

SKIP'S GAME

BY FRANK RICHARDS.



“MY pater’s coming to see the Oakshott match,” said Skip. There was no reply.

Skip Ruggles’s fat face was deeply serious. Apparently the circumstance that Mr. Ruggles was coming down to Felgate that afternoon to watch the junior eleven play soccer was important in Skip’s eyes.

But the other two fellows in Study Four couldn’t have cared less. Tom King and Dick Warren were thinking of football, which at the moment excluded all lesser matters from their minds.

“With you in goal, old man, they won’t get through a whole lot,” Tom King was remarking, when Skip interrupted.

“And with you at centre-forward, old chap, the Oakshott goalie will have plenty to do,” said Dick Warren.

Snort from Skip.

“When you fellows have finished with your Mutual Admiration Society——” he yapped.

Tom King glanced round.

“Eh? Did you speak, Skip?”

“I said my pater was coming down this afternoon to see the match!”

“Oh! Is he? I’m not so jolly sure about Reece at inside right,” went on Tom thoughtfully. “He’s a good man, but——”

“Will you let a chap speak?” howled Skip.

“Oh, yes! Run on, fatty,” said Tom resignedly. Really, when fellows were talking soccer Skip was a little superfluous.

Skip, it was true, was keen on the game. No fellow at Felgate was keener. His two chums admitted that it was a thousand pities that Skip couldn’t play the game on which he was so keen. Still, he couldn’t! What Skip did not know about soccer would have filled an extensive library with large volumes. Really and truly, when soccer was in the air it was time for Skip to keep quiet. But they were very chummy in Study

Four, in the Fourth Form at Felgate, and King and Warren reluctant but chummily let him run on.

"My pater's seeing the match," said Skip. "Well, this is a special occasion. He would like to see me playing for the school!"

"So would we, old fellow, if you could," said Tom. "Pity you're such a prize ass at the game."

"Oh, cut that out," snapped Skip. "I've heard all that before and don't want to hear it again."

King and Warren looked at him, giving him attention at last. Skip, they noted now, was not in his usual good temper. Generally Skip's fat face was placid and cheery, his plump features adorned by a happy grin. Now he was frowning. It seemed that something was the matter with Skip. Actually there was a dark and resentful expression on the usually cheery fat face.

"My dear chap——!" murmured Warren.

"You can cut that out, too!" snapped Skip. "You fellows think that I can't play soccer."

"We don't think," murmured Tom King gently; "we know."

"Do I ever get a chance in games?" said Skip quite bitterly. "I'm not a fellow to grouse, I hope. But I can jolly well tell you that there's a limit. Just once, at least, I ought to be given a chance."

Tom King sighed. Dick Warren echoed his sigh. It was the same old tale—poor Skip never could understand what a hopeless dud he was at games. He did not even know that if he played for a school side that side was

scheduled to go down in utter disaster. Any fellow at Felgate could have told him: and in fact not infrequently did tell him. But it was no use—Skip just couldn't get it into his fat head. The clumsiest ass that ever miskicked a ball nourished a secret conviction that he was a misunderstood genius at the game. Argument on the subject rolled off Skip Ruggles like water off a duck.

"I've said my pater's coming!" resumed Skip, as his comrades merely sighed. "Well, he would jolly well like to see me play for Felgate, and I'd jolly well like him to see me, too. I—I——" Skip stammered a little. "I—I haven't told them at home how you fellows keep me out of games——"

"You keep yourself out, old boy."

"I tell you I've heard all that before and don't want to hear it again," hooted Skip. "Can't you put on a new record?"

"Well, you see——!"

"I don't!" contradicted Skip. "Look here, Tom, be a pal!"

"Tom can't play a man because he's a pal, Skip!" said Warren. "Soccer's soccer, you know. Or do you?"

"He could play a man who could play his head off and chance it," said Skip. "What's the matter with my soccer, I'd like to know?"

"You mean what isn't!" asked Warren.

