

PLUCK AND LUCK

Frank Richards



“OUT of bounds!” said Tom King, in utter disgust.
“Rotten!” said Dick Warren.

“Putrid!” concurred Skip.

It was almost an indignation meeting in the Felgate quad. Study Four were not the only fellows who were annoyed and disgusted. It was, in fact, exasperating to everybody.

The Fenny was frozen hard. Skip Ruggles declared that it was hard as iron, which was an exaggeration. King and Warren opined that it would bear Skip’s weight, and if so, it was absolutely safe for any fellow at Felgate. True, there were places where the water shallowed, and the crust was thin, but any sensible fellow out on his skates

could and would avoid those danger-spots. Possibly the Head doubted whether the Felgate community was wholly composed of such sensible fellows! At all events, the fiat had gone forth: the Fenny was out of bounds till further notice.

A crowd of fellows had been looking forward to skating that afternoon. But that notice on the board knocked skating on the head. Tom King and Co. were especially keen, and especially exasperated. They were quite sure that they – being of course extremely sensible fellows – would be perfectly safe on the ice, whatever might happen to thoughtless fags sliding recklessly on perilous spots. But the Head’s edict, like the hail and the rain, fell alike upon the

just and the unjust, the wise and the unwise. Nobody was allowed on the frozen surface of the Fenny that day.

"I've a jolly good mind to go all the same!" said Tom.

"Let's!" said Skip, at once.

Warren shook his head.

"Too jolly risky," he said.

"Rot!" said Skip. "I tell you the ice is hard as iron——"

"Fathead!" said Warren. "I don't mean the ice – I mean the Head! If a beak or a pre spotted us, we should have to go up to the Old Boy."

"Um!" said Skip, doubtfully. Skip wanted to go skating, but he certainly did not want to go up to the Old Boy – otherwise Dr. Leicester, headmaster of Felgate. Visits to the Old Boy were not attractive functions.

"It's all rot!" said Tom King. "Safe as houses – and I'm jolly well going."

Then Reece chimed in. Reece was a fellow who always had something unpleasant to say, especially to Study Four.

"Hot air!" said Reece. "You wouldn't dare."

Now, as a matter of fact, it was, as Reece described it, just "hot air". Tom King spoke in the heat and exasperation of the moment, not weighing his words. He was "jolly well" going, but on reflection, he certainly would have decided jolly well not! But that gibe from Reece did it!

"You'll see!" he snapped.

"Look here, Tom——" began Warren.

"I'm going," said Tom.

"I'd like to see you doing it!" grinned Reece, which was undoubtedly true, for nothing would have pleased Edgar Reece more than landing the captain of the Fourth in a "row" with the Head.

"You'll see, if you're around after tiffin," said Tom. "And now you can shut up, Reece, if you don't want your cheeky head bunged in the snow."

"Bung it in anyway!" said Dick Warren, with a glare at Reece.

"Let's!" agreed Tom.

The next moment, Reece was wishing that he hadn't spoken, as he was grabbed and up-ended. There was plenty of snow about, and Reece kicked and yelled as he rolled over in it. He looked rather like an Abominable Snowman after that, and the fact that he had asked for it was no comfort to him; his only comfort was that he had landed Study Four in a reckless disregard of authority, which was very likely indeed to lead to bad trouble for that study.

II

"Going?" asked Bullinger, after dinner.

Tom King hesitated just one second before he replied. But it was only for a second.

"Yes!" he said.

"You'll get into a row."

"I shouldn't wonder!" agreed Tom, with a carelessness he did not feel.

"Well, you're an ass!" said Bullinger.

Tom King had to admit, to himself, that that was correct.

After tiffin that day he was, in fact, feeling like kicking himself. Having blown off steam, as it were, like other fellows that morning, the matter would have ended there – but for Reece and his gibing. True, he was extremely keen on skating, very keen indeed to whizz and whirl on the gleaming ice on the Fenny, and he had no doubt whatever that it was perfectly safe for him, whatever doubts the Old Boy might have. But Head's orders were Head's

orders, and Tom would have toed the line like any other fellow, but for Reece. He had been an ass, an absolute ass, to let Reece "chivvy" him into this. But what he had said, he had said, and he just couldn't back out.

