

CHRISTMAS PRESENT for CHARNE

by Frank Richards



THE cake came in a parcel for Tom King in break on Wednesday morning. Tom, and his chum Dick Warren, unpacked it in Study Four. Skip Ruggles, the third member of that study, was not present. Skip, in class with Charne, had perpetrated one too many of his innumerable howlers, and had been kept in. That was how Skip remained in ignorance of the cake: a blissful state in which his chums, when the great idea about that cake was mooted, sagely decided to let him remain.

It was a Christmas cake: and a very handsome one indeed. Christmas was coming, and Felgate fellows were looking forward to break-up for the holidays. A Christmas cake, in advance of Christmas, seemed to the chums of the Fourth an absolutely sound idea on

the part of an affectionate aunt of Tom's. It was as welcome in Study Four as the flowers in May. Tom King and Dick Warren gazed at that magnificent cake, when the lid was removed from the box, with delighted eyes. Skip, had he been there, would not merely have gazed at it. Skip simply couldn't have kept his plump hands off it. But Skip, down in the form-room, was slowly and painfully getting it into his fat head that "O dea" could not be translated "Oh, dear!" So that Christmas cake was, for the moment, safe from fat fingers.

Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth, had jumped on Skip Ruggles for that howler. Charne was, in fact, jumping on fellows right and left, these days. Charne, never as sweet as sugar, seemed to have turned quite sour. December

had brought a fall of snow, seasonable as Christmastide approached; but unluckily Reece, who was as full of knavish tricks as a monkey, had had the bright idea of catching Charne with a snowball. That snowball had landed in the middle of Charne's features, so obscuring his vision that the daring perpetrator had escaped unseen and undetected. All Charne knew was that some member of his form had snowballed him: and was Charne a beak to be snowballed with impunity? He was not.

Charne was often fierce. Now he was at his fiercest. His pin-point eyes detected the slightest fault of omission or commission. A Fourth-form man could hardly shuffle his feet without getting lines. Detentions fell almost as thickly as the leaves in Vallombros of old. Extra School became a daily experience. All the Fourth knew that they had to follow Agag's example, and walk delicately, till the effect of that snowball wore off. But it did not seem to be wearing off at all.

With a football match due that Wednesday afternoon, it was a worry. Detentions that day would knock Soccer sky-high. And with Charne in his present mood, you never could tell. That was how and why the brilliant idea occurred to Tom King.

"Won't old Skip just love this!" remarked Dick Warren, as he gazed lovingly at that magnificent cake. "Let's begin on it."

Tom King shook his head.

"I've an idea!" he announced.

"Keep it for Skip?" asked Warren.

"No! Keep it for Charne."

"Eh!" Dick Warren gazed in blank amazement at his chum. Tom smiled.

"That's the big idea," he said.

"Chris.mas present for Charne——"

"Oh, scissors!" said Warren. "But ——"

"Old Charne's on the war-path. A fellow can hardly breathe without getting Extra School. He thinks we're all sniggering over that snowball he got in his eye——"

"So we are!" remarked Warren.

"Um! Yes," admitted Tom. "It was funny, if you come to that. But Charne didn't think it funny. He's been like a bear with a sore head ever since. If he came down with detentions in third school today, what about the Soccer? But suppose he found out that fellows in his form like him so much that they give him a Christmas present – think that wouldn't pull him round?"

"Charne's a bit old for cakes——"

"It's the spirit of the thing," said Tom. "When we go into form, we hand him the box, with a few well-chosen words, you know. Won't it take the wind right out of his sails? Might wash that snowball right out. He would simply have to grin instead of scowling, if fellows in his form handed him a Christmas present, with a neat little speech about good wishes and things."

"It's a waste of that topping cake."

"Might not be wasted after all. What's old Charne to do, with a cake? Ten to one, he would shove it on the table in the hall, to go round."

"By gum! You think of everything, Tom!"

"Well, what about it?" asked Tom. "If old Skip saw that cake, he would want to wolf it on the spot. Better not mention it to him. We'll pack it back in the box, tie it up, and leave it here till third school. I'll cut up for it when the bell goes."

"Well, it's not a bad idea, if it pacifies old Charne——"

"It's a jolly good idea, old chap: one of the best. Bet you Charne will be grinning all over his face, instead of looking at a fellow as if he'd like to bite him. Bank on it."

"Okay!" assented Warren. And that magnificent Christmas cake was re-packed in its box, and carefully tied. Then the two juniors went down the stairs, with a cheerful hope of a happier time than usual with Charne. They ran into Skip Ruggles as they came out of the House: Skip had just emerged from the form-room. He gave them a rather dolorous look.

"I say, coming down to the tuck-

shop?" asked Skip.

"No, we're going down to the Fenny for a slide."

"I say, I'm jolly hungry."

"Are you ever anything else?"

"Well, if you've got any tuck——"

"We've got to get down to the Fenny. You come too."

Tom King and Dick Warren cut on. They did not want to discuss tuck with Skip at that particular moment. For once they were keeping a secret from their plump chum. They cut on, leaving Skip to wonder whether he would be able to live through third school that morning without something of an edible and solid nature to pack inside his fat circumference.



