

SKIP ON THE WAR-PATH

“**C**OME on!” gasped Skip. Tom King and Dick Warren were talking cricket in Study Four. They had, for the nonce, forgotten the existence of their plump chum, Skip Ruggles: and in fact, so far as cricket was concerned, Skip did not exist at all!

But they were reminded of him, as the study door was hurled open, and Skip pranced in with a flaming face, and gasped “Come on!” Skip, plump and placid – always plump and usually placid – seemed in a state of unwonted excitement. His fat face was red. His plump brows were knitted. His gooseberry eyes flashed – really, he seemed to be understudying Roderick Dhu, on the occasion when dark lightnings flashed from Roderick’s eye!

“What on earth’s up, Skip?” asked Tom.

“That swob Bullinger – !” spluttered Skip.

“What about Bullinger?” asked Dick Warren.

“Smacked my head!”

The faces of Tom King and Dick Warren registered wrath and indignation at once. They even forgot cricket, though Felgate were playing Dolcot that afternoon. The plump Skip was their chum: and he was a member of Study Four: and heads in Study Four were not to be smacked with impunity.

Bullinger, big and aggressive as he was, would never have ventured to smack Tom King’s head, or Dick Warren’s. Something like an earthquake would have happened to him on the spot. He would hardly have lived to tell the tale!

But it was different with Skip. Skip was as full of pluck as an egg of meat: but he was no fighting man. Skip was plump, and he was slow: and he knew as much about boxing as he knew about cricket or soccer, which amounted to precisely nil. If the spirit moved Bullinger to smack Skip’s fat head, there was nothing to stop him.

Bullinger of the Felgate Fourth was

not really a bully. But he had an unreliable temper, and a heavy and reckless hand. Sometimes he was quite a decent sort of fellow. At other times he was not. Obviously he hadn't been on this occasion.

"Smacked my head!" repeated Skip, breathless with indignation. "Just because I grinned – and can't a man grin if a man jolly well likes? He was letting off steam in the Pound, just because he's not in the eleven this afternoon – as if he can play cricket! Smacked a fellow's head because a fellow grinned – yah! Hard, too! I just spun! Went over with a bump! He stalked off before I could get up, or I'd have pitched into him there and then."

Tom King and Dick Warren were thankful to hear that Bullinger had stalked off before Skip could pitch into him. Skip's last state would undoubtedly have been worse than his first, had he pitched into the hefty Bullinger. They rose to their feet.

"Come on, Dick," said Tom King. "We've got time to strew Bullinger all over Felgate before we have to change for cricket."

"Forget it!" snapped Skip. "Think I'm a baby that has to be looked after? I'm going to fight Bullinger, and I want you chaps to come along and see fair play. That's all. I'm going to lick him!"

"But——!" gasped Tom King.

"But——!" stuttered Dick Warren.

"Oh, give us a rest with your butting!" yapped Skip. "Think a fellow can't stand up for himself?"

That, to be precise, was exactly what Skip's chums did think, as far as Bullinger was concerned, at least. They almost trembled at the thought of the valiant but quite useless Skip standing up to Bullinger's lunging fists. Poor old

Skip was booked to spin every time Bullinger chose to land a punch. Indeed it was on the cards that he might burst like a balloon!

"But my dear chap, you can't fight Bullinger!" said Tom. "You see——"

"Can't I?" said Skip. "You'll see! Coming or not?"

"Leave him to us, old chap," said Warren.

"Rats!" said Skip.

With that, Skip revolved on his axis and marched out of Study Four, leaving his pals to follow or not as they liked. Skip was on the war-path, and not to be reasoned with. He was going to look for Bullinger on his own – with probable results which they shuddered to contemplate.

"We've got to stop him, Tom!" said Warren.

"What-ho!" said Tom King. "Look here, you go after him and steer him clear, while I look for Bullinger and get him out of the way. We've got to keep them apart somehow. Walk him off somewhere where Bullinger isn't, while I find out where Bullinger is."

And they hurried out of Study Four after Skip.

