

SKIP PLAYS FOR SCHOOL — or does he?

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“COULDN'T be done, Skip, old chap.”

“Just couldn't, old fellow.”

Tom King, captain of the Felgate Fourth, spoke regretfully. So did Dick Warren. They liked old Skip. Almost everybody at Felgate liked “Skip” Ruggles, Skip was, in fact, such an ass, that a fellow could hardly help liking him.

The junior captain of Felgate would willingly have said, or done, anything he could to chase the furrowed gloom from Skip's chubby face and replace it with a happy grin. But there was one thing that he couldn't do—he couldn't play Skip in a cricket match. There was a limit to friendship.

They were great pals in Study Four, —Tom King, “Skip” Ruggles, and Dick Warren. The three were inseparable—except at games.

But when it came to cricket, Skip's role was to stand around and cheer Tom King's swipes with the willow, or Dick Warren's hat tricks. For at the summer game Skip was not merely a rabbit. He was nothing and nowhere.

Loyally did Skip stand around and cheer his chums, the best batsman and the best bowler in the Lower School

at Felgate. But he was as keen on cricket as either of them: he longed to hit sixers, and make hay of wickets, as they did. And he just couldn't.

So far from that, Skip couldn't even keep his sticks up against the bowling of Boot of the Third: and he couldn't bowl Sykes of the Second. When Skip handled a bat his own wicket was in the danger-zone: but when he handled the ball, nothing on the field was so safe as the wicket.

Skip was in the study, when King and Warren came in, in flannels. They were merry and bright—looking forward to the match with Colwood that day. Skip looked neither merry nor bright—he looked sad and sorry.

Skip was cleaning his bike lamp when his friends came in. He had spilled oil on his trousers, smeared oil and burnt wick on his fingers, his chin, his collar, the tip of his nose, and the pages of the “Arabian Nights” which lay open on his knee, and which he had been reading as he rubbed the lamp—with a handkerchief he had picked up in mistake for a duster. Skip did everything like that.

He too was thinking of the Colwood match: in which he had no more chance

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of playing than at Lords. And laying down the lamp—on the open book without noticing that it was still leaking oil—Skip shot at his pal, the captain of the Fourth, a request which he shot at him regularly every time a junior match came round—to give him a chance to play for Felgate.

“Couldn’t be done.” Tom King shook his head sadly. “Anything else, old man, but not that. We want to beat Colwood.”

“I fancy I could help beat them!” snapped Skip.

“What a fertile fancy!” remarked Warren, “You don’t win cricket matches old bean, by swiping your own wicket, or braining some harmless spectator with the ball.”

“Oh, rats,” said Skip, crossly.

Seldom was Skip cross. Almost always his plump face beamed with good-nature. But Skip was taking this to heart.

“It’s rotten, old chap, I know,” said Tom King. He could feel for Skip. Indeed, he sometimes wondered how life could be worth living, even at Felgate, for a fellow who played games as Skip did!

“You don’t give a man a chance,” said Skip.

“But you wouldn’t have a chance, old scout. What’s the good of sticking a pair of spectacles on the score board?”

“Forget it, Skip,” said Dick Warren soothingly, “Come out and watch the game—Colwood will be here soon.”

“You’re coming, Skip?” asked King, “We came in to fetch you.”

Skip was mollified for a moment. Keen as they were on the coming

match, his chums had not forgotten him.

“Oh, come on, Skip,” urged Warren, “Don’t get shirty about what can’t be helped. Just rub those smudges off your phiz and come along.”

“I wish—!” said Skip—and paused.

King and Warren, already turning to the door, looked back.

“Well?” asked King.

“I’ve just been reading about Aladdin and his lamp,” said Skip, “I jolly well wish that old bike lamp was Aladdin’s lamp! Then I’d jolly well make you put me in the eleven, see?”

“Oh, my hat! Then I’m jolly glad it isn’t!” chuckled Tom King, “The men would lynch me if I put you in.”

“Oh, go and eat coke!” grunted Skip.

“Aren’t you coming, old man?”

“I’ll play if you like—.”

“Help!”

“Oh, get out!” roared Skip.

King and Warren, grinning, got out of Number Four. They had no doubt that Skip would soon be in his usual sunny temper again, and would follow, to look on and cheer as usual.

Skip gave a grunt.

