

ALL ORIGINAL  
STORIES

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# THE STROKE OF THE SUN

By ARTHUR C. CLARKE

**"Kill the umpire!" the audience**

**cried — and why shouldn't they?**

**He was on the ball, wasn't he?**

**S**OMEONE else should be telling this story — someone who understands the funny kind of football they play down in South America. Back in Moscow, Idaho, we grab the ball and run with it. In the small but prosperous republic which I'll call Perivia, they kick it around with their feet. And that is nothing to

what they do to the umpire.

One of the first things I learned when I got to Perivia, after various distressing adventures in the less democratic parts of South America, was that last year's match had been lost owing to the knavish dishonesty of the referee. He had, it seemed, penalized most of the players on the team, disal-

Illustrated by WOOD

lowing a goal, and generally made sure that the best side wouldn't win.

This diatribe made me quite homesick, but remembering where I was, I merely commented, "You should have paid him more money."

"We did," was the bitter reply, "but the Panagurans got at him later."

"Too bad," I answered. "It's hard nowadays to find an honest man who stays bought."

The customs inspector who'd just taken my last hundred-dollar bill had the grace to blush beneath his stubble as he waved me across the border.

The next few weeks were tough, but presently I was back in what I prefer to call the agricultural machinery business. The last thing I had time to bother about was football; I knew that my expensive imports were going to be used at any moment, and wanted to make sure that this time my profits went with me when I left the country.

Even so, I could hardly ignore the excitement as the day for the return match drew nearer. For one thing, it interfered with business. I'd go to a conference, arranged with great difficulty and expense at a safe hotel, and half of the time everyone would be talking about football.

"Gentlemen!" I'd protest. "Our

next consignment of rotary drills is being unloaded tomorrow, and unless we get that permit from the Minister of Agriculture, some busybody may open the cases and then . . ."

"Don't worry, my boy," General Sierra or Colonel Pedro would answer airily, "that's already taken care of. Leave it to the Army."

I KNEW better than to retort "Which army?" and for the next ten minutes I'd have to listen to arguments about football tactics and the best way of dealing with recalcitrant referees.

It was then that Don Hernando Dias' name came up for the first time. I knew of him as one of the country's leading industrialists, but he had an equal reputation as playboy, racing-car driver and scientific dilettante. It surprised me to learn that he was one of us, for he was also a favorite of President Ruiz. Naturally I'd never met him; he had to be very particular about his friends, and there were few people who cared to meet me unless they had to.

I suspected that something was happening when I took my place in the football stadium on that memorable day. If you think I had no wish to be there, you are quite correct. But Colonel Pedro had given me a ticket and it was unhealthy to hurt his feelings by not using it.

There had been a slight delay in admitting the spectators; the police had done their best, but it takes time to search a hundred thousand people for concealed firearms. The visiting team had insisted on this, to the great indignation of the locals. The protests faded swiftly enough, however, as the artillery accumulated at the checkpoints.

Then a sweating band played the two national anthems, the teams were presented to El Presidente and his lady, and the Cardinal blessed everybody.

While we were waiting, I examined the program, a beautifully produced affair that had been given to me by the lieutenant. It was tabloid-sized, printed on art paper, and bound in metal foil that gleamed like silver. You could see your face in it, and I noticed a number of ladies using it to make last-minute repairs and adjustments. I also noticed that this "Special Victory Souvenir Issue" had been paid for by an impressive list of subscribers, headed by Don Hernando, who had himself, it seemed, presented fifty thousand free copies to our gallant fighting men.

If this was a bid for popularity, it seemed a rather naive one. And surely President Ruiz wouldn't let half his army be bottled up in this stadium for the best part of an afternoon . . .

These reflections were interrupted by the roar of the enormous crowd as play started. For the first ten minutes, it was a pretty open game and I don't think there were more than three fights. The Peruvians just missed one goal; the ball was headed out so neatly that the frantic applause from the Panaguran supporters (who had a special police guard and a fortified section of the stadium all to themselves) went quite unbooed. I began to feel disappointed. Why, if you changed the shape of the ball, this might be a good-natured Idaho game.

**T**HREE

THERE was no real work for the Red Cross until nearly half-time, when three Peruvians and two Panagurans (or it may have been the other way round) fused together in a magnificent mêlée from which only one survivor emerged under his own power. The casualties were carted off amid much pandemonium and there was a short break while replacements were brought up.

This started the first major incident: the Peruvians complained that the other side's wounded were shamming so that fresh reserves could be poured in. But the referee was adamant, the new men came on, and the background noise dropped to just below the threshold of pain as the game resumed.

The Panagurans promptly scored, and though none of my neighbors actually committed suicide, several seemed close to it. The transfusion of new blood had apparently peped up the visitors, and things looked bad for the home team. Their opponents were passing the ball with such skill that the Peruvian defenses were as porous as a sieve. At this rate, I told myself, the ref can afford to be honest; his side will win anyway. And to give him his due, I'd seen no sign of any obvious bias so far.

