

CAUGHT RUGGLES!



By **FRANK RICHARDS**

CRICKET, and Skip Ruggles, were wide as the poles asunder: *toto coelo*, as Reece put it classically. In all the Fourth Form at Felgate, only Skip did not know that he was a figure of fun with a bat, and a dangerous lunatic with a ball, and that in the field he had the precise value of a stuffed dummy. So it was quite a surprise when Ruggles' name appeared in the list for the Dolcot match: and it was still more surprising that nobody in the team raised any objection to Skip being given a chance at last. It was a surprise to Skip himself—indeed, a wonder of wonders. He had almost given up hope. Every time a match came round, Skip pushed his claims to

play: only to receive, from Tom King, captain of the Fourth, the laconic answer "No!" with Molotovian regularity. Skip could hardly believe his fat ears when he heard the glorious news that Tom had ceased to under-study Mr. Molotov, and become—if for one occasion only—a yes-man.

It came about in this wise.

Tom King and Dick Warren had looked in at Dolcot to see a match there. It was rather a long bike ride to Dolcot from Felgate. But Dolcot was a new fixture, and they were rather interested to see how the Dolcot men played on their own ground. Dolcot First played Felgate First, and played a good game: but what the junior game

was like, Tom King and Dick Warren did not know till they saw it. And then they could hardly believe it.

There was plenty of good cricketing material in the Lower School at Dolcot. But very little of it was represented in the junior eleven. How and why Augustus Smythe was junior cricket captain there, King and Warren, as strangers in the land, did not know, and could not guess. Smythe was a slim, good-looking fellow in beautiful flannels, and wielded an expensive bat, though he did not seem to have acquired the knack of contacting the ball with it. Looking at him, any fellow's Aunt Matilda would have thought that he looked the perfect schoolboy cricketer—at least until he went to the wicket. King and Warren gathered, from Dolcot talk about them, that Augustus was the sort of easy-going cricket skipper who put pals before play: and in fact, in the whole team there was only one member whom Felgaters would have called a cricketer at all: a red-headed fellow named Crump, who was nothing like so elegant as Smythe, but who could knock up runs, and pull off a difficult catch.

Eleven Crumps would have given Felgate something to think about: but there was only one Crump: the rest, to King and Warren, looked about on a par with their own fat chum Skip Ruggles. They stayed long enough to see Dolcot beaten by the visiting team, by an innings and a hatful of runs: and as they cycled back to Felgate, they agreed that when Dolcot came over next week, it was going to be comic, if it was not going to be cricket. And then it occurred to both of them that this was where Skip came in.

Skip longed to play for Felgate. He

yearned to do so. Playing Skip meant throwing away a wicket and sticking a stuffed dummy in the field. But what would that matter, in a game with Smythe and Co.? Nothing at all. It wouldn't give Dolcot a ghost of a chance: for Felgate could have played half-a-dozen Skips, and still beaten that crowd of fumbling rabbits with an innings to spare. Practically, it meant playing ten men against eleven: but six or seven would have been more than enough to beat Dolcot. Since it would cost Felgate absolutely nothing, why not?

So King and Warren, chuckling, agreed that Skip should have his chance at last. And when they were back at Felgate, and told the other fellows of the weird cricket they had witnessed at Dolcot, a whole grinning crowd agreed nem. con. that this was just Skip's mark. And that being settled, King and Warren went up to Study Four, to break the great news to Skip Ruggles that at long, long last, his name was going down for a School match.

Skip, in the study, was demolishing a bag of jam-tarts. Skip was keen on games, but could not get away with them. He was equally keen on jam-tarts, with which he could get away ahead of any other fellow at Felgate. He turned a jammy and rather morose face on his chums as they came in. Twice, thrice, and four times, he had urged his claim to play Dolcot when they came over, and a constant succession of negatives had made him a little shirty. However, Skip was a believer in the maxim, "if at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again!" so, bolting the segment of jam-tart that occupied a capacious mouth, he bleated:



Skip blinked at them rather suspiciously

“Look here, Tom, I’ve been slogging at the nets, while you chaps have been out on your bikes, and I can jolly well tell you that I’m in pretty good form. If you’d give a chap a chance——.”