It was a lovely summer’s day; just the day when any fellow would have enjoyed cricket—and no fellow more than Skip Ruggles. Cheery voices from a distance floated in at the open study window. But Skip frowned. Later on, he supposed, he would be standing around, cheering Tom King’s hits, or Dick Warren’s feats with the leather. But really that was not good enough. He wasn’t a top-hole cricketer like his pals—he admitted it. But wasn’t he as good as a rabbit like

Reece? He was sure that he was. Had that old bike lamp been, by some miraculous chance, a lineal descendant of Aladdin's Lamp, invested with magic powers, Skip would not have hesitated to rub it, summon the Slave of the Lamp, and order him to secure for him—Skip—a place in the Felgate junior eleven—with centuries and hat-tricks thrown in!

Skip had a rather fanciful mind. He was rather given to day dreaming. He let his thoughts run on that fancy. Of course, such things weren't possible—it was only an eastern tale. But how scrumptious it would be, if you just rubbed a lamp, and a genie appeared, able and willing to carry out all your commands. Skip wouldn't have asked for golden palaces, or heaps of jewels. What he wanted was to play cricket for Felgate, to hear the welkin ring with cheers for his mighty hits, to see the Colwood wickets going down like grass before his deadly bowling: to be spotted as a coming Colt for the County—it was gorgeous just to dream of it! Skip leaned back, closed his eyes, and gave himself up to a happy day-dream; and he did not even know that Colwood had arrived, and that the skippers were tossing the coin on Little Side.

II

SKIP wondered whether he was dreaming. He blinked and blinked at the strange figure in the study.

He had been alone in Number Four. Nobody had come in since King and Warren had gone down: he would have heard the door open. So who, and what, was this?

In dumb amazement, Skip blinked at him—a tall, powerful figure, with a dark Oriental face, alert black eyes, in eastern costume, with a turban on his dark head. Skip wondered whether his eyes were deceiving him. The figure was bowing before him. Skip blinked, his mind in a whirl.

"Who—who—who are you?" he stammered.

A deep, rich, musical voice replied. "I am the Slave of the Lamp! I await my lord's commands."

Skip gasped.

It couldn't be real—it just couldn't! How could it? Aladdin's lamp was a figment of an Oriental imagination. Such things didn't really happen. Above all they didn't, and wouldn't happen, in a junior study at Felgate School.



I am the slave of the lamp.

"I—I say," stammered Skip. He really had to believe his eyes. "I—I say, how did you get here?"

"My lord rubbed the lamp, and I came."

"Oh, scissors!" breathed Skip.

He had been polishing that old lamp, absently. Was it possible, that once upon a time, there really had been an Aladdin's Lamp, and that the old metal had somehow survived, and ages later had been worked up by some strange chance into Skip's bike lamp? It seemed—it was—incredible—yet there was the Slave of the lamp, bowing and waiting Skip's commands!

Skip Ruggles sat up.

He felt a strange thrill. If this was real, what vistas were opened before him! At any rate, he was going to put it to the test!

"Look here," said Skip. He was surprised to find his own voice so steady, in these strange, uncanny circumstances. "Look here, if this is the genuine jolly old lamp, and you're here to carry out my commands, can you do anything I tell you?"

"All that my lord commands shall be instantly done," sneered the Slave of the lamp, with a deep salaam. "Does my lord desire a magnificent palace set with precious stones?"

"Oh! No! This study's good enough for me," said Skip.

"Does he desire many elephants, richly caparisoned, with a host of slaves in attendance?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Skip, "They'd stare, at Felgate, if a Fourth-form man set up a show like that! No fear."

"Does my lord desire fleet Arabian

steeds, with saddles of the finest Damascus leather, and bridles studded with pearls?"

Skip shook his head. Fleet Arabian steeds were not in his line. Seldom had skip been able to keep on even a donkey at Margate!

"What then does my lord desire, since he has rubbed the lamp, and summoned his slave to hear his commands?"

"I'll tell you what," said Skip. "If you're real, and I'm not fancying all this, I want to play in the Colwood match today. I want to knock up a century, and give them hat-tricks, and such catches as they never saw before at Felgate. Can you wangle that?"

A slightly disdainful expression appeared on the dusky face of the Slave of the Lamp. His own ideas, it seemed, ran to golden palaces, Arabian steeds, and hosts of slaves. But evidently he was there to obey, for he bowed low, and answered:

"My lord's commands shall be done."

He vanished so suddenly, that Skip jumped.

Skip rubbed his eyes again. Had he dreamed it? Had that fantastic Oriental figure been there at all? Or was he going batty, or what? Well, he would soon see, for the Colwood team must have arrived by this time, and if he was going to play. . . .