He was going. All the form knew that he had said that he would: Reece had taken care of that. To back out would look like funk – quite an impossibility for Study Four. There would be derisive laughter in the Pound if he did not, after all, make his words good. He just had to.

Warren and Skip were, of course, going too. Tom would have dissuaded them from joining him in what, as he realised on reflection, was a very reckless exploit. But Study Four were not

likely to let him go it on his own. If Tom went, they were going too, and if trouble accrued, they would all be in the soup together. So it was settled that three members of the Fourth Form, that afternoon, were going to carry on, passing by the Head's edict like the idle wind which they regarded not.

But they had to be very cautious about it. It seemed to Tom, at tiffin, that Mr. Charne's pinpoint eye lingered on him, and he had an uneasy qualm. But Charne, of course, knew nothing, though all his form knew. Probably it couldn't have occurred to Charne that any Felgate fellow could think of disregarding an order signed by the headmaster's own majestic hand. Charne, certainly, would have flown right off the



Charne glanced at the trio, and three hearts almost missed a beat under those pin-point eyes.

handle, had he been aware that boys in his form were thinking of exactly that! Luckily, he wasn't aware!

It was, of course, easy to walk out of gates, on a half-holiday, and skates could be camouflaged under overcoats. Three overcoated members of the Fourth Form strolled down to the gates, as casually as if they were simply going for a walk in the keen, frosty air, as any fellow was entitled to do. Skip's coat had a rather suspicious-looking bulge; Skip's circumference was extensive, and there was little room for anything else in his garments. Charne, taking a brisk walk in the quad, glanced at the trio, as they went, and three hearts almost missed a beat under those pin-point eyes. But Charne was not near enough to notice Skip's bulge, and Charne's glance, in fact, was approving. Fellows going for a tramp, heedless of frost and sharp wind, compared favourably with slackers like Reece and Preece, frowsting over the fire in the Pound. Not a suspicion was in Charne's mind: but the three were glad to get out of the range of those pin-points.

Study Four strolled in the same casual manner down Fell Lane, as if heading for the village. Not till they were at a safe distance from the school, did they cut through a gap in the hedge, and trot across a field to the bank of the Fenny. There, with extreme caution, they scanned the frozen river, and its banks. They were in luck. Not a soul was in sight. Felgate masters sometimes walked by the river, but the freezing weather did not tempt any beak to take such a walk on that particular afternoon. It looked as if the adventurous three were going to have the Fenny all to themselves, and nothing could have suited them better.

"Safe as houses!" said Skip.

"Looks like it!" agreed Warren. "But we're asses to come, all the same. I'm glad we snowed that rat Reece."

"Oh, bother Reece," said Tom. "Let's get going."

They put on their skates and got going. It was cold, and the wind was bitter, but they were very soon as warm as toast. The ice was thick and strong, and – excepting in some spots of which they carefully steered clear – safe as houses. Whizzing on the slippery ice was undoubtedly exhilarating, and they whizzed, and whirled, and cut figures, and wove patterns, and enjoyed themselves thoroughly, and in a very short time forgot that they were out of bounds, and liable to severe penalties if spotted.

"Jolly, isn't it?" called out Tom.

"Topping!" called back Warren.

"Fine!" gasped Skip.

Jolly, topping, and fine, it certainly was, and the best of it was, that they continued to have the frozen Fenny all to themselves. Not another Felgate fellow had ventured to disregard the Head's edict, no beak or prefect showed up, not even a native of Fell or Hodden was visible. But——

But they had it coming!

All of a sudden, a figure appeared on the bank – a dismaying figure!

III

Mr. Charne compressed his lips, hard. His feelings were mixed between anger and alarm. Anger, probably, predominated. A minute earlier, he had been walking by the old Felgate oaks, braced by the keen frosty air, and in quite a good temper. But a few words floating to his ears made all the difference.