"I say, coming down to the tuck-shop?" asked Skip.

Skip stared.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

His fat face registered indignation, as he stood in Study Four, gazing at a totally unexpected sight.

"Well!" breathed Skip. "Well!" But although he said "Well!" twice, his look did not indicate that all was well. Quite the reverse.

His chums having gone down to the Fenny, to slide on the ice, Skip, who had no taste for sliding, had been left on his own. Sliding did not appeal to Skip, especially when he was hungry. There was, so far as he knew, nothing in the study: in fact, his chums had as good as told him they had no tuck. However, in the faint hope that some small item might have been overlooked in the study cupboard, Skip clambered up the stairs to the Fourth-form studies, and rolled into Study Four. Then he saw the box. All the wrappings having been removed, only cardboard enclosed that magnificent cake: and a faint but delicious aroma from it was unmistakable. Amazed, Skip untied the string, lifted the lid, and looked into the box. Then he gazed at that cake.

"Call themselves pals!" breathed Skip.

Indignation made his fat face pink.

Really, it was altogether too thick. It was not what a fellow would have expected from bosom pals. Skip, when he had tuck, keen as he was on devouring it, whacked it out freely in the study. So did Tom King and Dick Warren, as a rule. What was happening now was quite a new departure. Still, there could be no mistake about it. His chums had a cake – a royal, almost imperial cake, and instead of whacking



Skip lifted the cake from the box and started.

it out with Skip, not even offering him a single slice, they were keeping it a secret from him. True, he remembered that they hadn't exactly said that they had no tuck. They had, as he realised, dodged answering the question. This was why – with a lack of friendship that shocked Skip, they were keeping that cake for themselves, leaving Skip Ruggles out of it. As good as pretending that they had no tuck, when they had that magnificent cake!

"Rotten!" said Skip. "Let 'em keep their dashed cake, and be blowed to them! Who wants their cake?"

That, of course, was the dignified line to take. As they were keeping their cake away from Skip, they could jolly well keep it. Stanley St. Leger Ruggles disdaining both them and their dashed cake. But——

But——! Skip was hungry. It was a delicious cake. There was enough of it to fill Skip's extensive circumference to capacity. Gladly would Ruggles of the Fourth have marched out of the study in a mood of lofty disdain. But the lure of the cake was too strong.

He did not march out of the study in lofty disdain. Another idea came into his fat mind, much more pleasing. It chased the frown from his plump brow, replacing it with a grin. So they were hiding their cake from him, were they? Well, suppose they found it gone when they looked for it again? Skip was justly entitled to a whack in that cake. Hadn't he, only the day before, whacked out dough-nuts with King and Warren, dearly as he loved dough-nuts? He had! Lofty disdain was all very well, but Skip was hungry, and he was going to have fair play with that cake: and perhaps a little over, as a just reprisal on fellows letting down a pal like this.

Banishing all thought of lofty disdain, Skip lifted the cake from the box, sorted out a knife, and started.

When he started, he was not quite sure whether he would leave some of the cake for King and Warren, shockingly as they had treated him. But as he proceeded, and found the cake so absolutely delicious, he decided that what they needed was a jolly good lesson, and that he was going to give them one: by finishing the cake.

Few fellows could have finished that cake at a single sitting. But Skip Ruggles was one of the few. He started

at quite a brisk pace. That pace slowed down after a time. But he munched on manfully. By the time he had finished it, Skip, who seldom had enough, felt that for once he had, perhaps, had a little too much. But he was feeling ever so much better; prepared to go through third school with Charne, and wait quite patiently for dinner.

He grinned at the empty box.

The cake was finished. But Skip was not quite finished yet. When those unfaithful chums came for the cake, they were not going to find a cake, but they were going to find a surprise. In a corner of the study cupboard was an old football boot, long disused, and slightly mildewy. Skip sorted it out. He packed it in the cake-box.

Grinning all over his fat face, he replaced the lid, and tied the string as it had been before. The box now looked exactly as it had looked before Skip came up.

Skip chuckled.

He could picture the faces of King and Warren, when they opened the box, expecting to find the cake therein, and found only a mouldy old football boot! Serve them jolly well right! That would be a jolly good lesson to fellows who hid tuck away from a pal!

Skip rolled out of Study Four grinning. He was still grinning, in the quad, when King and Warren came in, a little breathless, from the Fenny, as the bell began to ring for third school: and still grinning when he rolled into Charne's form-room with the Fourth.

III

Mr. Charne frowned.

Charne, who had been so grim, indeed fierce, of late, looked as grim as ever. He really looked as if that

incident of the snowball would never be forgotten, as if, like Juno in the Aeneid, he nursed within him an undying wound. Frowns had come very frequently to that grim brow of late. Now he frowned quite portentously, as his eyes pin-pointed a member of his form coming into the form-room with a box under his arm. Why Tom King was bringing that box in to the lesson, Charne did not know, but he knew that he was not allowing the slightest departure from rule and custom.