There was a crash as the study door burst open. Skip jumped, and stared round, as Tom King burst breathlessly into the study.

"Come on, Skip—quick," he panted.

"But—I—I say what—?" stammered

Skip. Was it real, after all? It looked as if it was, and as if the Slave of the Lamp had lost no time!

"Get into your flannels, Skip. You're wanted—Reece is no good—you're the man—get going, old chap—we can't keep Colwood waiting."

Skip breathed hard, and he breathed deep. It was no dream—it was reality—he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, alias Skip, was wanted in the match—he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles—was going to play for Felgate!

Tom King grabbed his arm.

"Come on,—you're wasting time."

"I'm coming!" chuckled Skip.

And he came—walking on air!

III

FELGATE SCHOOL crowded round the ground. Junior matches always attracted a good crowd of the Lower School: but this time a good many seniors were giving the game a look-in. Skip, as he went to his wicket to open the innings for Felgate, cast a happy glance around. He noted that Langdale of the Sixth, the captain of Felgate, was present, towering over the mob of Lower boys. Near him were Perkinson and Purring of the Fifth, great games-men. To show off his powers as a cricketer under the eyes of such tremendous "Bloods" as Langdale, Perkinson and Purring, was sheer joy to Skip.

He had no doubt of what he was going to do! His confidence was complete. The mere fact that he was in the eleven at all, and that King had put him in to open the innings against Colwood, was proof that the Slave of

the Lamp had power to carry out his commands. The rest would follow as a matter of course.

It was an already triumphant Skip who took his stand at the wicket, the gleaming willow in his hand, Tom King at the other end watching him with a beaming face. Skip had dreamed of such things, but never expected them to come true. He had seen himself, in his mind's eye, hitting the deadliest bowling all round the wicket—but had hardly hoped ever to see it with any other eye! Now he saw—!

The ball came down—a tricky one—not too tricky for Skip. There was a merry click of bat meeting leather, and the ball went on its travels. Tom King made a move as if to run—but Skip waved him back. He knew that it was a boundary—and it was.

"Well hit, Skip!"

"Good man, Ruggles!"

He was hearing them at last—the shouts that he had longed to hear! Now they were ringing in his happy ears.

The Colwood bowler was a good man. He would have given Tom King plenty to think about. But his trickiest bowling had no more effect on Skip than hail on glass. Ball after ball came down; and to each of them Skip put "paid" with promptness and despatch. There was no need to run. Tom King loafed at his end—Skip had rather a fancy for boundaries. Skip was plump, and exertion made him very warm: he had more weight than any other Felgate junior to carry from wicket to wicket. Boundaries were good enough for Skip.

Six boundaries, in the first over, established rather a record in Felgate junior cricket. There was quite a roar when the over ended.

"Bravo, Skip!"

"Good old Ruggles!"

Tom King was not so lucky as usual. In the second over, the ball came down hot and fast from Colwood, and Tom gazed at a wrecked wicket, the middle stump out, giving it a toothless look.

"Hard luck, old chap!" called out Skip. It was the first time Skip had ever been able to sympathise with Tom King of the cricket field. He was sympathetic—but he could not help enjoying it.

Dick Warren came to take King's place. He scored a single, which brought Skip to the batting end. Four boundaries followed as if by machinery.

"Skip! Skip! Skip!" they were yelling round the field, now. Langdale was seen to wave his hat! Skip's cup was full!

That innings was like a happy dream to Skip Ruggles. It was almost fantastic. It must have seemed like a nightmare to the Colwooders. Other batsmen came and went, and some of them put up a good show and the runs mounted. But Skip, first man in, showed no sign whatever of going out. He was "set"—indeed, he seemed to the Colwood bowlers to be planted at the wicket like a solid oak. They changed their bowlers, they revised their field, without any effect on Skip. Fast or slow, tricky or not tricky, every kind and variety of ball met with the same fate—a swipe that sent it whizzing beyond the hopes of the most

active fieldsman. Up and up went the score, amid cheers and the waving of hats, and when Skip topped his century, there was a roar that woke every echo of the ancient grey stones of Felgate School.

And even then he was not finished. The runs still came, fast and furious, till Skip's own score was a hundred and fifty, out of a total of two hundred and ten: and then, Tom King, in mercy to the visitors, declared.

The Colwood men had serious faces when they prepared to take their knock. And their very worst anticipations were soon realised, when Tom King tossed the ball to Skip.