Reece and Preece, of his form, passed at a little distance. Reece was speaking, apparently unaware of Charne in the offing.

"I hope those fellows won't go through the ice."

Preece, who had seen Charne, whether Reece had or not, caught his arm.

"Shut up!" he whispered, hurriedly. "Charne'll hear you."

They walked on.

Charne stood compressing his lips. He had caught Reece's words, without guessing that he was intended to catch them. He was unaware that Reece had been rolled in the snow that morning, and nursed a grudge for having been turned into an imitation of an Abominable Snowman. It looked, to Reece, as if Tom King was making his reckless words good, without any penalty to follow. Just those few words in Charne's hearing were enough to make things uncomfortable for Study Four.

Charne, with tight lips, walked down to the gates.

Fellows – unspecified – were evidently out on the ice, regardless of the headmaster's order. From the fact that it was a Fourth-Former who had made that remark, Charne could guess that the unspecified "fellows" were boys of his own form. Who they were, he did not know, but he was going to know, and he was going to march them direct into the presence of their headmaster, there to pay the penalty. The fact that he was alarmed for their safety added to his wrath. He headed for the Fenny with a rapid stride and a frowning brow. No one was in sight, when he reached the tow-path, but from some distance down the river he heard the echo of a voice. He turned in that direction, and

tramped down the Fenny, and then, suddenly, he came in sight of three whirling figures on the ice.

That they were juniors he saw at a glance. But juniors in overcoats, with scarves round their necks, and caps pulled low against the wind, were not easy to recognise at a distance. Charne hurried along the bank to get a closer view, and then to call them off.

"Charne!"

Three fellows gasped out that name, as they suddenly sighted the dismaying figure coming down the bank.

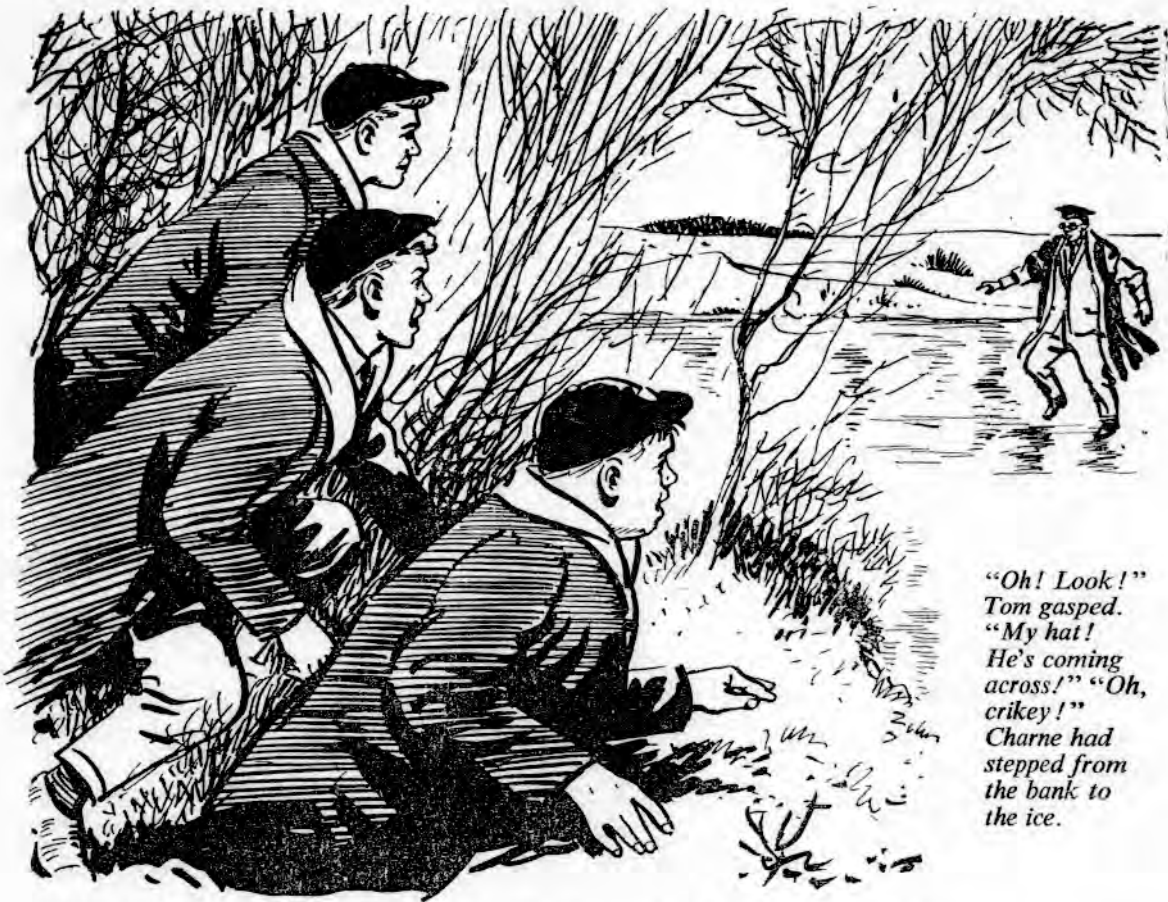
"Copped!" breathed Skip.

