

Eric put his hand up. ‘Sir! What if we’re sick and have to miss the test?’

The Bodge ignored him and continued. ‘The extra tuition will take place during games lessons,’ he said, ‘and for an hour after school – for three weeks.’

Eric leaped to his feet and shot his arm in the air.

'That doesn't include matches does it, sir?'

'It includes PE, games and all matches – football, netball . . . everything,' The Bodge insisted. 'You will have to miss them for those three weeks. IS THAT CLEAR, ERIC?'

It was very clear – and Eric sat down with a thump. A stunned silence filled the room, followed by a distinct ripple of grizzling groans. The Junior Football Final was less than two weeks away and Eric was the captain and a striker. If he had to stay behind, they had no chance of winning.

So what was he going to do about it?



TWO

On the way home, Eric talked with Wesley about the test.

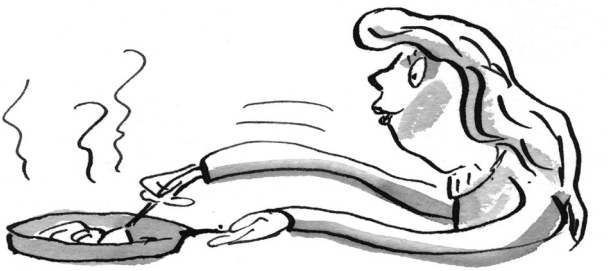
'I know I won't get forty,' he groaned. 'I haven't had time to do any studying this term, have I? Been too busy training and planning tactics to do the homework. Always copied yours, didn't I?'

Wesley nodded and kicked the toe of his boot against the wall. 'We'll never win without you, Ez. We don't stand a chance. That stuck-up lot from Woodthorne'll get the cup. They ALWAYS win. This was the first time we've had a hope.'

Eric glowered at the pavement. 'Real sneaky of The Bodge to go testing us like that,' he moaned. 'I'm sick as a parrot!' And then, stuffing his hands deep into his

pockets, he left Wesley and turned down Corporation Street.

When he got home, Mum was cooking bacon. (She was brilliant with a frying pan – but not much else, really.)



'Go and read your school books, duck,' she said when he told her about the test. 'An hour or two studying could work wonders. Give the telly a miss for once. You watch too much anyway.'

Eric leaned against the back door, feeling more fed up than ever. No telly? He'd die – especially when the United match was on LIVE!

Mum opened a tin of tomatoes and put them in with the bacon. 'By the way,' she said, 'there's a parcel for you on the hall table.'

Eric raced to the door.



'It'll be my birthday present from Auntie Rose. I've been waiting for it. She's always late.'

'I'm surprised they ever get here at all, the places she gets to,' Mum called out from the kitchen. 'How far's it come this time?'

'South America,' Eric yelled from the hall.

It was wrapped in brown paper and addressed in Rose's unmistakable bold black writing. Five stamps were stuck in the corner, postmarked *Cali – Rep. of Colombia*.

All in a rush, he tore it open. Was it a football strip? Was it a pair of shorts? Was it a baseball cap? Something brown and yellow and orange appeared and, as he pulled it out of the paper, a stink of goats . . . or camel dung . . . or rotting cabbage came with it. He held his nose in one hand and the striped thing in the other. It was a peculiar, woolly jumper.



'That's weird,' Eric said to himself and tossed it aside on the hall table.

As he did, a piece of blue paper fell at his feet. It was a letter from Auntie Rose, which he unfolded and read:

Dear Freckle Face,

Hope you had a fantastic birthday. How's it feel to be an old man?

South America is brilliant. Wherever I go, I have adventures and meet the most amazing people. I'll tell you all about it when I get home – which should be in two months' time. I hope you like your present. It was given to me by a tribe of Chibcha people living in the foothills of the Andes. They dye all their own wool with natural dyes. Do you like the colours? I think they're terrific!

But wait till you hear this!

I was told that the wool comes from the sheep on a mystical part of the Andes and that the jumper has special powers. Isn't that spooky? The woman who made it said it would improve the wearer's brain power. But its powers would only last as long as it wasn't washed. I didn't think you'd mind about that! I know you're not keen on washing!

Enjoy wearing it.

Have you been signed up to play for United yet? Keep practising!

Love and a kiss,

Auntie Rose

Eric looked once more at the jumper.

'The Striped Horror of South America!' he said. 'I wouldn't dare wear it! I'd look a real twit!' Then he raced upstairs, stuffed it under his pillow and forgot about it.



THREE

Just to please his mum, Eric sacrificed an evening in front of the telly and went up to his room to study. It was not something he did often and so it was not surprising that he felt the strain after twenty minutes.

'I can feel my brain aching already,' he muttered to himself. 'If I'm not careful, I'll do it permanent damage.' And he flung himself back on the pillow, exhausted.



'What I need is a break. Too much studying never did no good.' He reached out for his copy of *Football News* which he always kept under his pillow but instead he found the Striped Horror.

Annoyed, he pushed it to one side, but at the same time, an idea came to him that was so brilliant that he sat bolt upright on the bed. 'Chibcha people . . .' he gasped. 'I bet they really know what they're talking about – magic and all that stuff. I bet it's like they said . . . that jumper will improve my brain power. Yes! Great!' Quickly, he pulled the jumper from under the bed and stared at it. 'It looks pretty weird to me and it smells pretty weird, too – but supernatural stuff's got to be different.'

He spread the jumper over his knees and smiled. 'The least I can do is to give it a chance to prove itself. I might at least get forty marks. That'll be good enough for a first try.'

So it was decided. He would wear the jumper tomorrow and keep his fingers

crossed that its supernatural powers would work OK. Eric closed his books and pushed them aside. No point in studying now. Then he lay back on the bed and reached for the copy of *Football News*.



FOUR

'Where'd you get that from, Ez?' Wesley asked the next morning.

'South America,' Eric replied casually, pulling the Striped Horror down over his bottom.

'You've never been to South America,' Brent Dwyer interrupted. 'You're always telling lies, you are.'

'Did I say I'd been there?'

'Good as.'

'Well, Creep, it was my auntie who sent it to me. She works there. Right?'

'Anyway, it stinks,' said Brent, gripping his nose between his fingers. 'It smells of donkey droppings.'

A fierce argument raged until the classroom door opened and The Bodge

walked in with a pile of test papers in his hands.

'No talking,' said The Bodge, standing in the doorway. 'Just get out your pens.' Then, as they filed past him, he frowned and twitched his nose the way rabbits do. 'Someone . . .' he said, staring at their feet. '*Someone* has stepped into some dog dirt. Please check the soles of your shoes.'

A general titter ran round the room and they all turned up their feet to look.

'Please, sir,' Brent Dwyer called out. 'It's not dog dirt – it's Eric Braithwaite. He's got a niffy jumper on. It's horrible, sir.'

The Bodge looked suspiciously across at Eric. He stood up and walked towards him and, as he grew closer, he knew that what Brent Dwyer had said was true.

'Have you been rolling in cow muck, Eric?'

'No, sir.'

'Then why are you so disgustingly smelly?'

'It's my South American jumper, sir.'



'South American?'

'Yes, sir. It's made from sheep that live up the Andes.'

'Not made from the SHEEP, Eric. Made from their WOOL possibly,' The Bodge replied. 'But it SMELLS and I think you'd better take it off and put it in the cloakroom before the entire class passes out.'

Eric had not expected this. Now the experiment with the supernatural power would be over before it had begun.