It is safe to say that no such bowling had ever been seen on a Felgate, or any other school ground, before. Skip did not look impressive as a bowler; he was plump, he was red with exertion, he was perspiring. But a Sten gun could hardly have been more deadly. The batsman hardly saw the ball—if he saw it at all. He saw his bails go. And so did the next, and the next, and all Felgate roared appreciation of the hat trick from Skip Ruggles.

And was that all? It was not, for Skip cheerfully proceeded to repeat the performance, and the crowd yelled and roared for the double hat-trick.

Six down for nought was a bad beginning for Colwood. They picked up a few runs when Dick Warren bowled the second over. But after that, the terrific Ruggles was on again, and four ducks in succession sent Colwood sadly back to the pavilion.

They had, of course, to follow their innings. Dick Warren bowled the

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first over, which gave the visitors six.

"Feel like giving us a few more, Skip, old man?" asked Tom King, digging Skip joyfully in the ribs, when the field changed over.

"Fifty, if you like," chuckled Skip.

"They won't need 'em!" chuckled Tom King.

Neither did they. When Skip went on to bowl, the man with the willow knew that all was up—and up it was! Amid unending cheers, Skip proceeded coolly to entertain Felgate with another double hat-trick. After which, he was taken off the bowling, to give the Colwood men a sporting chance.

But it was booted not. It was Skip's day; and in the field he proved as deadly as with the willow or the leather. Fellows could hardly see how he brought off those wonderful catches—but he did. It was really as if some kind of hidden magic directed the ball to Skip's ready hand. Catches that looked wildly improbable seemed mere pie to Skip Ruggles—he handled them as if they were the veriest sitters. And the roar was positively like thunder, when the last catch put paid to Colwood; and the visitors, with a total of twelve for both innings, could only wonder what Colwood would say to

them when they got home!

And Skip?

Skip, who had never played for Felgate before, Skip, who was not ranked even as a rabbit; Skip, whose cricket made small fags in the Second Form chortle—Skip was on top of the world. Felgate surrounded him, surging and roaring. Never, at Lord's or the Oval, had a cricketer drunk so deep of triumph and glory. It was like a dream—the happiest of dreams! They thumped him on the shoulder—they smacked him on the back—they cheered, they yelled, they roared!

Tom King and Dick Warren grabbed him, and swung him to their shoulders, to carry him in triumph off the ground. Men of all Forms, from the Sixth to the Second, thronged round, cheering, waving their hats. Langdale of the Sixth came striding through the delirious mob, his face glowing. He smacked Skip on the back.

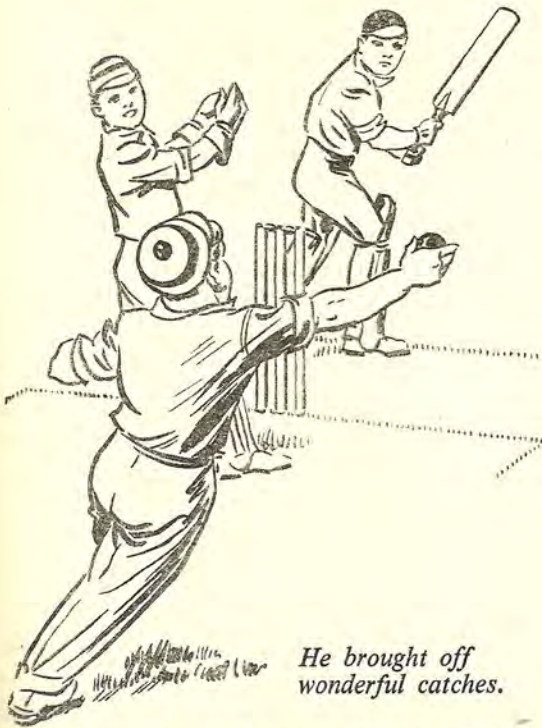
"Good man, Ruggles." It was Langdale, captain of the school, speaking—Langdale, the greatest games-man Felgate had ever known. "Good man! Good man! You're too good for junior cricket, Ruggles—we shall want you for the first Eleven!"

It was the climax! Skip's head fairly



And up it was.





He brought off wonderful catches.

swam. Langdale—the great Langdale—was smacking him on the back.

Smack—smack—!

IV

SMACK!

“Oh! Ah! Thank you, Langdale,” stammered Skip, confusedly.

