

SIX FOR SLEAKE



FRANK
RICHARDSON

CHARNE, none of the Felgate Fourth, was a mean gentleman. Every man in the firm knew that he had to be wary of Charne, if he kicked over so little over the trans. The Felgate Fourth couldn't help respecting him, even if they did not love him very much. Normally, not one fellow would ever have dreamed of jolting Charne. But when Charne came down with "jaund" on Deffen day, they got really annoyed of it, but thought of it, instead of it, and—grudgingly doing—did it!

It came about through Sleake, who was a quite unpleasant member of the Felgate Fourth. Bullinger had kicked Sleake, Tom King, cousin of the firm, did not approve of Bullinger's rather overbearing manners and customs still, even Tom admitted that there was an special reason why Sleake shouldn't be kicked—a fellow who had had about with his friends in his pockets while other fellows played cricket, who dodged games practice whenever he could, and

enjoyed himself great in obscure corners. It was really an incident of no consequence whatever—excepting to Sleake. Sleake retaliated by informing Peck, a Sixth-Form prefect, that it was Bullinger who had introduced gum into the school in his study. Result: a painful contact between a prefect's ash and Bullinger's nostrils.

"Smoking" in a gym was done, if not quite, unknown in the Felgate Fourth. Only Sleake was master of it. The whole firm made it clear to Sleake what they thought of him. Unfortunately Charne came into the jolting while they were doing Sleake's head in the fountain in the gym.

Charne did not know what Sleake had done, and he did not want to know. He found his stomach not stopping and repeating in every hands; and that was enough for Charne. The sentence of "jaund" followed, for every fellow concerned in what Charne called a riot.

"Gone" on a half-holiday would

have been income at any time. On DeLore day it was a disaster! In Study Four three days, as by the yellow Tiger of old, storms and allright. Tom King and Dick Warren debated whether they had to phone in DeLore that the match was off, or whether there was the slightest hope that Charne might relent, if Tom went in first and explained that Falgout practices simply wouldn't say in game when they were due for a cricket match at another school.

"No go!" said Warren, shaking his head dejectedly. "Charne wouldn't even listen. You know Charne."

"We can't run the match!" asserted Tom.

"Looks as if we've got to."

"It's rotten."

"Furious, and damn sore."

"I say," Skip Ruggles joined in the debate. "I say, I've got an idea."

King and Warren looked at their friend in alarm. They did not value Skip's ideas very much. If Skip had anything to suggest, it was bound to be something absurd. But the situation was so desperate that they were willing to hear a suggestion even from Skip.

"Well, what?" asked Tom.

"What about a picnic?" said Skip, brightly.

They gazed at him.

"Cricket's washed out," said Skip, "and we can't go out of game. But under the willows in the School Field—"

Skip got no farther than that. Gasps and hums and sighs came, under the willows in the School Field, appeared to Skip—as a quite happy alternative. His class had expected something serious; but not quite so serious as this. Words were useless in reply to such a suggestion. They did not

answer in words. They rose and led on Skip Ruggles, and bumped him on the carpet in Study Four—and, finding some sense in it, bumped him again. Then, leaving him on the carpet, gazing fit to burst, they resumed the dinner debate.

"I'm going to Charne!" said Tom at last. "It can't do any harm if it doesn't do any good. I'll try it on, if you like."

"Nothing is it!" said Warren. "Charne never changes his mind. The jolly old Maden and Persson were fools to him! But try it on, if you like."

And Tom King went down to Charne's study to try it on.

He came back about five minutes later, and kicked a chair across Study Four; which seemed to indicate that his mission had not been a success. Warren gave him a look of inquiry; Skip, a breathless blink.

"Well, what did Charne say?" asked Warren.



"Skip can't run the match," said Tom.



"What's that?"
"Oh, well, maybe!"

"Nothing!"

"Did you tell him——?"

"How could I tell him anything, when he wasn't there?" looked Tom. "I'd forgotten this was his dashed archaeological afternoon. He's gone out."

"That beats it!" said Dick Warren.

"That's it to sure!" missed Tom.

"I say——" began Skip.

They looked at him as if they could have eaten him. In this desperate situation, feeling like the Raven's unhappy master, when universal disaster followed fast and followed faster, they had no use for further advice suggestions from Stanley St. Leger Raglin.

"If you say 'please' again, we'll lynch you, Skip!" said Tom King, in concentrated tones.

"I wasn't going to say please— I was going to say——"

"Shut up, anyway."

"But I was going to say——"

"Put a sock in it."

