



By FRANK RICHARDS

NOBODY at Felgate School had ever seen Skip Ruggles' cousin, Eric Ruggles. If they had ever heard of him, they weren't interested, and if Skip had ever mentioned that Eric was a tremendous cricketer, an almost magic bowler, indeed a demon with the ball, probably nobody had believed a word of it; for Skip himself was not merely a rabbit at the game, but the extreme limit and outside edge in rabbits, and what he did not know about cricket would have filled large volumes. And if Skip had ever referred to the fact that Eric was remarkably like him in appearance, naturally that would have made fellows feel sorry for Eric, without leaving any other particular impression on their minds.

So when Skip, plump and rosy, went

off to Hodden, on the day before the junior match with Carcroft, to meet his cousin Eric at the station there, and bring him back to the school to tea in Study Four, not a man at Felgate dreamed what was to come of it. Even Skip didn't, at the time. The great idea came later; Tom King and Dick Warren, Skip's chums in Study Four, were prepared to be civil to Skip's cousin, and stand him a good tea, but their interest in him went no further than that.

They were rather relieved when Skip walked off to Hodden to meet that cousin of his. It gave them a rest from Skip on the subject of cricket. Poor old Skip fancied that he could play that game, a fancy that he had wholly to himself. Tom King hated saying "No!"

to Skip: but as junior captain, what else could he say?

When Skip suggested that his name should grace the list of players in the Carcroft match, Tom really hardly knew whether to laugh or to weep. Anyhow he couldn't adopt the suggestion. Skip's fat face was sad and reproachful, but it couldn't be helped.

It was at Hodden, that the great idea germinated in Skip's plump brain. There he met Eric, as the latter stepped off the train. They were to come back to Felgate for tea, but Skip always had a space to fill in his extensive inside, and after his walk to Hodden that space was an aching void. Eric, though as plump as Skip, did not share his taste for meals between meals, but he was ready for something after his train journey, and they adjourned to the station buffet, before starting to walk to Felgate. As they sat negotiating doughnut and ginger-beer, two plump and rosy faces were reflected in the looking-glass on the wall, as like one another as two peas. Skip, looking at those reflections, had his brain-wave.

Never was there so remarkable a likeness. They were the same age, the same plump build, they had the same features, the same rosy cheeks, the same untidy hair. Dressed in the same clothes—cricket flannels, for example—a microscope could hardly have picked out any difference between them.

Skip Ruggles was supposed, at Felgate, to be an unlimited fathead. But even an unlimited fathead may have a vein of artfulness in him. Skip had! When the great scheme hatched in his fat brain, he pondered over it for a few

minutes, and then propounded it to Cousin Eric. Cousin Eric stared.

"What rot!" he said.

"You'd be doing me a good turn," said Skip. "You're a better cricketer than I am, Eric—at least in bowling—"

"Oh, my hat! I hope so!" murmured Eric.

"As good a man as any in the Felgate eleven with the willow, and a better bowler than the best of them!" said Skip. "They've never seen you, and they'd never know a thing. They'd think it was me—and if I once put up a good show, in a match, they'd believe that a chap's a cricketer—I'd come on on our next fixture, with Greyfriars. See?"

"Um!" said Eric. Eric Ruggles really was a bit of a prodigy with the round red ball. At his own school he was considered worth his weight in gold in the summer game. Certainly cricket from Eric would have made Felgate men believe that there was cricketing quality in Ruggles.

"It's a half-holiday tomorrow with you, same as with us," went on Skip. "You could work it all right—meet me here again early in the afternoon, see? It would give me no end of a leg-up! That's all I need really: things would go all right afterwards."

Skip felt confident about that! "You'll do it for me, old chap?"

There was a pause. Then Eric Ruggles, grinning, nodded.

"Well, it would be rather a lark," he said, "I'll do it, if you like, Skip. But I say, I don't know any of the Felgate chaps—"

"You'd know them all right, from the photograph of the junior eleven I

sent you, with their names on it," said Skip.

"So I would! I'll nose it over! O.K. Skip! It's a go!"

When Skip Ruggles returned to Felgate that afternoon, he returned alone. Tom King and Dick Warren were prepared to entertain the guest in Study Four. But no guest materialised.

"Isn't your cousin coming, after all?" asked Tom.

"Well, no!" answered Skip. "You'll see him another time."

"After we've got this spread ready!" said Warren.

"I'm ready for tea," said Skip.

Doughnuts at Hodden made no difference to that. Skip sat down cheerfully to tea in Study Four, and easily disposed of the extra good things. He seemed very cheery, and did not even mention cricket, which was a relief to his friends. They were glad to see old Skip looking so bright, and never thought, or guessed, or dreamed of the deep dark scheme that was working in the fat brain of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

Skip disappeared immediately after dinner the next day. Sad to relate, nobody noted that circumstance. Tom King and his merry men were thinking wholly of cricket; and much as they liked old Skip, they had no use for him with cricket in the offing. Nobody knew or cared whether Skip Ruggles was within the walls of Felgate School or without. Which, as it happened, suited Skip, with the extraordinary scheme he had in mind, which was to be carried out that day with the assistance of that champion cricketer, his

cousin Eric. Nobody remembered Skip till a fat figure in flannels was seen in the quad. Then, of course, fellows took notice, wondering why on earth Skip Ruggles was in flannels. Dick Warren bestowed a grimace on Tom King. Did this mean that Ruggles hoped, at the last moment, to be picked to play?