"Nailed!" muttered Dick Warren.

But Tom King was quick on the uptake.

"Cut across – quick – into the willows." He shot away, putting the width of the Fenny between him and that dismaying figure on the bank. Warren and Skip shot after him. They were among the frozen willows drooping over the further bank almost in a twinkling. There they gazed anxiously back. Charne had seen them – they knew that. But had he known them? If not, there was a chance yet.

Charne halted, staring across the frozen stream. His wrath, already deep, deepened as he realised that the young rascals were dodging him. If they kicked off their skates, on the further side, and escaped ashore, disappearing among the trees, and getting back to Felgate by a roundabout route, there would be no penalty to pay. They would escape scot-free, laughing in their sleeves. They couldn't be picked out from the dozens of fellows who were out of gates on a half-holiday. Charne's eyes fairly glinted at the idea. That was not going to happen, if Charne could help it.



*“Oh! Look!”
Tom gasped.
“My hat!
He’s coming
across!” “Oh,
crikey!”
Charne had
stepped from
the bank to
the ice.*

“He hasn’t recognised us!” breathed Tom King. “He would have yelled out our names if he had. We’re all right.”

“Keep in cover!” said Warren. “Lots of time to get clear before he can go round by the bridge.”

“Lots!” chuckled Skip. “Charne won’t know a thing – except that some fellows were out on the ice. He can keep on guessing who they were.”

Then Tom gave a jump.

“Oh! Look!” he gasped.

“My hat! He’s coming across.”

“Oh, crikey!”

Charne had stepped from the bank to the ice. He was coming across. They had not expected that. But Charne knew that if he was going to catch those delinquents that was the only way, and he was coming.

“Quick!” breathed Tom.

The skates were off. They were ready to run. There was a chance yet. Under the willows they clambered up the bank.

Crash! smash!

They looked back, in alarm and horror. Charne had disappeared. The three juniors gazed with starting eyes at a gap in the ice, with dark water lapping over its edges. Charne’s foot had slipped on the ice, and he had crashed on it, and whatever the icy crust might have stood otherwise, it could not stand that. Charne was in!

“Oh!” panted Tom. His face was like chalk.

From the dark water, welling in the gap, a drenched head appeared, and two hands clutched at the ice-edge. Charne was holding on, and striving to

climb out, but the brittle edges crumbled in his grasp.

"Oh, crikey!" moaned Skip, through chattering teeth. "He can't get out—he'll drown——"

It was fortunate for Charne, and for all concerned, that Tom King was quick on the uptake! For one moment, he was almost spell-bound with horror, the next, he was breathlessly active. He pointed to a hurdle up the bank.

