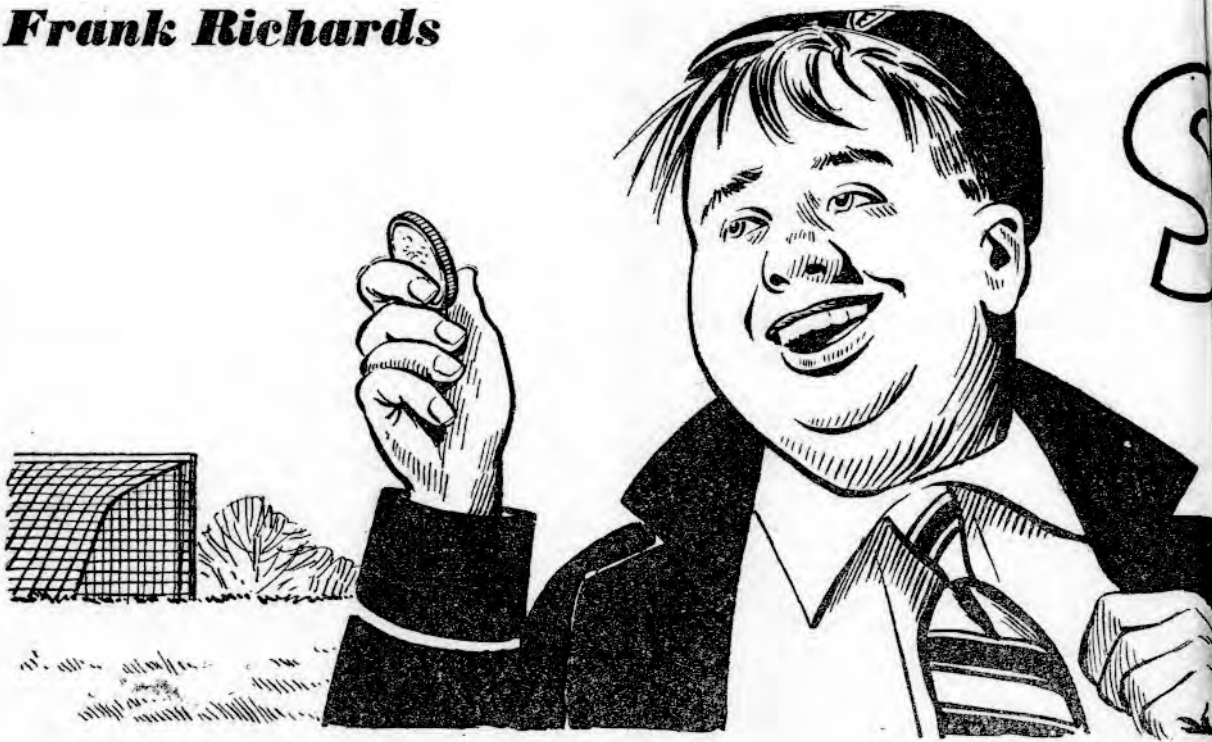


Frank Richards



“THAT swob!” breathed Skip.

Skip’s eyes gleamed – at Pook of the Sixth.

Skip Ruggles was standing at the window of Study Four, looking down into the quad at Felgate. There had been a fall of snow over-night. It had been followed by a bright clear day, and most of the snow had disappeared, but there was still a good deal left on roofs and window-sills. The broad stone sill of Study Four was thickly banked with it. Only a shove was needed, to send the mass tumbling down on a head below. And Pook of the Sixth was coming along the path.

Only that morning, Pook had smacked Skip’s fat head, simply because he had lost a note Pook had given him to take to a beak. Skip had a genius for losing things. If he hadn’t a hole in one pocket, he was sure to have

a hole in another. Skip resented that smack. He would gladly have returned it, but of course, a fellow couldn’t, with a pre. But now——

Voices floated up to Skip’s fat ears, from the path twenty feet below the window. Reece of the Fourth had stopped Tom King, captain of that form, on the path. Skip cast an irritable glance down. He did not want Fourth-Form fellows there to get a share when the avalanche fell. He wanted Pook of the Sixth to get it all.

Reece’s voice was loud and angry.

“Look here, King, if you’re leaving me out this afternoon——”

“No ‘if’ about that!” came Tom King’s reply.

“I keep goal better than your pal Warren.”

“Do you? First I’ve heard of it.”

“Well, stick him in, if you like, but I

KIP ALL OVER

jolly well hope that Walcot will wipe up the ground with you.”

“That’s patriotic, at any rate! Leave it at that.”

Reece had opened his mouth for an angry rejoinder, when Pook, coming up the path, reached the spot. Skip Ruggles frowned. That swob, Pook, was now just where he wanted him – but Tom King and Edgar Reece were just where he did not want them.

