

PLAY THE GAME!



**Frank
Richards**

DICK WARREN, of the Felgate Fourth, could do practically anything with a cricket ball. Great men of the First Eleven, like Langdale and Loring and Perkinson, had been known to come along and watch him making hay of Greyfriars or Carcroft wickets. His chum Tom King indeed declared that Warren could have jolly well bowled First-Eleven batsmen, and Warren modestly agreed that he jolly well could! But that Warren would ever have a chance of displaying his powers among those mighty men was undreamt-of—till it happened.

When it did happen, all Felgate sat up and took notice. Everybody was surprised, many were pleased and expectant, and only one person—Pook of the Sixth—was annoyed, indeed exasperated. But nobody cared what

Pook thought about it, least of all Study Four in the Fourth, rejoicing in the distinction that had come their way. Tom King clapped his chum enthusiastically on the back; Skip Ruggles grinned and chuckled his congratulations, as pleased as if they had themselves been picked to play against Dolcot.

Of course it was very unexpected, but the fact was that Langdale, the captain of Felgate, was in a jam. Owing to a concatenation of circumstances, he was not only weak, but feeble, in bowlers. Cadby was in sanny with a cold, Denver had crocked his wrist, Paynter was absent, Purring was off his form, and that ass Perkinson of the Fifth had landed himself in Extra after a spot of bother with his form-master Kye. Batsmen galore were available,

but hardly a bowler except Chard, and even Chard was not out of the top drawer. It looked as if he would have to call in Pook, who certainly was keen to play, and who was perhaps half as good a bowler as he fancied he was. Pook, indeed, took it for granted, and already saw himself levelling Dolcot wickets. Perhaps Langdale's personal dislike of Pook, who had oily and stealthy ways, may have been one cause of his hesitation; but the fact was that Pook, in spite of his excellent opinion of himself, was nowhere near the form required, and when the big idea suddenly came, Langdale was glad that he had not spoken to Pook.

It came suddenly, when he was strolling by junior nets. He stopped to look on, and, watching Dick Warren with the ball, he remembered how he had seen him strewing the sticks in junior matches. Warren, by happy chance, was at the very top of his form. Even Tom King, the best junior bat at Felgate, failed to keep the wicket up. The big idea germinated in Langdale's mind as he watched, and at length he made up his mind, and called to that uncommon junior bowler.

"Warren!"

Dick Warren looked round.

"Yes, Langdale."

"I shall want you tomorrow."

"Eh - why?" The Dolcot match was on the morrow, but Dick, naturally, did not think of that.

"You'll bowl for us," said Langdale. Warren almost fell down.

"Bowl for the First!" he ejaculated.

"Yes! I'll speak to Charne, to let you off third school. Mind you're in form."

Langdale walked on, leaving astonishment and joy behind him. He went to his study, in a somewhat relieved frame

of mind. He had been feeling rather like the Raven's unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster. But that Fourth-form junior, with his magic hand with a cricket ball, looked like a solution of the problem, or as near a solution as he could hope to get. The kid's wicket would go down, of course, to Dolcot bowling, but that did not matter; he was strong in batsmen. If the kid could face up to senior men, and root out a few stumps, that was all he wanted. And he believed that the kid could.

He sat down to add a name to the cricket list. He had just written "R. Warren" when there was a tap at his study door, and Pook came in. Langdale looked up, trying not to let his face express the repugnance he felt whenever



"You'll bowl for us," said Langdale.

Pook came near him. Pook had his most amicable smile on: but there was something oily in it that Langdale disliked intensely. However, he said as cordially as he could, "Hullo, Pook."

"I've looked in about the cricket," said Pook, in his smooth way. "Isn't it about time the list went up?"

"I'm just going along to stick it up."

"I'm in, I hope?" Pook said that he "hoped", but he was quite assured of it, for where was the Felgate captain to look for another bowler, even if he didn't or wouldn't understand what a champ Pook was? So Langdale's answer came as a shock to him.

"Sorry, no."

The smile vanished from Pook's face, as if he had suddenly run out of oil!

"Not!" he exclaimed. His narrow eyes glinted at Langdale. He would willingly have landed his knuckles in the Felgate captain's face. "You're leaving me out?"

"I'm not putting you in, if that's what you mean."

Pook breathed hard.

"Who's the happy man, then?" he asked, between set lips.