"I'm practically barred out," said Skip. "Well, that's all very well. You're skipper, Tom, and you fancy you know, and I don't grouse as a rule. But my father's coming down today, and I've said that I haven't told them at home how you bar me from games. It's not only that he would like to see

me play. He will expect to after—after one or two things I may have said.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Tom.

“Oh!” repeated Warren.

They began to understand. It was not merely the usual keenness to shove in where he was of no earthly use that bothered Skip. It was not even wholly the paternal visit. Skip, who often talked too much, had been talking too much at home, and more in the line of wishful thinking than of actual facts!

“You’ve been stuffing your pater!” exclaimed Warren.

Skip gave him an indignant glare.

“No I haven’t!” he roared. “Think I’d stuff my pater, or anybody else? I may have said a few things—I mean—well, I may have said that I expected to get a show this term—and—and things like that—so I jolly well did, too! How was I to know Tom was going to keep me out of the footer as he did out of the cricket? A skipper ought to know a man’s form.”

“Oh, my hat!” said Tom.

“Give a man a chance, say at centre-forward——!”

“Oh, scissors!”

“And judge by results!” said Skip. “After all, you want to beat Oakshott, don’t you? They beat us last time. Let’s beat them this time. Play me—and let my pater see that I’m a game-man, see?”

“But you’re not, old chap.”

“Chuck that!” snapped Skip. “I don’t want any more of your dashed ignorance, Tom King! Give me a chance this once and see. Is it a go?”

Tom King shook his head. Skip was red, and he was wrathful; he was hurt, and he was indignant. Tom would have

done anything else—but not that. Playing Skip in a soccer match was not merely playing a man short. It was playing a man who would get in everybody’s way and put the whole side off their form. Playing Skip was as good as presenting the match to Oakshott on a plate. It simply could not be done.

“Is it a go?” repeated Skip belligerently.

“You see, old fellow——”

“Cut the cackle and say yes or no!”

“No!” said Tom.

Skip heaved his fat form out of the study armchair. His expression reproduced that of the Alpine young gentleman, whose brow was set and whose eye beneath flashed like a falcon from its sheath!

“What’s that?” he said. “All right! Don’t call yourself my pal any more, Tom King. I’m done with you!”

“My dear old fathead——!”

“Yah!”

That elegant retort from Skip was followed by the banging of the study door. Skip was gone from Study Four, and he went in wrath.

Tom King and Dick Warren looked at one another sadly but comically.

“Poor old Skip!” said Tom.

“Poor old blithering ass!” said Warren.

“He really thinks he can play soccer.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

They laughed. They could not help it. The thought of Skip as a footballer might have made a cat laugh. They were sorry for poor old Skip—but they could not help laughing. But it was to turn out, after all, that it was not quite a laughing matter.

Skip was desperate.

That was why he did it.

Otherwise, he certainly would not have done it: would never have dreamed of doing it.

Had anyone suggested that he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, was capable of playing such a trick on any fellow, especially football captain and a pal, Skip would have repudiated the suggestion with scorn.

Yet he did it !

And he did it without a qualm.

It was some time after dinner that he asked Tom King to come up to the top box-room. That apartment was at the very top of the ancient building of Felgate School, never used, and hardly ever entered, save as a secure spot for doggish fellows smoking surreptitious cigarettes. It was called a box-room, but was quite disused except for odds and ends of lumber. Once upon a time Skip had unintentionally locked Charne, the Fourth Form master, in that remote room in mistake for someone else—the sort of thing that Skip would do ! But it was not going to be a mistake this time !

Tom King went up the old winding staircase with Skip quite cheerfully. He supposed that Skip wanted a helping hand with a box or something. He was very glad to do anything that Skip wanted—anything short of playing him at soccer, that is. Skip had declared in Study Four that he was “done with him”—wild words that he had now apparently forgotten. He followed Tom up, puffing and blowing on the almost endless staircase.