The fat figure strolled up to them, with hands in the pockets of the flannel bags. They could not help noticing that Skip seemed to have more lithe and easy motions than usual, and a certain assurance that they had never observed in him before. Otherwise, he was just Skip. Certainly no Felgate man, even his nearest chums, would have dreamed that this was not the old familiar Skip.

He gave his friends a cheery nod.

"Carcroft not here yet?" he remarked. His voice seemed a little less high-pitched than was familiar. But it was not really noticeable.

"Not for a while yet, Skip," answered Tom King, unsuspectingly. "What have you changed into flannels for?"

"Cricket, if you'd like to play me."

"For the love of Mike, don't begin that again, old chap!" implored the junior captain of Felgate.

"For Pete's sake——!" beseeched Warren.

Ruggles laughed.

"Oh, all right," he said. "But I'll tell you what. Come down to the nets, and if I take your wicket first ball, will you play me?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared King and Warren. They could not help it. The idea of Skip taking anybody's wicket, especially Tom King's, was too funny.

The Greeks did not find it so difficult to take Troy, as Skip would have found it to take a wicket, even in a game with the Second Form.

Ruggles waited sedately till they had finished laughing. Then he said:

"Well, are you on?"

"Fathead!" said Tom.

"Funk taking it on?" asked Ruggles.

"You silly ass, Skip," said Tom King. "What are you fooling for? You know jolly well you can't bowl for toffee. I'd be glad to play you if you could."

"I know I could knock your sticks over. Try it on."

"Oh, all right!" said Tom, resignedly. "Come on, Dick—come and see Skip bag my wicket. Mind he doesn't brain you with the ball."

If old Skip wanted to waste a few minutes showing what a hopeless dud he was with a cricket ball, his friends were willing to oblige him. Other fellows followed to see the fun. It was only necessary to be alert, for really nobody quite knew what direction the ball might take when it left Skip's hand; Skip, probably, least of all. Tom King was smiling as he took his stand. He did not expect to see anything of the ball. But it was the unexpected that happened.

Ruggles took a little run, turned himself into a sort of plump catherine-wheel, and the ball came down like a bullet from a rifle. The next moment Tom was staring at a wicket from which the middle stump was missing.

"Oh, great pip!" he ejaculated.

Warren fielded the ball, looking like a fellow in a dream.

"Skip did that!" he said, "Skip!"



Ruggles took a little run, turned himself into a sort of plump catherine-wheel, and the ball came down like a bullet from a rifle.

"Try that again, Skip!" called out Tom King. He had been, perhaps, a little careless, but it was astonishing, all the same, "Give him a catch, Dick."

Warren returned the ball to Ruggles, naturally expecting him to miss it by a yard. Instead of which, a plump hand flashed up, and the ball rested in the plump palm. It was not an easy catch, but it seemed to come easy to Ruggles. Warren almost rubbed his eyes, in wonder.

Tom King was very careful as he prepared to take the next ball. How Skip had got away with his first shot, he hardly knew; but Skip was not going to get away with a second. It was simply

too absurd. And how that ball curled under his bat. Tom was never able to surmise. All he knew for certain was that his leg stump slanted and the bails came down.

There was a buzz of amazement from fellows looking on. This was not merely astonishing. It was amazing—astounding! Ruggles, the rabbit, Ruggles, the dud, Ruggles the fellow whose cricket made even the fags smile, had twice knocked over the wicket of the best junior bat at Felgate. And he had apparently done it with ease.

Ruggles, it appeared, was a dark horse. Some remarkable, amazing, extraordinary improvement had taken place in Skip Ruggles, all of a sudden. Fellows could not doubt the evidence of their eyes. Dick Warren was the champion junior bowler at Felgate, but he could not have done this! It was hard to believe, but Ruggles was a prize-packet, a rod in pickle for Carcroft when they came.

Tom King had said that he would play Ruggles if he could bowl! Tom was a man of his word, and he was eager to keep it, too. How it had come about and what it meant he did not know, but he was eager to secure such a bowler to take Carcroft wickets. Reece, left out to make room for Ruggles, grumbled, but everyone else was satisfied. Ruggles, having developed this unexpected and amazing form as a bowler, was not to be spared from the team. Tom King and Dick Warren almost hugged him. It had always been a spot of bother to them that their chum couldn't put up a show in games. Now he had proved himself a foeman worthy of anybody's steel, and they

rejoiced. Those lightning balls were going to help beat Carcroft—and later on, Greyfriars, and St. Jim's, and Rookwood—it was quite an enticing vista.

“Skip!”

“Bravo, Ruggles!”

“Good old Fatty!”