“Just what we’ve come up to speak to you about, old man,” said Tom. “You’re going to have a chance in the Dolcot match on Wednesday.”

Skip fairly jumped. He had hoped for it—hope springs eternal in the human breast. But he had not expected it.

“Mean that?” he ejaculated.

“Honest Injun!” said King and Warren together.

Skip blinked at them rather suspiciously. Both of them were grinning; and Skip could see nothing at which to grin, unless they were pulling his fat leg. But “Honest Injun” settled that. “Honest Injun” guaranteed that, unexpected as it was, surprising as it was, indeed, amazing as it was, it was the straight goods. The morose expression faded from Skip’s plump face. It was

like the sun coming out of the clouds. He beamed on his chums.

"I say, I'm jolly glad you've seen sense at last, old chap," he said. "You're not much of a judge of a man's form at cricket, Tom, if you don't mind my saying so——!"

"Not at all!" said Tom.

"I mean to say, look at the way you've left me out!" said Skip. "Our record at cricket this season would be a bit different, if I'd played in the matches——."

"It would!" agreed Tom, heartily.

"No doubt about that!" concurred Dick Warren.

"Well, I'm glad you can see it," said Skip, unsuspectingly. "I'll play, old fellow. I'm not going to get my back up simply because I haven't had justice so far. I'll play!"

"Good man!" said Tom. "Your name goes up in the list, Skip. Mind you don't burst yourself with jam-tarts, or suffocate yourself with dough-nuts, before Wednesday. We're relying on you."

"I won't let you down!" said Skip, reassuringly. "And look here, Tom, now you're doing the sensible thing at last, stick to it. I'll show you what I can do, on Wednesday: and if I make a century——."

"A whatter?" ejaculated King and Warren simultaneously.

"A century—if I make a century against Dolcot, will you put me down to play in the next fixture—Greyfriars——."

"Oh, my hat! Oh! Yes! If you make a century, old fat man, I'll put you down to play Greyfriars, and St. Jim's, and Carcroft, and Rookwood, and every other fixture this season!" gasped the captain of the Fourth.

"Good!" said Skip.

King and Warren backed out of the study. It was more considerate to laugh in the passage.

They left Skip beaming.

II

Nobody told Skip the joke. He had not the remotest idea that the Dolcot team were a parcel of rabbits who could have been beaten by the fags of the Second Form at Felgate. So far as Skip knew, they were a normal junior cricket team, and the match was going to be on normal lines. During the following days, Skip was assiduous at the nets. He was going to be at the top of his form when Dolcot came over. King and Warren, seeing him so merry and bright, were glad that they had thought of that happy idea. It was worth something, to be able to gratify old Skip, just for once. In such a game, even Skip couldn't do any harm: indeed, it was imaginable that he might even knock up a few runs, considering what the Dolcot bowling and fielding were like.

Skip, dreaming of centuries, looked forward to Wednesday with tremendous anticipation. His friends also looked forward with pleasurable anticipation, to seeing Skip, for once, enjoy the distinction of playing for Felgate: also to the entertainment of wiping Augustus Smythe and his merry men off the face of the earth. So everybody was in a cheery mood when Wednesday came round: and Skip was on top of the world, and Tom King and Dick Warren had smiling faces, when the Dolcot brake turned up.

And then there was rather a shock for King and Warren. As the poet has remarked, a change came o'er the spirit

of their dream. They were too utterly taken aback even to greet the Dolcot men with the accustomed politeness. They stared at them as if they had been eleven ghosts.

"What the dickens——!" breathed Tom.

"Holy smoke!" murmured Warren.

They had watched the Dolcot junior eleven play at Dolcot. They had witnessed their antics with deep though suppressed amusement. But——!

In all the team, there was only one familiar face—that of Crump, the red-headed fellow they had marked as the only cricketer in the Dolcot team. All the others were new men. And they did not look in the least like Augustus Smythe and his rabbits. They looked fit, and keen, and up to the mark. Evidently, there had been a change at Dolcot—not before it was needed, certainly.