"Get that, and come after me!" he snapped. Then, sliding, he shot away towards the gap in the crust on the Fenny.

Charne's fingers, almost frozen, were slipping from crumbling ice-edges. There was an ominous crack under Tom, as he reached the gap. He did not heed it. He was on his knees, on the edge, reaching to Charne. That he might have gone in at any moment perhaps did not occur to him; if it did, he did not care. He grasped hold of Charne's hands, and held.

"Hold on, sir! They're coming—just hold on!" he panted.

Charne, in imminent danger of death, was calm. His teeth chattered with the cold, but he spoke quietly:

"Go back, King! The ice may go any moment! Get back."

Tom did not heed. He held on to Charne. There was another crack, and another. But the ice under Tom still held, and he still held Charne. And then, with a slither, Warren and Skip reached them with the hurdle.

Then it was not easy. But the hurdle was pushed across the gap, and with the help of three eager pairs of hands, Charne half-crawled, and was half-dragged, on it. He was almost at the end of his tether. But from the hurdle, he was helped to firmer ice, and some-

how got on his feet. Tottering, but with helping hands, he reached the bank.

IV

"You fellows are for it!"

Study Four did not need telling that. They knew it only too well. For several days, after that wild adventure on the Fenny, Tom King and Dick Warren and Stanley St. Leger Ruggles had the longest faces at Felgate. Other fellows sympathised; even Reece was rather sorry for the scurvy trick he had played, as it had turned out. But everyone agreed that there was no hope for Study Four. Charne was laid up with a severe cold, and what his temper was likely to be like, when he got about again, everyone could guess. Study Four were "for it", and the only question was, how severe would the penalty be? Not only had they disregarded and condemned an order of the headmaster, for which a Head's flogging was due, but their form-master had been endangered; he had been within an ace of going under the ice of the Fenny, and if that did not spell the "sack" for the fellows responsible, what did it spell? Bullinger and Reece and Preece and Parrott and in fact all the Felgate Fourth had no doubt about it—and Study Four could hardly have any doubt. During the days, which seemed very long, while Mr. Charne was laid up with that cold, three hapless fellows could only wonder whether they would be lucky enough to get off with a flogging, or whether it was going to be the "sack".

In such suspense, it seemed to Tom King and Co. about a century, or rather more, before Charne was up again, and they were bidden to his study. They repaired to that apartment with heavy hearts. They found Charne still looking

rather pale, but otherwise his accustomed self. His sharp eyes pin-pointed them as they came sadly into his study.

"King! Warren! Ruggles!" Charne rapped out the names. "You were aware, when you went skating on the Fenny, that your headmaster had posted a special notice placing the river out of bounds."

"Yes, sir!" mumbled the three.

"You disregarded that order?"

"We're sorry, sir."

"Kindly answer yes or no," snapped Charne.

"Yes, sir."

"By this conduct, you endangered your own lives, and mine!"

"We weren't in any danger, sir——" ventured Tom.

"Not when you knelt by that gap in the ice, and held me up from sinking, when the ice might have cracked under you at any moment!" snapped Charne. "Not when you ventured on cracking ice with that hurdle?"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But——"

"But what?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir."

There was a long moment of silence. It seemed very, very long to the three, as they waited to hear their doom. Then, to their astonishment, Charne's grim face melted into something like a smile.

"You deserve the severest punishment," said Mr. Charne. "No doubt you are aware of that. But——"

Never had Study Four been so glad to hear that there was a "but". They hung on Charne's next words.

"But," said Mr. Charne, slowly, "courage is a great thing—a great thing—and it redeems many faults. The courage you showed in coming to my help far outweighs your fault. I shall not take you to the Head! I shall not punish you. I shall dismiss the whole matter, only adding," Charne's voice had become quite gentle, "only adding that I am proud of such courage displayed by boys of my form! You may leave my study!"

For a moment, three juniors gazed at him blankly. The next, they were dancing down the corridor, the three merriest and brightest fellows in all Felgate!