2

"Bullinger!"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" said Bullinger.

That was not really the way for a fellow to answer the captain of his form. But Bullinger was morose that afternoon. In his own opinion, he ought to have been in the list for the Dolcot game: and all the Felgate Fourth had heard him express his opinion of Tom King for leaving him out. He had no politeness whatever to waste on Tom just then. Indeed, probably he would

have liked to smack Tom's head as he had smacked Skip's.

He was loafing under the old Felgate oaks when Tom came up. Skip, under Dick Warren's skilful guidance, was looking for him on the cricket ground.

"You're going out of gates this afternoon," said Tom.

Bullinger stared.

"Am I?" he asked, aggressively.

"Yes. Old Skip is after your blood, for smacking his head——"

Bullinger laughed.

"And you're going to keep out of his way, as he won't keep out of yours," said Tom, quietly. "You're going right out of gates now, and not coming back till lock-up. That will keep Skip clear while we're playing cricket. I've heard you say you want to see the new picture at the Regal at Hodden. You can see it this afternoon."

"Not if I don't choose," said Bullinger.

"No!" assented Tom. "But if you don't choose, you're going to have a scrap on your hands after the cricket, not with Skip, but with me: and as I've licked you twice, old scout, you know what to expect." Then, as Bullinger's jaw jutted, Tom went on, in a more conciliatory tone, "Don't be a rotter, Bullinger. You could lick old Skip with one hand tied. Keep out of his way."

Bullinger's aggressive jaw relaxed.

"Well, if you put it like that——!" he said.

"I do!" said Tom.

"Okay!" Bullinger laughed. "He shouldn't have grinned at me like a Cheshire cat. You can tell him I've gone to the pictures at Hodden, and he can watch you losing wickets and muffing catches and forget all about it."

Bullinger strolled away to the gates.

Tom, much relieved to see him go, went to look for Warren and Skip. He found them at the pavilion.

"That swob's not here," Skip was saying to Warren, as Tom arrived. "We've got to look somewhere else. Hallo! Seen Bullinger, Tom?"

Tom King suppressed a smile.

"I've just heard that he's gone to the pictures at Hodden this afternoon," he answered. "You'll have to wash it out, Skip! Stick around and watch us beat Dolcot at cricket, old man."

"Blow Dolcot!" exclaimed Skip. "It's all your fault, Warren - dragging me along here, and that swob getting off to Hodden all the time! I'm going to fight Bullinger——"

"Well, you can't while he's out of gates, old chap," said Dick Warren, soothingly. "Come along to the cricket——"

"Blow the cricket!"

"We've got to go and change now——!"

"Go and change, then," snapped Skip. "If that swob Bullinger has gone to Hodden, I'll go after him, and——"

"Skip——!"

"Stop!"

"Rats!" came over Skip's plump shoulder, as he marched off. Warren and King looked at one another in dismay.

"He'll never catch him up!" said Warren.

"Let's hope not!" said Tom.

They had to leave it at that. Cricket claimed them: not even to save the warlike Skip from himself, as it were, could they intervene further, with Dolcot almost due. Stanley St. Leger Ruggles had to be left to his own devices for the rest of that afternoon: and they could only hope for the best.



He was the most unpleasant tramp Skip had ever seen

And when the game started, they had to cease to wonder where Skip was, and what he might be up to: and in fact to forget his fat existence once more.

3

Skip thought it only prudent to climb the beech when he saw the tramp. Thinking was not Skip's long suit: but really it was an obvious move. The spot was a very lonely one: trees barred the visibility in all directions: and that

tramp looked an unpleasant character.

Skip had marched out of Felgate School with the fixed resolve to follow Bullinger, overtake him, and engage him, on the spot, in deadly strife. That, if he did, he would very rapidly be left for dead, Skip did not know, or even surmise. But he knew that the afternoon was very warm: that he had a lot of weight to carry, and that by the time he was half way along the footpath through Hodden Wood he was dog-tired. So, on second thoughts, pro-

verbially the best, Skip came to a halt under a shady beech, and sat on a projecting root to rest. Really, it was just as good: for Bullinger had to come home that way, and it was equally effective to meet him on his homeward way. So there sat Skip, resting luxuriously against a gnarled trunk, waiting for Bullinger to happen along—his wrath unabated, his determination as fixed as ever to fight Bullinger, and give the swob the thrashing he had asked for.