"Isn't Smythe with you?" Tom asked in a gasping voice.

Crump smiled and shook his head.

"No: I'm skipper now," he said.

"Oh!" gasped Warren. "You!"

Crump nodded genially.

"I think I saw you chaps on our ground last week," he said. "I won't ask you what you thought of the show we put up—I can guess. Fact is, it was the limit, and everybody was fed up with Smythe. Nice chap, and popular, but what he doesn't know about cricket would fill the Long Room at Lord's, right up to the roof. Smythe got out and I got in."

"Oh!" said King and Warren.

"I've made a few changes in the team," grinned Crump. "Ten, to be exact! I fancy we'll give you a good game. Not like what you saw over at Dolcot the other day, anyway."

Tom King ran his eye over the Dolcot men. Notwithstanding Skip's opinion on the subject, he had a very keen eye for a man's form at the summer game. His impression of Crump and his men was that they were as good a selection as ever came over from Greyfriars or Carcroft. That match was not going to be in the nature of comic relief. It was not going to be a walk-over. It was going to be a tussle, with victory on the knees of the gods. And he was playing Skip—in a word, playing a man short!

He could have kicked himself. He could have kicked Dick Warren. He had taken too much for granted, as he realised too late. Reece came up to him when the Dolcot men were out of hearing.

"Look here, King, that lot don't look the crew of doddering duds you described the other day," he said.

"They're not!" groaned Tom.

"They look as if they can play cricket."

"I've no doubt they can."

"Well, you can't play Ruggles, then! We can't afford to chuck away a wicket just for a joke."

"No jolly fear!" said Preece.

"I—I—I'll speak to Skip!" muttered Tom. He went to look for Skip, to speak to him. It was painful. It was embarrassing. He hated to think of disappointing Skip, after raising his hopes. But——!

Skip was already in flannels—just in!—for he looked like bursting out of them. He greeted Tom with a cheery grin.

"I—I—I say, old chap!" stammered Tom, "I—I—I——."

"Cough it up," said Skip, encouragingly. "Do you mean that you want me to open the innings?"

"Oh! No! Not exactly! I—I want you to stand out."

"Eh?"

"You—you—you see——!" mumbled Tom, "the—the Dolcot lot are a tougher crowd than we expected, and—and——."

"All the more reason why I should play for Felgate," said Skip, staring.

"Oh, my hat! I—I say, will you stand out, Skip, like a good chap? The—the fact is, I can't play you in this game, Skip."

Skip stiffened.

"If you mean that you've been pulling my leg, Tom King—!"

"Oh! No! Not at all! But——."

"You said 'Honest Injun!'"

"So—so I did! But——."

"You're skipper," said Skip, bitterly. "You can turn me out if you like. I certainly shan't stand out of my own accord, when I know, if you don't, that Felgate needs me. Turn me out!"

"Skip, old chap——!" pleaded Tom.

"Oh, don't mind me!" said Skip. "Turn me out, after asking me to play. Make me look a fool to all the school. That's what you want, isn't it? Turn me out."

But that really was impossible. It was a painful pill, but Tom had to get it down. Skip was in the team, and he had to stay there. Skip, who was hardly equal to playing small boys at marbles, had to play Crump and Co. at cricket. And that was that!

III

Tom King won the toss, and Felgate took the first knock. Skip did not, as he had suggested, open the innings. Skip's place was at the tip of the tail: and the score was only at forty when his turn came. Tom's first impression of Crump

and Co. had not been a mistaken one. They were good men at the summer game: as good as Greyfriars or Rookwood—far, very far, from bearing any resemblance to Augustus Smythe and Company. There was only one rabbit present, and he was in the home eleven. Skip, happily unaware of being a rabbit, sallied forth hopefully when the call came. Really, it was hardly worth while for Skip to make the journey from the pavilion to the wicket, and back again. How and why his leg stump was whipped out by a grinning Dolcot bowler, Skip did not know: it was just one of those things! But he knew that he had to leave over his century—if any—till Felgate took their second knock.