Unexpectedly, Pook himself came to Skip’s rescue, as it were. He stopped in his walk, waved a hand at the two juniors, and rapped:

“Don’t hang about here.”

That was Pook, all over. He was a prefect, and a very unpopular one. He enjoyed throwing his weight about. There was absolutely no reason why two juniors shouldn’t stop and talk on that path, if the spirit moved them so to

do. But Pook chose to order them off – and did so.

Reece gave him a dark look, and stalked away. Tom King hesitated a moment; tempted to tell Pook what he thought of him. But he was not looking for trouble with a Sixth-Form prefect, especially with the soccer team from Walcot due at Felgate under an hour. He breathed hard, and walked off.

Pook stood with his hands in his pockets.

Skip, at the window high above, fairly beamed down on the top of his head. If ever a fellow was asking for it, Pook was. He couldn’t have pleased Skip more – standing there, directly under the window, really as if he waited specially for an avalanche of snow to be tipped on his head!

That avalanche was not long in coming. Skip stretched out his fat arms, and swept the window-sill almost clear of snow with one mighty, extensive shove. Down it went, on Pook’s head, crashing, smashing, and splashing on that target, and falling all round Pook in showers. Pook gave a startled howl, stumbled blindly, and sat down, in snow.

Skip backed away hurriedly.

Skip was not very bright, perhaps, but he was bright enough to know that a junior who tumbled a stack of snow on a prefect’s head, had better not be seen. Rapid retreat was Skip’s cue. He cut across Study Four to the door; he shot out of the doorway like an arrow from a bow; he did the passage like a cinder-path, and he disappeared down a back staircase like a ghost at cock-crow. A breathless Skip was far from the scene of the crime, so to speak, long before it was possible for the promptest inquiry to start.

II

Dick Warren came into Study Four, and stared across at the open window. Warren had expected to find one or both of his study-mates, Tom King and Skip Ruggles, in Study Four, but it was vacant. He was unaware that, hardly a minute earlier, Skip had quitted it at supersonic speed. He glanced across at the window, because unusual sounds reached him from without. A strange sound of gasping and spluttering came up, mingled with startled voices. Warren crossed to the window, leaned out over the now almost bare sill, and looked down, wondering what was going on.

It was quite a spot of excitement. Pook of the Sixth stood there, in a snow-smothered state, gouging snow



Pook stood there in a snow-smothered state

from his ears, his hair, his neck, spluttering as he did so. A dozen fellows had gathered round – staring, some of them grinning. Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth, among them, was not grinning – Charne’s look was portentous. Charne stared at Pook, then stared up, at the study window over his head – and stared at Dick Warren’s face, looking down. Then he disappeared into the House.

Warren, at the study window, grinned. He was amused by Pook’s state. Charne, as a beak, might consider it a very serious matter to swamp a prefect with snow: beaks had their own way of looking at things. To other beholders, it was amusing. Pook gasped, and panted, and gouged and clawed at snow, his face red with fury. Dick Warren grinned – much entertained.

He ceased to grin suddenly, as there was a footstep in the study doorway, and a sharp voice rapped behind him.

“Warren!”

He spun round. Mr. Charne rustled into the study. His pin-point eyes glistened at the surprised junior.

“Warren! How dare you?” boomed Charne.

Dick Warren blinked at him.

“Have I done anything, sir?” he stammered.

“What? What? You are well aware of what you have done, Warren – hurling a mass of snow down on the head of a Sixth-Form prefect——”

Warren jumped.

“I, sir!” he ejaculated, “I never——”

“What? What?” Charne’s voice rose crescendo. “The snow was pushed off that window-sill, Warren——”

“Was – was – was it, sir? If it was, it must have fallen – somehow——”

“It could not have fallen of its own



"That will do Warren. Extra school this afternoon"

volition, Warren. The sill has been brushed almost bare. It was deliberately pushed off to fall on the head of a Sixth-Form prefect."

"Oh!" gasped the Fourth-Form goalkeeper, bewildered. He realised that Charne had it right. That stack of snow simply couldn't have taken unto itself wings and flown off the sill. It had been shoved off - on Pook. And Warren was there - the only fellow there - and Charne had seen him looking down and grinning over the window-sill! If evidence counted for anything, Dick Warren was the man! He hadn't done it, but some person unknown evidently had!

"But I - I - I never——!" stuttered the hapless junior.

Charne raised a majestic hand.

"That will do, Warren. Extra School this afternoon, Warren——"

"Oh, crumbs! But I - I - I say, sir——"

"You need say nothing, Warren. You will go into Monsieur Pin's detention class at two o'clock - two to five."