“King!” rapped out Charne.

“Yes, sir!” said Tom, meekly.

“What does that mean? What is that box? Are you under the impression, King, that you are permitted to carry all sorts of articles about this form-room?”

“Oh! No, sir! But——”

“Put it out in the corridor at once, and take a hundred lines.”

“If – if you please, sir——”

“That will do, King!”

“But, sir——”

“Silence!”

It was not easy going! But Tom King was not to be deterred. He had cut up to Study Four for that box, and brought it down to the form-room, and he was going to give Charne his Christmas present. Warren gave him an encouraging look. Skip, from his place, a stare, wondering what on earth Tom was up to with that box.

“If you please, sir,” recommenced Tom. “It’s jolly near Christmas, sir——”

“I said silence, King.”

“Yes, sir! But we’ve got a Christmas present for you, sir——”

“What?”

Charne, from his high desk, stared at

Tom King. Just as Tom had predicted, the wind was taken out of his sails. He stared quite blankly, taken quite by surprise. He could not suppose that his recent manners and customs had made him popular in his form. He could not help suspecting that most of the Felgate Fourth would rather have given him a snowball in the eye, or even a jolt on the solar plexus, than a Christmas present. So it was no wonder that he was surprised, and for the moment dumb. In that moment, Tom King advanced to his desk, and laid the box thereon.

“Bless my soul!” said Mr. Charne, breaking his astonished silence.

“I hope, sir, that you will accept this little token of the – the respect and – regard of the form, sir.” Tom had his few well-chosen words all ready. “We – we should be very pleased, sir, if you will accept this little Christmas present from us, sir, with our very best wishes for a happy Christmas.”

Charne’s face relaxed.

He was not frowning now. He actually smiled! He had been severe – possibly a little too severe, with his form: but so far from resenting it, they were presenting him with a token of respect and regard. Charne, who was not really half so hard as he looked, melted.

“Well, well,” he said, “I am afraid that I cannot accept presents from my form, King, but – but——”

“Oh, sir, please do,” pleaded Tom. “I – I think you will like it, sir – it’s rather special, sir! Do please, sir.”

“Well, well, very well, King, as you make a point of it,” said Mr. Charne. “Thank you, my boy. You may untie the string.”

Tom untied the string. Charne was



Tom King advanced to his desk and laid the box thereon.

quite genial now. All, in fact, was calm and bright, and it was evidently all right for the football that afternoon. Charne had been fierce – but that happy thought of a Christmas present had worked the oracle. All the Fourth could see that. Only one fellow – Skip Ruggles – was gazing on in dumb horror.

Charne, still genial, lifted the lid, and looked into the box on his desk. He hardly knew what to expect to see. But whatever he expected to see, it was not a mouldy old football boot!

He gazed at that boot!

Tom, stepping back, was surprised by the change that came over Charne's face. Possibly he did not care for cake, but it was, after all, the spirit of the

thing. What on earth was the matter with Charne?

“Upon my word!” Charne's voice was not genial now. It came like the grinding of a very rusty saw. “Upon my word! King! How dare you?”

“D – d – don't you like it, sir?” faltered Tom.

“How dare you?” The thunder rolled. “You have the audacity – the effrontery – the unheard-of impudence, to bring this wretched, disgusting old football boot here, and give it to me——”

Tom King very nearly fell down in his astonishment.

“Fuf – fuf – fuf – football bub – bub – boot!” He was afflicted with a stutter.



"King! Bend over that chair!"

"I - I don't understand. I - I - I——"

Crash! The box was knocked off the desk by an angry hand. The old boot rolled out of it, on the floor. All the Felgate Fourth jumped at the sight of it. Some of them grinned. Most of them wondered at Tom King's nerve in pulling Charne's leg like this in the form-room. Tom King himself could only stare at the football boot, as if it had been the ghost of a football boot. Up rose Charne in his wrath.

"King! Bend over that chair!"

"I - I - I - I——"

"Instantly."

Whop! whop! whop!

"Now go to your place, King. The whole form will go into Extra School this afternoon. We shall now proceed with the lesson."

They proceeded with the lesson. The atmosphere in the Fourth-form room at Felgate had been considerably electric of late. Never had it been so electric as now. Charne had been fierce. He was now almost ferocious. There was no Soccer that afternoon. There was Extra School - with Charne! And Charne was about as dangerous to come near, as a tiger that had tasted blood!

IV

Skip kept his secret.

Of course, he was sorry about it, as it had turned out. He was very sorry indeed. But when his chums discussed the mystery in Study Four, Skip said no word. Of course they guessed that somebody, somehow, had abstracted the cake and replaced it with the mouldy old boot: that cake hadn't changed into a football boot by black magic! But who? Knowing that Reece was as full of tricks as a monkey, King and Warren decided that as likely as not it was Reece, and they kicked Reece in case it was so. But they never thought of Skip. And Skip, unaccustomed as he was to keeping secrets from his chums, kept that one: for it was almost as much as his fat life was worth to let them know what he had had to do with that Christmas present for Charne.