"I tell you I was going to say——"

"Shut UP!" yelled King and Warren together.

"Oh, all right!" said Skip, indignantly. "If you don't want to play Dohot this afternoon——"

"You fat, footling, footling, fathead, we can't play Dohot, as we're going, and Charrie's gone out and we can't ask him——"

"Yes, but I was going to say——"

"Put it up before we hang you again."

"Will you listen to a chap?" howled Skip. "If Charrie's gone off with that

archaeological gang of things is——

"He has, indeed."

"Well, he never got back till late when he got on those wires. Not till after callosities."

"What about this, now?"

"Well, how's he to know if we go over to Delcot?" asked Skip. "He wouldn't even dream that we'd walked out on him. When Charre says gites, it's gites; and that's that. Not just for once——"

Tom King jumped. So did Dick Warren. Walking out on Charre was, certainly, a somewhat delicate resource. The consequences were awful, if Charre knew. But would he know? These archaeological expeditions, as everybody was aware, kept Charre out late. The crickets would be back from Delcot long before Charre came back from archaeology. Charre was accustomed to say "Do this!" and he meant it! It would hardly occur to his mind that, for once in the history of the Felgate Fourth, that firm had stringy, deliberately, dispersively, disregarded his commands, pinning them by like the little wood which they regarded not!

Tom's eyes met Dick Warren's. They smiled simultaneously.

"By gites!" said Tom. "Why not?"

"Why not?" agreed Dick.

Really, there were a good many reasons why not. But Tom King and Dick Warren agreed in disregarding them.

"Come on!" said Tom.

Saying only to give Skip an approximate attack on a far shoulder—— which made Skip yell—— Tom dashed out of the study, with Warren as his berth. Tom carries just a whole variety of jesses—— where Charre, if he spread a thought for them from archaeology, supposed

to be strictly within gites—— were slipping quietly out of Felgate to take the train at Fell. They told one another that it was as safe as houses, with Charre at a distance archaeologically; Charre would never know a thing. Snake of the Fourth, with a little doing, and more than a little resourceful and malicious, had a different opinion. Snake's idea was that Charre was going to know, for the simple reason that, when he returned to Felgate, Snake was going to tell him!

II

It was a glorious day. The skies were blue, with dots of floppy white clouds, and there was a gentle, balmy breeze. The Delcot pitch was perfect, and Tom King and Co. had the first knock. The Delcot men were a good cricketing crowd, who played a good game. Everything, in fact, was about as perfect as a thing could be in this imperfect universe, and everyone was merry and bright. Everyone enjoyed the game—— Skip Buggles as much as anyone. True, he was not playing; but he sat under one of the shady Delcot benches with a large bag of cherries, which was the next best thing; and loudly did Skip clap, with fat, sticky hands, when Tom King hit a succession of fours. Sadly he sighed when Billinger went out for a duck; but cheerily he trooped up again when Dick Warren came in and added two to Tom's score. Everyone was happy that bright summer's afternoon. Skip probably the happiest of the whole Felgate crowd, for was it not he who had made that happy suggestion to Study Tom, of taking advantage of Charre's archaeological absence, and coming over to Delcot in defiance of Charre's edict? Skip justly expected

himself as the "main batter" of the great and glorious victory won by Felgate juniors that day; and even the cherries gave him less satisfaction.

It was a hard-won victory, the result of the knees of the gods right up to the finish. Felgate made fifty in their first innings; and, by a coincidence, Dolton put up exactly the same figure. In their second knock, the visitors made it sixty, leaving Dolton sixty-one to get after tea if they wanted to win. When Felgate went into the field again, Tom King was impressively in his best clothes.

"One of your best tricks, mind, if I'll show your head in the fountain, like we did Skink's, when we got back."

Dick Warren chuckled.

"Anything to oblige?" he answered.

And whether it was the prospect of having his head shown in the fountain like Skink's, or more probably good

bowling and good luck, Dick Warren did perform the last trick as requested, sending three Dolton bats running home, and causing Sixy Ruggles to clap sticky hands with experts like pond sticks.

But the Dolton men retired from their setback and runs piled up again. It had looked like six, with Dolton three down for ducks; but nothing is more certain than that cricket is an uncertain game. Dolton had, apparently, a sting in its tail: wickets went down, but runs went up; and Tom King cast a very unloverly eye at the board when his runs were called: the bats were stood at fifty-eight. With two to go, three to win, and a wicket yet to fall, it was anybody's game: everyone knew that the next over would be the last, and it was a thrilling moment. Tom would have felt better if Warren had been bowling; but Ruffings was bowling now, Warren



"Ain't it late?"

in the field. Skip's cherry bag was empty, but he would not have dipped a fat paw at it had it been full: Skip's pennywise eyes were glued on the game. Bullinger strut down the ball, which was whisked away for a single.