"Warren!"

"Eh? Who's Warren?" Pook was puzzled. "There isn't any Warren in the Fifth or Sixth that I know of."

"Young Warren of the Fourth."

"Is that a joke?" asked Pook, staring.

"Not at all. I'm taking a chance, I know: but we're hard up for bowlers, and that kid can bowl."

Pook burst out.

"A Fourth-Form fag! You're playing one of Charne's fag crowd, and leaving me out! You've always disliked me – you'd chuck away a match rather than give me a chance – think I don't know?"

"That will do, Pook."

"Dolcot will walk over Felgate tomorrow. You don't care, so long as you give me a jolt. By gad, I'll be glad to see them wipe up the ground with you, and you know they will."

Langdale rose from his chair.

"That's more than enough, Pook. Are you leaving this study on your feet or on your neck?"

Pook decided to leave on his feet.

II

"OH" gasped Tom King, Dick Warren and Skip Ruggles, all together in dismay.

It was a sheer accident. That ball banged on Pook's head, without the least intention on Dick Warren's part. But it was, undoubtedly, the sort of accident that shouldn't have happened. Sixth-Form Prefects could not be banged on the head with cricket balls without something to follow.

Actually, it was largely Pook's own fault. In morning break on Wednesday, Tom King and Co. were in the quad, in the highest spirits. Warren, as a member of the Eleven for once, if for once only, was let off third school by Charne, as stumps were to be pitched early. He was already in flannels, and looking on top of the world. He was going to play cricket – for the First! – while the rest of the Fourth were in form with Charne. He was tossing and catching a ball, just to show his friends in what topping form he was, and in sheer exuberance of spirits. That ball went up, to a quite tremendous height, when Pook came along, and but for Pook, it would have come down, straight as a die, into Dick's ready palm.

Pook, to whom the mere sight of his successful rival was, just then, like a red

rag to a bull, pushed roughly by. That did it! The ball came down, not in Dick Warren's hand, but on Pook's head. It gave him a hard knock – a very hard knock. He tottered, and sat down suddenly.

Three Fourth-Formers gazed at him, in dismay, as he sat, dizzy, and rubbed his head. Pook rubbed and rubbed his head, where there was already a bruise, and the expression on his face was absolutely ferocious. Even a kind and good-tempered senior like Langdale would probably have been considerably annoyed by such a crack on the nut. But the juniors knew what to expect from Pook, with his bitter and malicious temper.

He tottered to his feet.

“You young hooligan!” breathed Pook. “You’ll go up to the Head for this! You fancy you can chuck cricket balls at a prefect because Langdale’s making a favourite of you, what? You’ll see. Head’s study at six.”

That was Pook all over. He chose to regard what was palpably an unfortunate chance, as a deliberate act. No doubt the fact that Warren was to bowl for the First Eleven helped.

“But look here, Pook,” exclaimed Tom King, “It was just an accident——”

“Warren never meant——” began Skip.

“I didn’t see you, Pook, when I tossed up the ball!” exclaimed Warren. “I never dreamed you’d get in its way——”

“Head’s study at six!” said Pook, and he walked away.

Three juniors looked at one another, in eloquent silence. Pook, clearly, was going to make the most of this. Dr. Leicester was to hear that a junior had

deliberately landed a cricket ball on a Sixth-Form prefect’s head, and Pook had a big bruise to show for it. Very likely Pook, with his suspicious and malicious mind, believed so himself. At any rate that was the line he was going to take.

It was an awful prospect for Dick Warren, but quite a solacing thought to Pook, as he bathed that bruise in his study.

But other thoughts came, as he dabbed and dabbed. It was Langdale who had barred him from the cricket in favour of that cheeky junior, Langdale who hoped for good results from the kid who, as Pook knew at the bottom of his heart, was an infinitely better bowler than Pook was ever likely to be. What a jolt back for Langdale, if that recruit failed him after all! Pook’s narrow eyes glinted as he thought it over.

He grinned sourly when Dick Warren came into his study. He wanted to speak to that junior – alone. Warren came in with a clouded and troubled face. He had little hope from an appeal to Pook, but he was going to try.

“Look here, Pook, you jolly well know I never meant that ball for you,” said Warren. “You wouldn’t have got it if you hadn’t pushed into me as you did. Can’t you let it drop?”