"But I - I - I——"

Charne did not stay to listen. He rustled away, frowning; leaving Dick Warren overwhelmed with dismay, and wondering dismally who was going to keep goal for the Felgate junior eleven when Walcot came. And when Tom King came in, and heard, he wondered, too, and had to make up his mind reluctantly that it would have, after all, to be Reece.

III

Skip chuckled.

He was feeling in high feather.

Reece, strolling under the old Felgate oaks, glanced at him, and wondered what the fat clown was chuckling about. Reece was feeling rather like chuckling himself. The incident in Study Four, and its outcome, had brought dismay

to Tom King and most of the footballers, for, whether Reece knew it or not, Dick Warren was badly wanted that afternoon to stop shots from Walcot. Walcot men, when they came, came with their shooting-boots on: a very good man was required between the sticks. Reece did not share the general dismay when Warren went into Extra School. From his point of view, nothing could have happened more luckily. Warren had played a fool trick on a pre. and pushed himself out of the eleven, thereby pushing Reece in. Reece had no doubt that Tom King would soon be looking for him. So he was disposed to chuckle – but why Skip Ruggles chuckled so merrily was a mystery to him. Disaster to his chums was no cause of chuckling for Ruggles.

But Skip did chuckle, and as he saw Reece, he grinned at him.

“Row going on at the House?” he asked. “Anything happened to that swob Pook?” And Skip chuckled again, loud and long.

Reece stared at him.

“Don’t you know?” he asked.

Skip winked, a knowing wink.

“I’ve been keeping out of the way,” he explained, “I don’t want Pook to guess it was me.”

“Wha-a-at?” stuttered Reece.

“I got him all right!” chuckled Skip. “Right on the napper, with about half a hundredweight of snow. Ha, ha! Did he howl? Ha, ha! Obliging of him to stick there on his hind legs just under my study window, what? Ha, ha! Did I get him a treat? Ha, ha!”

Reece gazed at him, blankly. He had not doubted, any more than Charne, who was the culprit. He knew better now. It was Skip – that ass, that clown, Skip Ruggles – who had tipped that

cargo of snow on to Pook; and evidently he did not know that Warren had been nailed for it. Skip, with great sagacity, had been lying low, at a safe distance, and as a result, he had not heard the news.

“Are they kicking up a row about it?” asked Skip. “I’ll bet Pook’s wild! Ha, ha! He won’t know it was me! Ha, ha! He smacked my head, the swob, just because I lost his note! But I got him all right with that stack of snow off the window-sill! I say, is there a row going on about it? Is Charne doing anything?”

Edgar Reece drew a deep breath.

His vision of supplanting Dick Warren in the Walcot game faded out. It was not Warren, it was Ruggles, who was the culprit. Skip’s present desire was to keep his exploit dark; but the minute he knew that Warren was taking the rap for it, what would Skip do? Reece did not need telling – Skip would rush off to Charne and own up to what he had done. Skip might be a clown, an ass, and a fathead – his best friends agreed that he was – but he was not the man to let another fellow take his gruel. He did not know yet, but he would know, before the Walcot men arrived – and then——!

But would he?

Reece had a quick and active brain, and few scruples troubled him. He was not going to lose this chance, if he could help it. Skip was in the dark so far – he had to be kept in the dark.

“You’d better keep out of the way a bit, Ruggles,” he said. “Charne’s after the man who swamped Pook – and Pook’s raging like a tiger. Better steer clear till it blows over a bit.”

“I’m going to!” chuckled Skip.

“Keep right off the scene,” advised



"I got him all right," chuckled Skip. "Right on the napper"

Reece. "Look here, Hodden's in bounds on a half-holiday – why not trot over to the Regal, and see the new picture there? I've heard you say you wanted to see it."

"So I do," said Skip, "and it's a jolly good idea – but——"

"But what?"

"Stony!" said Skip, sadly.

"I'll lend you half a crown."

"Will you really?" Skip could not help staring. Reece was not a fellow, as a rule, to lend a fellow so much as a threepenny-bit. "Pulling my leg?"

"Here it is."

That settled it. Skip was quite keen to see the new picture at the Regal, and to keep off the scene while the row was going on about Pook; and Reece was equally eager to see him off out of gates, before he learned how matters really stood. They walked down to the gates together, and Reece had the satisfaction

of watching the plumpest figure at Felgate disappear up the road.

He smiled as he strolled back into the quad.

Skip was safe off the scene: he would learn nothing, and know nothing, till he came back from Hodden, after the Walcot match was over. Tom King did not like him, they had never been friends, but he would have to play him, with Warren unavailable. If there was any doubt about that, it was soon dispelled, for a little later, Tom King came out of the House, evidently looking for somebody – and when he saw Reece, he bore down on him.