Perhaps from shortness of breath, he lingered on the little landing as Tom

went into the box-room. Tom glanced round the room, dimly lighted by a small window.

“Well, what is it, Skip, old man ?” he asked.

Bang !

The door closed.

Tom stared at it. Why Skip, staying outside on the landing, had banged the box-room door shut he could not begin to guess.

“Skip !” he called out.

“Yah !” was the unexpected response.

Click !

A key turned outside!

Almost dizzily Tom King realised that Skip Ruggles had locked him in. He made a jump at the door and rattled the handle.

“Skip, you ass !” he shouted.

“Tom King, you goat !” retorted Skip from the safe side of solid oak.

“What have you locked that door for ?” shouted Tom. “Gone crackers ?”

“Yah !”

That monosyllable, expressive as it was, did not explain matters. Tom rattled the door-handle more energetically.

“Is this a lark, you ass ?” he exclaimed. “Let me out.”

“It’s not a lark, and I’m not going to let you out !” came Skip’s fat voice in determined tones through the key-hole. “You’re staying there, Tom King, until you make up your mind to do the decent thing. I told you my pater’s coming down to see the match this afternoon——”

“Bless your pater ! Let me out !”

“I want him to see me play ! I want him to see me play centre-

forward. I want him to know that I'm a games-man! Are you playing me?"

"No!" roared Tom.

It dawned on his mind now why Skip had inveigled him into that remote box-room. He would never have thought it of Skip! He would never have dreamed that Skip could develop such artfulness. Really, it was not at all like Skip. But there it was!

He thumped on the door. Then he kicked on it.



"Go it!" said Skip. "If I'm not playing, you're not playing! You don't come out till you've promised, honour bright, to play me at centre-forward!"

"You mad ass!" yelled Tom.

"You can chuck Reece—he's all gas, anyhow, and not much use. You can take his place and give me yours."

"You potty smudge!"

"Do I play centre-forward today?"

"No!" shrieked Tom.

"All right! I'll sit out on the landing while you make up your mind! You can see the game from the window, if you want to."

"Skip, you fat villain——"

"Yah!"

"Will you let me out?"

"Not so's you'd notice it!"

"I'll smash you into a million pieces when I get out!"

"Yah!"

"Oh, you fat rotter!"

"Yah!"

Tom King brandished a furious fist—unfortunately on the wrong side of the door. He could hardly believe that it was Skip—fat old fatheaded Skip—who was doing this. He just couldn't believe that Skip was in earnest.

For long, long minutes, Tom King talked to him through the keyhole. He called him many names—all he could think of!—to which Skip either replied with a derisive "Yah!" or did not reply at all. He had to realise, at long last, that Skip meant this.

And time was passing. There was absolutely no hope of rescue. Nobody was likely to come up to the box-room, especially with a football match in the offing. By this time fellows would be in the changing-room, wondering why their captain was not there. They could never guess where he was or why. Who could ever guess that Skip—fat, fatuous old Skip!—was capable of this Machiavellian trickery? Tom heard

two o'clock boom out from the clock-tower. At half-past two the game was scheduled to begin : Oakshott would be along soon. And here he was, locked in the top box-room, far from help.

He looked from the window, with a wild idea of climbing out. A slanting roof and a drop of sixty feet did not look encouraging. He came back to the door.

"Skip, you mad goat, let me out."

"Am I playing centre-forward?"

"No!" yelled Tom.

"All right! I'll stick it out as long as you do! I've got some toffee—like me to slide a chunk under the door?"

"I'll smash you!"

"Yah!"

Tom paced that solitary box-room rather like a lion in a cage. He had to play for Felgate. What the other fellows would think of his absence he could not begin to imagine. If he did not turn up they would have to play without him—without the champion goal-getter of Felgate School. The game would be a goner. Slaying Skip afterwards would not compensate for that. Somebody would have to be shoved in at the last minute—the team would be at sixes and sevens—even playing Skip would be no worse. In sheer desperation Tom began to toy with the idea. The sound of the quarter chiming from the clock-tower helped.