Fifty-one! One to tie, two to win, for Delect! and Bullinger's last was not good enough. The ball came down, to be whisked away; and that game was a game. But was it?

No; quite! For Dick Warren, with a bound that a kangaroo might have envied but never equaled, rose to it—and there was a smack at the bowler, hot from the bat, slung into a palm—that clucked and laid.

"How's that?"

"Oh, well caught!"

It was a narrow margin, but what did margins matter? That catch had worked the miracle; and Fulgus came victorious off the field. Skip rushed up to thank Warren in the back. Nobody would have guessed, from his stammered gasp, that only a few hours ago Warren had lost a hand in bumping him on the carpet in Study Four! Skip clattered with glee.

He straggled all the way home to Fulgus. Some of the cricketers had rather more thoughtful looks. Now that it was over, the Delect match they played and they won, some of them wondered what fun was going to be any less agreeable circumstances. If Charré got wise to it—

"Still, how could Charré?"

They went back at Fulgus for nothing; and Charré had not yet returned from Archduchy. A little hint he was sure to show it. He remained visible for some time, and was seen chatting with other boys, and with Langley, the Fulgus captain; and as long as the

visibility was good, some rather insidious eyes looked on him. But nothing transpired, and it became fairly certain that Charré knew and suspected nothing, never even dreaming that his authority had been set at naught—and he went to his study at last, and when his door closed on him, Tony King pressed Warren's arm, and murmured:

"May?"

"Right as rain!" agreed Warren.

"And it was jolly well my idea!" said Skip.

And they went up to Study Five for jays, in the chambers of monks, and never even remembered the unpleasant existence of Snake.

III

"Well?"

Charré tapped out that monosyllable. He had no high opinion of Snake. Certainly, he had come down hard and heavy on the Fourth for ducking him. But he did not like his steady work; and he was not pleased to see him come into his study. So he tapped:

"If you please, sir——" began Snake.

"Well?"

"I think you ought to know, sir, that a whole crowd went out of gates this afternoon, while you were away, and played cricket at Delect, and——"

"Say!"

Snake stopped.

Charré sat looking at him. There was wonder at his brow. Judging by his look, the rebels were going to have the use of their feet, now that Charré knew. Whelp at mouth, attention for half-holidays, perhaps going up to the Head! The blacking grew Charré's brow, the more Snake bravely persisted. They were going to be wry for that ducking

in the fountain! Something worse than a ducking was coming their way.

There was a long pause, while Charley pin-point eyes almost bored into Snake. Obviously, he was very angry. He spoke at last, and his voice was very deep.

"If this had come to my knowledge from any other source, the most severe punishment would have been awarded for such disregard of my authority in my town. But as I cannot act on information received from a tale-teller, I have no choice now but to pass the matter over. I cannot, however, pass over your act in coming here, Snake, and informing on your town-fellows. You must learn, Snake, that tale-bearing is a deplorable thing, not by any means good enough for Felpate. I shall, at all events, endeavour to impress that on your mind."

Charley rose to his feet and picked up his cane.

Snake stared at him—almost goggled at him. Fook had said an "information received", and he had not doubted that Charley would do the same. Charley's eyes, however, seemed quite different from Fook's. Charley was angry, very angry; but it showed in Snake's eye

that he was the chief object of all Charley's pointed-to-a-chair-with-the-cane.

"Bend over that chair, Snake."

"Bis—bis—[]—!" answered Snake.

Then the teacher relented:

"BEND OVER!"

Unhappily, wishing from the bottom of his heart that he hadn't come to Charley's study with a tale to tell, Snake bent over the chair. The cane rose and fell, rhythmically, and dust scattered from trousers. Whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop! whoop! it was a full "six". All the Felpate Fourth knew that Charley could whoop; but Snake had never realized it so thoroughly as now. He was spinning like a worm when it was over.

Charley pointed to the door with the cane.

"Go!"

Snake went—spinning.

Tom King and Co. heard nothing from Charley. They were very pleased to hear nothing; and had no doubt that Charley knew nothing. Charley perhaps looked a little grim in the forenoon the next day; but that was all—the whole affair had happily ended with six for Snake!