“You can cut all that out,” said Pook. “You banged a cricket ball on my head, and I’ve got a bruise like a hen’s egg. You’re going up to the Head for it. But——” He paused, his eyes stealthily on Warren’s face. “I might let it drop if——if——” He paused again.

“Yes?” said Dick, hopefully.

“You’re bowling for the First today,” said Pook. “Langdale’s shoved you in as an excuse for keeping me out. He

The ball came down, not in Dick Warren's hand, but on Pook's head!



fancies that you can take Dolcot wickets——”

“I’m going to try jolly hard.”

“Oh, do!” sneered Pook. “You’ve butted into a senior game, and you’ll look a precious young fool if you’re a flop. You won’t take any Dolcot wickets. And if you don’t——” Pook paused again. He realised that he had to be very careful how he put this. “If you’re a washout, as I expect, if you don’t knock out a single Dolcot bat, it will be rotten enough for you, making such a dashed fool of yourself, and I’ll let it go at that, and let you off going up to the Head!”

Dick Warren stood looking at him. It was quite a minute before he could assimilate this. Then the full meaning of Pook’s guarded words sank into his

mind, and the look that came over his face made even Pook flush.

“You cur!” said Warren.

He walked out of the study, leaving Pook to bathe his bruise. It was quite painful, but Pook was not sorry for the incident now. It was worth a crack on the nut, to give Langdale such a jolt back – and he knew that the junior quite understood that if he captured a single Dolcot wicket, he was going up to the Head afterwards, while if he failed, it was all clear. He had no doubt which line the cheeky young rascal would take!

Dick Warren wandered out into the quad. The bell had gone, and his chums were in form with Charne. But they could not have helped him. What was he going to do? Play up, and face the consequences – which Pook would

make as hard for him as he could? Or let old Langdale down, and save his own skin? That was the choice before him. As he wandered by the Head's study window, he glanced at it; he had to face Dr. Leicester in that dreaded apartment, if he defied Pook. The window was open, and the Head was seated there – his glance fell on Warren, and he frowned at him. Apparently he was already displeased with that particular junior, Warren did not know why. But that frowning glance put the lid on, so to speak; there was no hope in that quarter. He wandered on, trying to think out his problem. And then the Dolcot men arrived, and cricket was the order of the day.

III

The Dolcot match was somewhat unique in the history of Felgate cricket. First-Eleven matches always attracted a crowd, but on this occasion, hardly a man at Felgate missed the show. The fact that a Fourth-Form junior had been picked to play was a sensation in itself, and the way that junior shaped when he was put on to bowl – which, after a few overs, was as often as the rules of the game allowed – made all Felgate sit up and take notice. Dick Warren, sturdy as he was for his age, looked rather like a minnow among the whales, amid the tremendous game-men of the Fifth and Sixth. But could he bowl? Could he not!

Tom King and Skip Ruggles, when third school dismissed, were the first to race down to Big Side, eager to see how their chum was shaping. But there was nothing to see so far. Felgate had won the toss, and Langdale elected to take first knock. Warren was last on the list, and still waiting at the pavilion; when

he did go to his wicket, he was lucky to take four before he left it again. That mattered not at all: nothing was expected of him in the batting line. A wicket was, so to speak, the price of his bowling. Langdale had plenty of stout fellows with the willow to put up the runs, and the innings ended, in time for lunch, with the score at seventy. It was later that the fireworks came – and when they came, it was quite a dazzling pyrotechnic display.

When Dolcot went in, Chard bowled the first over. Then the ball was entrusted to the new recruit. Langdale, perhaps smitten by a slight doubt as to whether he had erred, gave him a quiet word.

“Keep cool! And remember I'm banking on you, kid.”

That was more than enough for Dick Warren. If there had been hesitation in his mind, it vanished. He caught sight of Pook in the crowd – watching with a sour smile. He knew what Pook expected. Pook, like so many of us, judged others by himself: he knew that he would have let down anyone rather than face up to grim consequences. He fully expected as much of that junior. What followed astonished as well as enraged him – while it delighted all the rest of Felgate, and caused Tom King to fling his cap into the air, careless where it came down, or whether it ever came down at all.

One thought was in Dick's mind now – Langdale banked on him, and trusted him. He would not have let old Langdale down, if Pook, instead of reporting him to the Head, had been going to boil him in oil. He was going to play the game!