"Skip!"

"Hello!"

"Don't be a rotter, old chap! Let me out!"

"Don't be a rotter, old chap—let me in—into the team!" mimicked Skip.

"The men will scrag you for this."

"I don't care—after I've kicked goals

for Felgate, and my pater's seen me doing it!"

"Oh, you chump!" groaned Tom.

"Yah!"

Minutes were fleeing. With deep, deep feelings, Tom King made up his mind. Either he had to let his team down or he had to come to Skip's terms—never had his feelings been so deep. But he made up his mind.

"Ten minutes to kick-off," came Skip's fat voice through the keyhole.

"What about it?"

"You—you—you——!" gasped Tom.

"Do I play centre-forward?"

There was a last pause. Then Tom King gasped:

"Yes!"

"Honour bright?"

"Yes, you villain."

"You can call me all the names you like, so long as I get goals for Felgate," said Skip cheerfully. "You'll be glad of this afterwards, Tom—after we've licked Oakshott to the wide."

"Open that door, you blithering cuckoo."

"Pax, you know," said Skip cautiously. Skip was not very bright, but he was bright enough to guess that Tom King was feeling homicidal.

"Pax!" hissed Tom.

The key turned in the lock. The door opened. Skip grinned cheerfully at an infuriated face. Tom gave him one look, a look full of expression, and raced down the winding stairs. Skip, cheery and satisfied, puffed and blew after him.

"Mad?" asked Dick Warren blankly.

Warren asked the question, but every other fellow in the changing-room looked it. For unless Tom King had suddenly taken leave of his senses there seemed no accounting for this.

It was almost on time when Tom rushed into the changing-room, with Skip Ruggles puffing at his heels. There was no time to explain. He had given his word and had to keep it, and talk was superfluous. But the bald announcement that Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was going to play centre-forward, that Tom was going to play inside-right in place of Reece, and that Reece was not going to play at all, had rather the effect of a thunderbolt on the

Felgate footballers. As Tom had not been quite satisfied with Reece on the wing, that did not matter very much—excepting to Reece personally! But Skip at centre-forward—Skip in the team at all!

“Mad as a hatter,” said Bullinger.

“Look here, King——”

“Where’s my shirt? Find my boots, somebody! Don’t jaw—no time for jaw! Do you want to keep Oakshott waiting—they’re in the field already.”

“But——!” gasped Dick Warren.

“I say it’s all right,” said Skip. “You fellows ought to be glad that Tom’s doing the right thing at last! Only watch me!”

“You blithering dunderhead——!”

“Yah!”

“Get changed, Skip, you petty pilferer,” roared Tom. “Shut your silly mouth, and cram your idiotic carcass into football rig—if it will go on! You other fellows ready?”

The footballers gazed at Tom as he rapidly changed. They glared at him. For once the Felgate football eleven trembled on the verge of mutiny. But there was no more time for mutiny than for talk. The footballers had to “take it”. They “took it” with deep feelings.

Skip crammed his fat person into shirt and shorts. It was not a rapid process with Skip; but Tom, having finished, gave him first aid. Skip roared, as a football boot thudded on him.

“Ow! Wow! Look here, stoppit! I——”

“Buck up, you fat frump!” roared Tom. “I’m going to boot you all the while you’re changing. You boot him, too, Dick.”



It was almost on time when Tom rushed into the changing-room, with Skip Ruggles puffing at his heels.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Skip.

With such assistance Skip succeeded in changing in record time, though he was feeling more like a football than a footballer by the time he rolled out of the changing-room. However, he did roll out with the rest. There was already a crowd round the field, and every eye in that crowd popped, at Skip among the footballers. In fact, the Felgate crowd could hardly believe their popping eyes. Only one of the many spectators gave a plump smile of satisfaction at the sight of Skip in the blue and white of Felgate. That was a plump gentleman recently arrived—no other, in fact, than the pater on whose account chiefly Skip had played that remarkable trick on the junior football captain. Mr. Ruggles, at least, was pleased. But it is safe to say that he was the only person present who was.