He looked round at a sound of approaching footsteps: but he did not see Bullinger: he saw the tramp. He was the most unpleasant tramp Skip had ever seen: untidy, unwashed, burly, shaggy, with a damaged nose reddened by strong liquors, and little shifty eyes like a rat's: altogether, the sort of person nobody would want to meet in a solitary spot, far from help. He did not notice Skip under the tree as he came slouching along: and Skip, his fat brain working with unusual celerity, did not give him time to do so: Skip backed round the beech and clambered up the rugged trunk, wisely deciding to keep out of sight till the man had passed on. In thick foliage Skip waited, prepared to descend and resume his watch for Bullinger when the tramp was gone.

Only the tramp did not go!

Perhaps he was tired, like Skip, with tramping on a hot summer's afternoon. Perhaps he was lazy. Perhaps the projecting root under the shady beech tempted him, as it had tempted Skip. Anyhow, he came to a stop, sat down on the root, just as Skip had done, and leaned on the trunk, filled a foul pipe, and started smoking. Fumes ascended to Skip, in the foliage overhead. He was almost directly over the shaggy man, and he had to repress a cough.

Through the foliage he had an eye on the man, impatient for him to go. But the man still sat there, and Skip saw him take several articles from his pockets, and examine them. Among them was a silver watch, which certainly didn't belong to the shaggy man: and Skip was gladder than ever that he had taken cover: he did not want his own watch added to the shaggy man's collection! That unpleasant character was in possession of plunder which he had taken at the end of a knuckly fist: Skip did not need telling that. If Skip fancied that he could fight Bullinger of the Fourth, he did not fancy that he could fight a burly footpad: and he hugged his branch very silent and still.

Then there came a sound of footsteps again.

The tramp looked round. Skip peered through foliage.

"Oh, scissors!" breathed Skip. He caught sight of the blue and white cap of Felgate. Bullinger was coming, at last.

"Cor'!" Skip heard a mutter below. "Jest my mark! Cor'!"

The tramp rose swiftly, and backed round the beech. Bullinger came on, without a suspicion. But for the tramp he would have met Skip under the beech, which would not have bothered him very much. Now he was walking straight into trouble. For as he came abreast of the spot the shaggy man made a sudden rush and collared him.

Bullinger gave a gasp of angry surprise. He struggled fiercely in the shaggy man's grasp.

"Let go! Leave me alone, you beast! Let go."

"'And it over!" snarled the shaggy man. "All you've got about you, young covey—and sharp! And don't give a



"Ooooh!" gasped Skip

bloke any trouble, if you don't want your face pushed through the back of your 'ead! Now - OH!" The shaggy man gave a yell, as Bullinger hit out.

He caught Bullinger's knuckles with his crimson nose, which spurted new crimson on the spot. The next moment, his shaggy face ablaze with rage, he was hitting the Felgate junior right and left.

Bullinger had pluck, and he was sturdy and strong: but the burly rough was knocking him about like a punch-ball.

That was too much for Skip!

He was there to fight Bullinger, who had smacked his head. But a Felgate man was bound to stand by another Felgate man. Skip did not waste time clambering down the beech. He jumped down from his branch.

What the courageous but corpulent Skip could have effected, by joining in the fight, was rather a question. Probably the shaggy man would have winded him, if not slain him, with one jab. But Skip was fortunate. The branch swayed as he swung on it, he missed his intended jump, and instead of landing

beside the combatants, he landed fairly on the shaggy man, crashing on his shaggy head with a tremendous crash.