Dolcot put up fifty-five. The two teams were, in fact, about equal, except for that chink in the Felgate armour. Felgate, in the circumstances, really couldn't afford to play Skip. In the Dolcot innings, Skip distinguished himself by muffing several easy catches: in fact it seemed impossible for Ruggles to get hold of the leather unless it was handed to him on a plate. But nobody expected anything else of Ruggles.

Felgate pulled up their socks in their second innings. Helped by luck, Tom King contributed thirty-five, and the total came to sixty. That left Dolcot with forty-five to tie, forty-six to win. They looked as if they expected to do it without a lot of trouble. Skip, having metamorphosed his duck's egg into a pair of spectacles, was perhaps a little dashed. Certainly he had to wake up from his dream of centuries. Still, cricket was an uncertain game, full of chances. Stanley St. Leger Ruggles still hoped for chances in the field. Indeed, he had little doubt that, entrusted with



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the ball, he could have pulled the game out of the fire.

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Tom did not laugh. He did not feel like laughing. He only glared at Skip as if understudying the fabled basilisk.

"What about it?" asked Skip.

"Another word, and I'll brain you with a bat!" hissed Tom.

Snort, from Skip.

"Well, where am I going to field, then?" he snapped.

"Anywhere you like, so long as you keep out of the way."

Skip, with deep feelings, tramped into the long field. Dolcot proceeded to put on runs. But Dick Warren, Felgate's best junior bowler, was on his mettle: and to the great delight of the Felgaters, he put up a hat trick, beginning with Crump. It was a great relief to see that red head disappear from the wicket. And Reece was responsible for two good catches, and Bullinger for another. So the score did not leap up as Dolcot expected.

But it mounted. Dolcot were forty for nine, which left them with six to win and one wicket in hand. Last man in began, to Dolcot delight and Felgate dismay, with a boundary. Tom King sighed. One to tie: two to win: and that blighter who had just gone in had hit a boundary! It was all over bar shouting—thanks to Skip! Tom glanced at his fat chum, fielding in the deep with the ease and grace of a sack of coke, with a quite unchummy glance. And then—!

The cheery click of willow and leather really sounded like a knell to Felgate ears. Away went the ball into the deep.

"Skip!" gasped Tom.

It was Skip's chance, if he could make anything of it. Of course he couldn't—was it likely! Every eye was on Skip. Skip's eye was on the ball. He ran for it, and a fat hand jerked up. And then he stumbled. It was the precise moment at which Skip *would* stumble! If there was no other way of missing a catch, Skip would naturally stumble. But——.

Skip not only stumbled! He tumbled. He would, of course. Right under the descending ball, the fattest figure at Felgate spread out on the turf, a fat hand still in the air.

Smack!



Right under the descending ball, the fattest figure at Felgate spread out on the turf, a fat hand still in the air.

Cricket is a very uncertain game. There are all sorts of flukes in it. But the glorious uncertainty of cricket had never been so extraordinarily exemplified as at that moment. Of all the flukes that ever fluked on the cricket field, this seemed to all beholders the wildest and maddest. Nevertheless, there it was! For that ball smacked right into the fat palm.

Even then, with the round red ball smacking a fat palm, Skip might have been expected to let it drop. But—*mirabile dictu*—the fat fingers closed on it. They closed on it and held it. Skip staggered up with the ball in his hand.

“How’s that?”

“Caught!” gasped Tom King, blankly. “Caught Ruggles! Oh, my hat! Oh,

my only Aunt Sempronia! Fan me, somebody!”

“Wake me up!” gasped Dick Warren.

They thumped Skip on a fat back, depriving him of what little wind he had left. Skip gurgled for breath: but he gurgled happily. His duck’s eggs and his muffed catches were all forgotten now. For once, if for once only, Skip Ruggles was the goods: and as he rolled off the field he felt like that ancient Roman touching the stars with his exalted head. For the first time, and undoubtedly for the last, Skip had pulled a game out of the fire: and if he was never likely to play for Felgate again, at least he could always remember the Dolcot match, and repeat, with undiminished satisfaction, the magic words “caught Ruggles”.