“Well bowled—oh, well bowled.”

Skip Ruggles had often dreamed of hearing such shouts on the cricket ground at Felgate. Often he had heard them—with his mind's ear, as it were, never destined to hear them with any other ear. But they were ringing out now, whether it was Skip who heard them or not. How the rabbit of Felgate had come out like this, was beyond guessing. But he had! There was no doubt that he had. His bowling was superb. With the willow he was as good as any other man in the eleven. But with the leather he was far and away ahead of the best of them. There were good bats in the Carcroft team—especially Compton and Vane-Carter. But both Compton and Vane-Carter were sent bootless home by that new and amazing Ruggles.

Ruggles seemed tireless. Skip, when he cavorted in the field, had been wont to puff and blow, shortness of wind being his long suit. But there was no sign of it now. He was fit as a fiddle all through. Tom King gave him almost as many overs as the rules of the game allowed, but even at the end of the long summer's afternoon he seemed fresh as paint. And when he wound up the final innings—Carcroft's—with a hat trick, leaving Felgate winners by a bagful of runs, the Felgate crowd yelled, and



"Skip!" "Bravo, Ruggles!" "Good old Fatty!" "Well bowled,—oh, well bowled."

roared, and cheered, to such an extent that Ruggles, like Horace of old, might have touched the stars with his exalted head!

There was a celebration of that glorious victory, after the Carcroft men were gone, and for once, if for once only, in the history of Felgate cricket, Skip Ruggles was the hero of the hour. Strange to relate, the hero disappeared quietly, indeed almost surreptitiously, and could not be found.

Tom King and Dick Warren, and a dozen other fellows, looked for him everywhere, but found him not. It seemed that Ruggles had gone out of gates: why, nobody could guess, unless

it was the modesty of a hero. Anyhow he did not appear till close on lock-ups, when, at long last, a fat figure rolled into Study Four.

"Oh, here you are!" exclaimed Tom King.

"Here I am," assented Skip.

"Where have you been, you ass?" asked Dick Warren.

"Oh, just ambling around," answered Skip, vaguely. "I . . . I . . . I say, it was a . . . a pretty good game, what? Eric told me—."

"Eric!" repeated Tom. "Have you been seeing that cousin of yours again?" Skip's fat face coloured.

"Oh! Yes! I mean . . . I didn't

mean . . . I . . . I . . .” Skip stammered. “I mean, it was a jolly good game——.”

“Topping!” said Tom, “though I half-believe that we must have dreamed it. How did you ever pick up bowling like that, Skip?”

“Oh! I . . . I . . . I always told you I could play cricket——.”

“But you never could!” said Warren.

“Never!” said Tom. “Must have had it in you, though, I suppose, to come out like that! Good old Skip!”

Skip eyed his study-mates almost stealthily. There was no suspicion in Study Four. Neither King nor Warren dreamed that this Ruggles was not the Ruggles who had played cricket that day. It had been a masterly scheme, and it had worked like a charm—it had got him a place in Felgate cricket—for of course, after that amazing display of quality, there could be no question of leaving Skip out of the eleven. He was safe to be selected for the next fixture—with Greyfriars School, that went without saying. It was quite a thrilling prospect. Skip did not expect to play a game like his cousin Eric, but he had no doubt that, given a chance, he would come well to the fore. He was going to have his chance now: which poor Skip really believed was all that he needed. But he felt a slight pang in his fat conscience. He did not like pulling his friends’ legs like this, if it could be helped. Still, he reflected that it was for their good!

“Good old Skip!” repeated Tom. “By gum, who’d have dreamed that old Skip would turn out like this?”

“You’re going to play me in the Greyfriars match!” gasped Skip. He fully expected it, after the success of his

deep-laid scheme. Still it was rather dazzling.

“Of course!” said Tom. “You’ll be wanted next Wednesday.”

“You bet!” said Dick Warren.

And Skip grinned happily.

It was a sheer mercy, so far as Felgate cricket was concerned, that on the Saturday preceding the Wednesday, Skip Ruggles played in a Form match. The Fourth played the Shell, and Skip was put on to mow down the Shell wickets. Skip went into the game full of confidence, which, before it started, was shared by his friends. They had no doubt that they were going to see Ruggles do his wonders again, demonstrating beyond all doubt what a rod in pickle he was for Greyfriars the next week. But this time—alas for Skip!—it was not Eric or anything like Eric. Even Skip, perhaps, began to doubt whether he was, after all, the cricketer he fancied he was. His friends were left in no doubt. Skip’s efforts with the willow were rewarded by a pair of spectacles. His bowling was so wildly erratic that, after a few overs, Tom King was more inclined to brain him with the ball than to let him have it to bowl.

How and why nobody knew, but it was obvious that Ruggles’ remarkable form on Carcroft day had wholly disappeared. And Skip did not play in the Greyfriars match. He did not play in any match. He fell back sadly into his old status of disregarded rabbit, and—as really might have been expected by the fathead of the Fourth!—absolutely nothing whatever resulted from Skip’s Scheme.