One horrible gurgle came from the tramp as he crumpled up. Skip's fat fists would hardly have done him any harm. But Skip's extensive weight, crashing on his head, did. Quite unintentionally, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles had done the most effective thing. The tramp crumpled in a heap in the grass, Skip sprawling over him, spluttering, unaware whether he was on his head or his heels.

"Ooooooogh!" gasped Skip.

The shaggy man did not even gasp. He lay in a heap, stunned, for the moment at least. Bullinger stared at Skip, like a fellow in a dream.

"You - what - how - !" he stuttered.

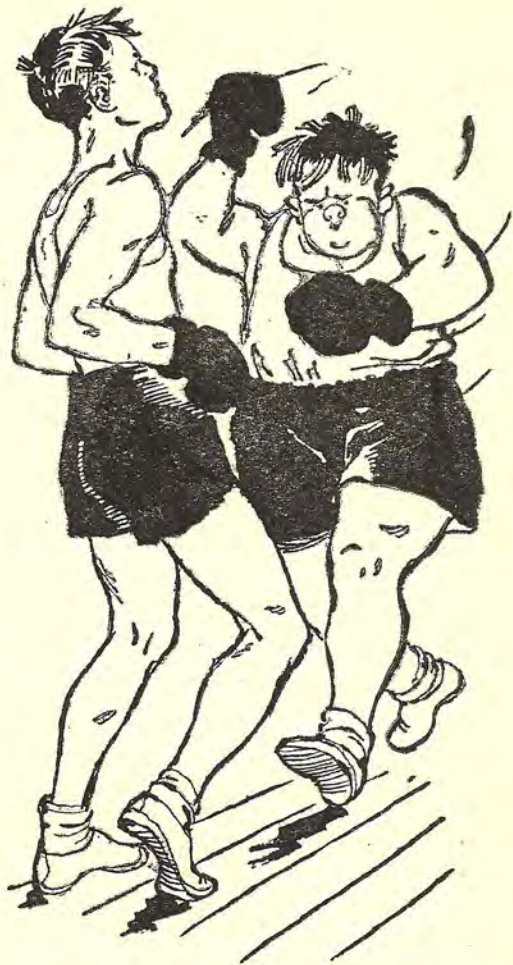
"Oh, scissors!" gasped Skip. He rolled off the crumpled tramp, and scrambled up. "I say - oooooogh!"

Bullinger was quicker on the uptake than Skip. He grabbed the fat junior by the arm.

"Cut, before he gets up!" he breathed.

He started to run, dragging Skip after him. It was as well that they lost no time. In less than a minute, the shaggy man sat up, rubbing his head, and glaring round him. He staggered to his feet, with remarks that might have turned the summer air blue. But the two schoolboys were quite distant by that time. Skip puffed and blew, and blew and puffed: but he realised that he had better keep on running, with that dangerous character behind: and Bullinger's drag on his fat arm helped to keep him going. They came out into Hodden Lane: Bullinger breathless: Skip winded to the wide.

"Okay!" said Bullinger. "He won't



*Instead of which he drove Bullinger
all round the ring*

dare show up here! Get your wind, Ruggles."

"Grooooooogh!" said Ruggles.

He leaned on a tree, and gasped and gasped. Bullinger, with one eye on the footpath, waited.

"Jolly plucky of you, Ruggles," said Bullinger.

"Groooooogh!"

"Take your time."

Skip took his time. His wind revived at last. Then he came towards Bullinger, with a gleam in his eyes.

"Put up your hands, you swob!" he said.

"Eh! What?"

"I'm going to thrash you now - now I've got you."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bullinger.

That was enough for Skip! He came on, with lunging fists. Bullinger, to his surprise, took to his heels. Skip rushed after him. But Skip's rushes had to be brief. Bullinger, still laughing, disappeared in the direction of Felgate. He was back at Felgate in time to see the finish of the match with Dolcot, and to learn that Tom King and Co. had been quite able to beat Dolcot without his aid. It was quite some time later that Skip Ruggles rolled in: a breathless but still warlike Skip!

4

"Time!"

It had to be!