“Dreaming? What are you calling me Langdale for, you ass?” It was Dick Warren’s voice.

Skip stared at him. He rubbed his eyes, and stared again. How had he got back from the cricket ground to the study? He didn’t remember—.

Smack! smack! Dick Warren was smacking his plump shoulders as if to wake him up. But he was awake. He was in the study, that was certain—there was the “Arabian Nights” lying on the floor, where it had fallen—there was his old bikelamp on his knee,

the last drop of oil oozing from it on his trousers, now pretty thoroughly soaked. What did it all mean?

Dick was staring at him.

“You fat chump,” he said, “Falling asleep in broad daylight! You’ve let that bike oil leak all over your bags!”

“Eh! Oh! What! Have—have I been asleep!” stuttered Skip.

“Like a doormouse—I’ve been smacking and smacking you to wake you up. What’s the matter—been dreaming, or what? Look here, I’ve cut in to fetch you—Tom’s at the wicket, and worth watching, old chap—do come.”

“But—but we’ve beaten them—.”

“We’re going to beat them—the match is just beginning,” said Warren, “What on earth’s the matter with you, Skip? Have you been dreaming cricket?”

“Oh!” gasped Skip.

He began to understand.

He sat up in the armchair. The bike lamp rolled to the floor, unheeded. He was in the study—the old familiar study and the Colwood match was only just beginning, and Dick Warren had cut in to fetch him—for his usual role of standing around and cheering!

“Oh!” gasped Skip, again.

He had fallen asleep in the armchair in the study; the day-dream had glided imperceptibly into a sleeping dream.

“Oh!” said Skip, for the third time.

“Look here, is anything the matter, old chap?” asked Dick Warren, “If you feel queer, or anything, perhaps you’d better not come—.”

“Oh! No,” Skip pulled himself together. It was all a dream, and he was,

after all, only Skip, the less than a rabbit. "I—I—I've been dreaming, I—I think—cricket and the Arabian Nights all mixed up—it's all right—I'm coming."

"Come on, then—I'm down to bat third."

Skip gave one deep sigh. It had all been so glorious—and it was hard to come back to hard reality.

"Skip, old man, what—"

SPORTSMAN (continued from page 131)

Warren off the cricket ground—in the middle of an innings—the Fourth Form were, after all, going to lose their bowler.

Skip Ruggles was disgruntled. He was peeved. He was indignant. But he forgot it all now. Not a single further thought did Skip waste upon his own fat self and his absurd grievances. The calamity that was about to fall upon his bosom pals was enough for Skip to think about. He felt it as keenly as if he had been handling bat or ball in the Form match. There was nothing that Skip would not have done to avert that calamity.

What could he do?

It was his fault. His chums, at least, believed that it was his clumsiness that had caused the ball to drop on the French master's nut on the stairs. And it was his own words that Nosey Parker, Pook, had overheard, putting him on the track. Skip was full of remorse. But what could he do?

Suddenly it came to him. There was yet time—if he acted quickly. Skip detached himself from the oak, cut across to the doorway, and shot

"It's all right," said Skip, hastily, "I'm coming."

Skip Ruggles stood around, and watched Tom King's mighty hitting, and Dick Warren's deadly bowling, and cheered Felgate when they beat Colwood. They did beat Colwood; but nothing like so easily as Skip had done in his happy dream!

THE END

into the House. A moment later, he was tapping at the door of his form-master's study.

"Come in."

Mr. Charne looked up, probably expecting to see Dick Warren. But it was Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

"Well, what is it, Ruggles?" he asked.

Skip hesitated one second. Skip was a truthful chap, and he realised that what he was going to say was, at least, sailing very near the wind. Still, if it was his fault, as undoubtedly it was, he was the man to blame—upon whom judgment ought to fall. And it would save the match for the Fourth.

"If you please, sir, I—I want to tell you about that accident on the stairs yesterday with the cricket ball, sir."

Mr. Charne's face became severe.

"I—I never knew Mossoo was on the stairs, sir," went on Skip, hurriedly, "I—I never meant the ball to fall on him, sir. It was quite an accident."

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mr. Charne, "Do you mean to tell me, Ruggles, that you were responsible for the disgraceful episode on the staircase yesterday?"

"Yes sir," faltered Skip.

Really it was true—he certainly was responsible. He hoped that Charne wouldn't question him more closely. Charne didn't—he was quite satisfied with a confession which cleared up the whole matter. His brow grew very grim.