Indeed, that look on Pook's sour face helped to spur him on. He was at the

"Mind, another hat trick, old man!" said Tom King, digging Warren in the ribs when the field went on.



top of his form, full of confidence. He was going to put in all he knew, and a little over, if he could. He was going to excel himself at his best. And he did! Fortune is said to favour the brave, and undoubtedly Fortune smiled on Dick Warren that day. Even his chums, who expected the most of him, could hardly have ventured to hope that he would take the Dolcot captain's wicket first ball. When he did, there was a roar. And that roar was renewed, and renewed again, when second and third wicket went down. Pook's face was a picture, as he watched the hat trick. Everyone else roared and yelled.

Tom King grasped Skip, and waltzed that fat youth round and round, bumping into Bullinger and Reece and Preece. Skip gurgled for breath. Langdale, in the field, grinned with glee. Afterwards, the Dolcot men paid very

special attention to that bowler. They treated him with caution and respect. But the change bowlers did them little damage, and runs went up, and the score was at sixty-nine when the innings ended. What it would have been, minus Warren, was anybody's guess.

Felgate's second knock produced sixty, Warren contributing only a duck. Then came tea, and then the visitors' second knock.

"Mind, another hat trick, old man!" said Tom King, digging Warren in the ribs when the field went on. Warren smiled and nodded. He was going to produce all the hat tricks he could. But hat tricks cannot be produced like rabbits out of a hat. A wicket came Warren's way, and later another, and then he gave Langdale a catch in the field. But all the while the Dolcot men were hitting, and they were good men with the willow: and the score crept up and up. When it stood at fifty-six, with three more wickets to fall, excitement was breathless. Dolcot wanted four to tie, five to win, when Dick Warren went on to bowl again.

By that time, Big Side at Felgate was the most thickly-populated spot in Hertfordshire. Everybody was there: Charne, and Kye, and the other beaks, and even Dr. Leicester had come down to the pavilion. The Head, an old cricketer himself, watched the next over as keenly as Tom King. And it was worth watching.

It was like magic. Even Warren hardly dared hope for another hat trick, though it was fairly clear that nothing else could pull the game out of the fire. But it was the hat trick that came. One - two - three - one after another - amid a rising roar that could have been heard a mile away. And when the last

wicket went down, and all was over, Dick Warren found himself carried off the field on the shoulders of Langdale and Chard, amid a thunder of cheering, and couldn't help feeling like the ancient Roman who was like to touch the stars with his exalted head. And then he remembered Pook!

IV

"Warren!"

It was the Head speaking.

They had set Dick Warren down, flushed and breathless, and feeling on top of the universe. But as he saw that the Head was there, and heard his voice, his heart gave an unpleasant beat. He had played up, and played the game: and having called the tune, he had to pay the piper.

"Yes, sir!" he stammered. He wondered if Pook had already made his report. It was past six. But the Head was not looking stern. Far from it.

"Congratulations, Warren." Never had Dr. Leicester looked so benignant. "A great game—a great game. Well done, my boy."

"Thank you, sir." Evidently Pook had not been at work yet!

"I had intended to speak to you, Warren, about the incident in the quadrangle this morning, which I witnessed from my study window. I had intended, Warren, to deal with you somewhat severely for so careless and

thoughtless an act as tossing up a cricket ball in the quadrangle, which fell, as I myself saw, on a Sixth-Form boy's head. Such accidents, Warren, should not be allowed to occur. You will bear that in mind."

"Oh!" gasped Dick. "Yes, sir! Certainly, sir." He felt as if his head was turning round. He remembered that frowning glance when he had passed the Head's window that morning. He understood—the Head had been sitting at his window, and had seen the whole thing from a distance, and knew that it was an accident. The sort of accident, of course, that shouldn't have occurred, but all the same, it wouldn't be much use now for Pook to make his malicious report.

"But we will say no more about it," added Dr. Leicester, with a smile. "You will be more careful in future, Warren, that is all. You have played a great game—a great game! Congratulations, my boy."

And the Head shook hands with him.

Tom King and Skip came up and walked Warren off, almost hugging him. Dick walked between them, the happiest fellow at Felgate or anywhere else. They passed Pook, who scowled rather like a demon in a pantomime, but Pook's scowls cut no ice now. And if Dick Warren had ever doubted it, he was quite sure now that a fellow's best guess was to play the game!