He waved a plump hand to his hopeful son, and Skip waved back, grinning.

Fellows could think what they liked, say what they liked, do what they liked—but there was Skip, playing for the school, under the paternal eye!

Perhaps it was just as well that Mr. Ruggles, keen as he was to see his son playing for Felgate, was no great judge of soccer. Had he been, he could scarcely have continued to feel pleased as he watched the game.

For Skip, in spite of his touching belief that he could play soccer, was indeed a sight for gods and men and little fishes. As a consumer of doughnuts and jam-tarts, he had no equal at Felgate or anywhere else; but as a footballer he was like nothing in the earth or in the waters under the earth.

Charging and barging were Skip's long suit; and he did not seem to mind or even to see whom he charged and barged. Felgate men came in for quite as much of his attention as Oakshott men. That any side could win a match with a fat, heavy, wildly excited fellow hurtling about in their midst like a mad elephant did not seem within the bounds of possibility. The only question was, by what awful margin of goals would Oakshott beat Felgate.

By great luck Oakshott were not in great form. Normally, Felgate would have wiped them off the field. That helped to some extent to save the harrowing situation. And Dick Warren in goal was a tower of defence, saving shot after shot. Amazingly, Oakshott did not score in the first half. Neither did Felgate. Twice, thrice, and four times, was an almost certain goal knocked out by the fat and fatuous Skip careering in the way.

Had Skip sat down on the touch-line and stayed there it would have been well. Felgate could have kept their end up a man short. But Skip was not the man to be idle. Skip was full of beans, packed with pep, bursting with energy. Skip was the man to be in the thick of it, fighting all the time. He panted and gasped and spluttered for breath; but his mad-elephant tactics did not fail; and even when he barged over Tom King in the very act of shooting a goal, his only feeling was indignation that Tom had failed to centre, Skip having no doubt that he, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, could and would have kicked a certain winner. At half-time there was no score for either side, a miraculous escape for Felgate so far.

"Oh, you fat idiot!" groaned Tom at the interval.

"If you'd let a fellow have the ball——"

"Shut up before I boot you."

Skip indignantly shut up.

Probably it was only the presence of the Oakshott men that saved Skip from being massacred on the field. What was going to happen to him after the match might have made Skip's blood curdle, if he had thought of it. Luckily he didn't—he was thinking of the goals he was going to score in the second half, if only those silly asses would let him have the ball.

The second half was very like the first. Felgate's only hope was to keep goals down, which seemed possible as Oakshott were not up to their usual forms. The utmost they could hope for

was a draw. All round the field spectators were addressing impolite remarks to Skip, which he did not heed, even if he heard them. Fortunately Mr. Ruggles, who seemed to know as much about soccer as he knew about Sanskrit, continued to be pleased; and Skip was safe for a ten-shilling note as a tip after the game. Not that Skip was thinking of that. Felgate's centre-forward was only thinking of goals for Felgate.

The game went on ding-dong. Dick Warren luckily proved equal to anything that Oakshott could do when they got through. As time drew near, it looked more and more as if Felgate might miraculously pull through that remarkable game at least undefeated. Almost on the finish, there was a mix-up in front of the Oakshott goal, into which Skip charged wildly, mad-



Probably it was only the presence of the Oakshott men that saved Skip from being massacred on the field

elephant to the last ! Skip's weight in a charge was effective.

Tom King went spinning to the right, Preece to the left, and Skip's elbow jammed into Bullinger and winded him. Skip kicked, missed the ball by a good six inches, and landed his boot on Parrott's knee. The yell Parrott gave was heard all over Felgate. An Oakshott forward cannoned Skip as he essayed a second kick. But Skip's foot contacted the ball before he spun over.

And then it happened.