After the cricket, Tom King and Dick Warren remembered the existence of their fat chum. They were rather worried and troubled about Skip. But after a talk with Bullinger, and what he told them, they went down to the gates to wait for Skip to come in, with cheerful faces. Skip rolled in at last, red and perspiring. Somewhat to his surprise, his chums raised no further objections to that fight with Bullinger. Skip would not have heeded them anyhow. But so far from raising objections, King and Warren entered heartily into the spirit of the thing. When Skip had had a rest - which he needed - they walked him round the corner behind the gym, where such affairs were usually settled by Felgate juniors who felt an irresistible urge to punch one another's noses. Bullinger was there, with Reece as his second, and a dozen Fourth form men



Two or three fellows helped Bullinger up

gathered, to see Skip knocked into a cocked hat. Most of them were grinning: and there was a lurking grin on Bullinger's face. There was not the ghost of a grin on Skip's. Skip was in the deadliest earnest.

He had rescued Bullinger from the hammering fists of that tramp. Bullinger might feel grateful: even friendly. But that cut no ice. Bullinger had smacked his head, and Skip had announced his intention far and wide of fighting Bullinger, and thrashing him too. Now he was going to do it. Fellows could grin if they liked. Skip was on the war-path. His fat face was quite grim as he donned the gloves.

"Time!"

Skip never doubted that he could box, any more than he doubted that he

could play cricket. But even he was surprised by the ease with which he dealt with the hefty Bullinger in the first round. Most of the fellows looking on expected to see Skip double up at the first exchange. Instead of which, he drove Bullinger all round the ring, on the defensive all the time, and the big fellow almost tottered into his second's arms when time was called. Reece stared at him.

"What's the matter with you, Bully?" he asked. "You're not going to let that ton of tallow beat you, are you?"

"Why not?" asked Bullinger.

"Oh," said Reece.

Skip, in his corner, bleated with satisfaction.

"Not so bad, what?" said Skip. "You chaps think I can't box! Well, what does it look like now? Did that swob land a single tap?"

"Not one!" said Tom King, solemnly. "Keep it up, old fat man," said Dick Warren. "You'll beat him."

"I fancy so!" assented Skip.

"Time!" called the referee.

Skip bounced into action at once. He was full of beans. Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged a wink, unseen by Skip. Not for worlds would they have apprised Skip that his plump leg was being pulled: Skip had not the slightest suspicion of their recent conversation with Bullinger, and what had been arranged thereat. Skip would have spurned the idea of any reward for his pluck in coming to Bullinger's rescue in Hodden Wood. But he was getting one, all the same: he was going to beat Bullinger!

In the second round, it was all Skip! True, Bullinger did not seem to get much damage. Skip's fat fists flailed the

air without doing much harm. When Bullinger went down, it was due to a stumble. Still, he did go down. Time was called, and Reece came out to help him. There was astonishment in the faces of most of the onlookers. It really began to look as if Skip was getting the best of it!

"I'll finish him in the next round!" said Skip.

"By gum! I believe you will!" said Tom.

"Looks like it!" agreed Warren.

And in the third round, Skip did! He landed a punch on Bullinger's chest which, in the opinion of most of the spectators, wouldn't have hurt a fly. But Bullinger went down – and stayed down. The referee counted. Bullinger made efforts to rise, but fell back again.

"– six, seven, eight, nine – OUT!"

Two or three fellows helped Bullinger up. He seemed to want a lot of help. Tom King whispered to him as he heaved:

"Thanks, old scout!"

And Bullinger grinned.

Skip came and beamed at him. He insisted on shaking hands with Bullinger after the fight.

"Okay, old boy," said Skip. "You smacked my head! I've licked you! I hope I haven't hurt you very much, old chap. I just had to lick you, you know."

Bullinger did not look as if Skip had hurt him very much when he walked away with Reece. Tom King and Dick Warren marched the victorious Skip off to the tuck shop, where they stood him ginger-pop and buns in celebration of his victory. It was a happy and satisfied Skip: once more as placid as he was plump, and no longer on the war-path.