"I am glad that you have confessed, Ruggles. You will now take a note from me to the headmaster. I shall explain to Dr. Leicester that you have made this confession of your own accord, and I trust that it may cause him to take a somewhat more lenient view. But you must expect a severe punishment, Ruggles."

"Yes, sir," moaned Skip.

He waited while Charne wrote the note to the Head. He left the study with that note in a fat hand. His heart was almost in his boots—he knew what was going to happen in the Head's study after Dr. Leicester had read Charne's note. But, as he headed with slow and faltering steps for the headmaster's study, he saw Pook coming into the House with Dick Warren—Pook with an oily smile on his face. Warren the picture of utter dismay. And that strengthened Skip for the ordeal before him. He stepped out quite briskly for the Head's study.

V

THEY were dismayed on Little Side.

The sword of Damocles had been so long suspended, that the Fourth Form men had rather forgotten that it impended at all. In fact, after the cricket had once started, not a man gave it a thought. And now it had fallen—for that sudden summons to

Dick Warren to go to his form-master's study could mean nothing else. In the hope that he would return, Tom King fielded a substitute in Warren's place—but the hope was faint, and his heart was heavy. Somehow or other, Warren had been found out—and his return to the cricket field was the unlikeliest event that could occur. Even if he did return, it would be after the Head had dealt faithfully with him—not exactly in shape to take Shell wickets. It was as good—or as bad—as the K.O. for the Fourth Form cricketers: and faces were long in the field—Tom King's longest of all.

And then there was a shout from the crowd—a Shell batsman had just hit a boundary, at the end of an over, but that did not cause the shout. It was caused by the sight of a figure in flannels cutting down to the cricket field at top speed. And Tom King gazed blankly at his chum, as Warren arrived breathless.

"O.K., old chap," gasped Warren.

"What did Charne want, then?"

"Goodness knows! He told me it was a mistake, and I wasn't wanted, and I could go! I can tell you I fairly hopped out of his study. O.K., old man!"

"Oh! what splendid luck."

It was luck for the Fourth—not for the Shell! The sword of Damocles, it seemed, had not fallen after all: here was Warren again, and he had come back as full of beans as ever—indeed fuller. For his next proceeding, in the next over, was to take three Shell wickets one after another, and the crowd yelled for the hat trick—happily

unconscious that, in the headmaster's study, Skip Ruggles was yelling too: though Skip's yells, as his headmaster laid it on, did not lack vigour and were audible at a considerable distance.

But nobody was thinking about Skip. Nobody noticed that his fat figure did not appear on the cricket ground all through the rest of the match. Nobody knew, or thought, or cared, a bean about Skip: and when, at long last, the Fourth had beaten the Shell, even his chums did not remember him, and did not miss him from the joyous crowd that celebrated the victory.

It was not till they went up to Study Four, that King and Warren remembered Skip. They had to be reminded of him then, for as they came into the study, their ears were greeted by strange sounds:

"Ow! wow! Ooooh! Wooh! Wooh! Oh, scissors! Oh, crikey! Wow!"

They gazed at Skip Ruggles. Skip, in a suffering state, was leaning over the study table. There was a comfortable armchair at hand, but he did not seem to want to sit in it. It was, indeed, likely to be quite a long time before poor Skip wanted to sit down again!

He gave his chums a lack-lustre look, as they gazed. Skip, only too plainly, had been through it.

"What the thump—" ejaculated Tom King.

"Whopped?" asked Warren, mystified.

"Ow! Yes! Wow! Wooh! I say, I never knew the Head packed such a muscle! Wow!" moaned Skip.

"But why?" asked King and Warren together.

"Ow! wow! I heard Pook tell Charne that he'd found Warren out—wow! So I—I owned up!" moaned Skip.

"You owned up!" repeated Tom King, blankly.

"Ow! wow! Yes."

"So that was how—!" exclaimed Warren.

"Ow! wow! I say, the Head laid it on! Wow! Charne said he might be lenient because I owned up. If he was, I never noticed it! Wow!"

For a moment, Skip's chums, regarded him blankly. Then they fairly hugged him. They told him that he was a sportsman, that he was a prize-packet, that he was the pluckiest fat-head that ever had a fat head—they could not make enough of him. And later, when the anguish had worn off, they marched him down to the tuck-shop, where every coin in possession was freely expended in standing Skip the biggest spread ever! Skip was a man whom the study delighted to honour. He couldn't play cricket—but undoubtedly he was a sportsman!

THE END