Where Skip's kick would have sent the ball had it not been diverted by the Oakshott man's cannon nobody knew. It might have gone anywhere but in the direction of the Oakshott goal. But as it was, the ball shot out of the mêlée like a pip from an orange, straight for goal. There was at least plenty of force in Skip's kick. The Oakshott goalie missed it by a foot—perhaps because he was laughing—and came back to serious business a second too late. Anyhow, he did miss it. It landed in the net.

“Goal !”

It was a wild howl all round the field.

“Skip !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Skip struggled to his feet dizzily.

“Urrrgh ! Where's that ball ? Urrrgh !” gurgled Skip.

“Goal ! Goal ! Goal !”

“I—I—I say, is it goal ?” stuttered Skip. “Who kicked it ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“You did, you blithering idiot !” gasped Tom King. “And only just in time to save your life, you dangerous maniac !”

“Oh, crikey !” gasped Skip.



Why the fellows in the changing-room collared him, ducked his head in a basin of water, bumped him on the floor, and ragged him right and left till he hardly knew whether he was on his head or his heels, Skip Ruggles just could not understand. Only that one goal was scored in the match, and Felgate had beaten Oakshott; and Skip, playing at centre-forward, had kicked the winning goal and won the game for his school. Naturally he would have expected rather an ovation, if not a triumph. He did not get either. What he got was the ragging of his fat life.

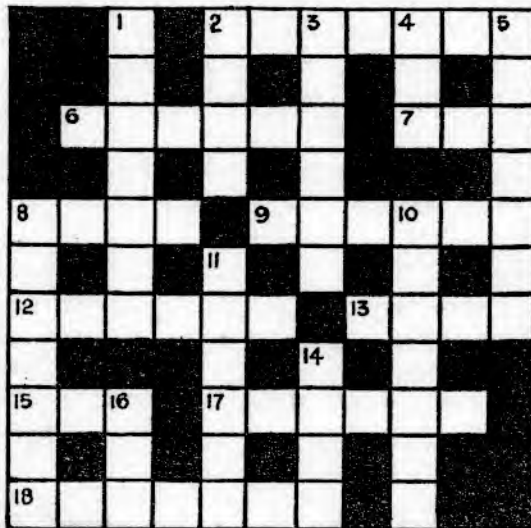
Skip was willing to admit that his method of getting into the team was a little irregular. In fact his only excuse was that the end justified the means. And hadn't the end justified the means? Hadn't he kicked the winning goal—

the only goal scored in the Oakshott game?

Nevertheless, though Skip couldn't understand why they ragged him, he understood that they did. He understood that only too clearly. It was a breathless, winded, bedraggled and dizzy Skip that crawled out of the changing-room more dead than alive. Keen as he still was on soccer, more

convinced than ever that he was a misunderstood genius at the game, Skip was never, never likely to try those methods again; his first game for the school was booked to be also his last. But he had at least one consolation: he had played for the school, and kicked the winning goal in the Oakshott match. Whatever fellows thought, or said, or did, it was Skip's Game!

SPORTS CROSSWORD · No. 2.
(Solution on page 151)



CLUES—ACROSS

- 2 Sprinting means doing this very quickly (7)
- 6 Association Football (6)
- 7 Large Australian bird (3)
- 8 With leg this gives you a fielding position in cricket (4)
- 9 Transferred the ball to another player (6)

- 12 How tennis is played (2, 4)
- 13 Principal player (4)
- 15 Pair (3)
- 17 Olympic Games usually take place in them (6)
- 18 Some say the best method of this is attack (7)

CLUES—DOWN

- 1 Areas used for cricket and football (7)
- 2 Compete in speed with (4)
- 3 This conquest of England was in 1066 (6)
- 4 Essential if you wish to skate (3)
- 5 You don't want to do this too often when swimming (2, 5)
- 8 Shammed attack in boxing (7)
- 10 AT ISLES (anag.). Where they steered when they did this? (3, 4)
- 11 Tension (6)
- 14 Surrender the match (4)
- 16 "They're ——": often heard at the races (3)