"You'll be wanted after all, Reece," he said. "I expect you've heard that Warren's in Extra this afternoon——"

"I think I heard something about it," assented Reece, casually. "Mopping snow over a pre., or something——"

"It wasn't Warren – but Charne

thinks it was. Some silly ass larking with Pook," said Tom. "Can't quite make it out – but it wasn't Warren, as he says it wasn't. Anyhow we want a goal-keeper, and you're next best."

"Only next?" sneered Reece. "Any port in a storm, what?"

"Exactly!" said Tom King. "But if you're not keen, I'll speak to Bullinger——"

"I'm keen enough," said Reece, hastily.

"Turn up on time, then."

Tom King walked away, with that. Reece smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. He wondered what the captain of the Fourth would have thought, if he could have known how the matter really stood. But Tom, of course, couldn't and wouldn't know, with Skip sitting in a cinema three miles away while the match was played. Reece was in a very cheery mood, as he joined the crowd in the changing-room.

IV

"Tom, old chap——"

"Don't bother, Skip."

Nobody in the changing-room was disposed to be bothered by Skip just then; Tom King least of all. Tom had lost a reliable goal-keeper, and had to make do with a make-shift one; and was not feeling his bonniest. Walcot had arrived, and the teams were about to go out to the field. Nobody was interested when Skip's plump moon-face looked in – with a single exception. That exception was Reece. Reece stared at Skip Ruggles as at a fat ghost. Ruggles should have been a mile on his way to Hodden – Reece, from the gates, had watched him go. Yet here he was——

The look that Reece gave him was

awfully expressive. Indeed, if looks could have slain, the Felgate Fourth would have been in danger of losing its fattest member, at that moment. Why, in the name of all that was unlucky, had Skip come back, at the most unpropitious moment imaginable?

"Look here, Tom——!" persisted Skip.

"I said don't bother."

"I was going to the pictures at Hodden," said Skip. "Reece lent me half a crown for the ticket. But——"

"Pack it up."

"But when I felt in my pocket to make sure that it was safe, it was the pocket with a hole in it," said Skip, sorrowfully. "So I had to come back."

Some of the fellows laughed. Reece's half-crown had slipped through a hole in his pocket – probably the same hole through which Pook's note had slipped. It was Skip, all over!

"Watch the game instead, fathead," said Tom. "Come on, you men."

"But I say where's Warren?" asked Skip. "Isn't Warren playing?"

"Warren's in Extra, because some silly ass mopped snow over a pre., and Charne thinks it was Warren——"

Skip jumped almost into the air.

"What?" he yelled. "What makes Charne think it was Warren, when it was me?"

Tom King yelled in his turn:

"You!"

"Me!" said Skip. "He smacked my head this morning, the swob – and I got him from our study window – didn't you know——?"

"How should I know, you blithering bandersnatch?" howled Tom.

"Well, Reece might have told you – he knew – I told him, when he lent me the half-crown——"



"Cut off! Run! Hop it! Whiz!"

Tom King grasped a fat arm.

"You priceless piffler, was it you mopped Pook——?"

"Yes, it was - I told Reece——"

"Never mind Reece - cut off and tell Charne. There's still time - the Walcot men will wait - cut off to Charne." Tom King dragged at the fat arm, and whirled Skip out of the changing-room. "Cut off! Run! Hop it! Whiz!"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Skip.

Skip did as he was bid - he cut off, ran, hopped it, and whizzed! He burst into an astonished form-master's study rather like a fat thunderbolt. He left the changing-room in a buzz. Tom King fixed a grim eye on Reece. Reece's face was a picture - not a pleasant one.

"So you knew, Reece!" said Tom. "And you sent that fathead off to Hodden, so that nobody else would know. And if he hadn't been the silliest ass at Felgate - Oh, boot him!"

How many football boots landed on

Reece, before he escaped from the changing-room, he hardly knew. A yelling Reece vanished into space; and a breathless Warren, newly released from Extra, bolted into the changing-room, and changed at lightning speed. It was Dick Warren, after all, who kept goal in the Walcot match: what time his rival was dolorously rubbing innumerable spots where aches and pains lingered long.

Skip did not watch the match. Having manfully owned up to his beak, Skip had to take what was coming to him; and he sat in Extra, absorbing more or less knowledge of the beautiful French language from Monsieur Pin, while Dick Warren was saving a rain of Walcot shots, and Tom King was kicking the winning goal for Felgate. But he was consoled by the knowledge that he had saved the situation - in his own inimitable way - which was Skip all over!