I didn't have long to wait. A last-minute rally by the home team blocked a threatened attack on their goal, and a mighty kick by one of the defenders sent the ball rocketing toward the other end of the field. Before it had reached the apex of its flight, the piercing shriek of the referee's whistle brought the game to a halt. There was a brief consultation between ref and captains; the crowd was roaring its disapproval.

"What's happening now?" I asked plaintively.

"The ref says our man was off-side."

"But how can he be? He's on top of his own goal!"

"Shush!" said the lieutenant, obviously unwilling to waste time enlightening my ignorance. I don't shush easily, but this time I let it go and tried to work things out for myself. It seemed that the ref

had awarded the Panagurans a free kick at our goal, and I could understand the way everybody felt about it.

The ball soared through the air in a beautiful parabola, nicked the post — and cannoned in. A mighty roar of anguish rose from the crowd, then died abruptly to a silence that was even more impressive. It was as if a great animal had been wounded — and was biding the time for its revenge.

Despite the heat pouring down from the not-far-from-vertical sun, I felt a sudden chill as if a cold wind had swept past me. Not for all the wealth of the Incas would I have changed places with the man sweating out there on the field in his bulletproof vest.

**W**E were two down, but there was still hope — a lot could happen before the end of the game. The Peruvians were on their mettle now, playing with almost demonic intensity, like men who had accepted a challenge and were going to show that they could beat it.

The new spirit paid off promptly. The home team scored one impeccable goal within a couple of minutes and the crowd went wild with joy. By this time, I was shouting like everyone else and telling that referee things I didn't know I could say in Spanish. It was 1 — 2 now, and a hundred thousand people were praying and



cursing for the goal that would bring us level again.

It came just after half-time. The ball had been passed to one of our forwards; he ran about fifty feet with it, evaded a couple of the defenders with some neat foot-work, and kicked it cleanly into the goal. It had scarcely dropped down from the net when that whistle blew again.

Now what? I wondered. He can't disallow *that*.

But he did. The ball, it seemed, had been handled. I've got pretty good eyes and I never saw it. So I cannot honestly say that I blame anyone for what happened next.

The police managed to keep the crowd off the field, though it was touch and go for a minute. The two teams drew apart, leaving the center of the pitch bare except for the stubbornly defiant figure of the referee. He was probably wondering how he could make his escape from the stadium, and was consoling himself with the thought that when this game was over, he could retire for good.

The thin, high bugle call took everyone completely by surprise—everyone, that is, except the fifty thousand well-trained men who had been waiting for it with mounting impatience. The whole arena became instantly silent, so silent that I could hear the noise of the traffic outside the stadium. A second time that bugle sounded —

and all the vast acreage of faces opposite me vanished in a blinding sea of fire.

I cried out and covered my eyes; for one horrified moment, I thought of atomic bombs and braced myself uselessly for the blast. But there was no concussion — only that flickering veil of flame that beat even through my closed eyelids for long seconds, then vanished as swiftly as it had come when the bugle blared out for the third and last time.

Everything was just as it had been before, except for one minor item. Where the referee had been standing, there was a small, smoldering heap, from which a thin column of smoke curled up into the still air.

What in heaven's name had happened?

I turned to my companion, who was as shaken as I was. "Madre de Dios," I heard him mutter. "I never knew it would do *that*."

He was staring, not at the small funeral down there on the field, but at the handsome souvenir program spread across his knees. And then, in a flash of incredulous comprehension, I understood.

**S**ELDOM do we realize just how much energy there is in sunlight. I've since looked it up, and the experts say that more than a horsepower hits every square yard of the Earth. Those fifty

thousand well-trained fans with their tin-foil reflectors had intercepted most of the heat falling on one side of that enormous stadium — and aimed it all in one direction. Even allowing for the programs that weren't tilted accurately, the late ref must have absorbed the heat of about a thousand electric fires. He couldn't have felt much; it was as if he had been dropped into a blast furnace . . .

I doubt if even the ingenious Don Hernando realized exactly what would happen when he had talked his trusting friend, President Riaz, into lending him the necessary manpower. The well-drilled fans had been told that the ref would merely be dazzled out of action for the game. But I'm sure that no one had any regrets; they play football for keeps in Perivia.

Likewise politics. While the game was continuing to its now predictable end, beneath the benign gaze of a new and understandably docile referee, my friends were hard at work. When our victorious team had marched off the field (the final score was

14 — 2), everything had been settled. There had been practically no shooting, and as the President emerged from the stadium, he was politely informed that a seat had been reserved for him on the morning flight to Mexico City.

**A**S General Sierra remarked to me, when I boarded the same plane as his late chief, "We let the Army win the football match, and while it was busy, we won the country. So everybody's happy."

Though I was too polite to voice any doubts, I could not help thinking that this was a rather short-sighted attitude. Several million Panagurans were very unhappy indeed, and sooner or later there would be a day of reckoning.

I suspect that it's not far away. Last week a friend of mine, who is one of the world's top experts in our specialized field, indiscreetly blurted out one of his problems to me.

"Joe," he said, "why the devil should anyone want me to build a guided missile that can fit inside a football?"

— ARTHUR C. CLARKE

