



Truant's Triumph

By Frank Richards

WATCH me get him!" grinned Skip.

"Chuck it, you ass!" exclaimed Tom King and Dick Warren, simultaneously.

Skip "chucked" it: not in the sense intended by his chums.

"It" was a snowball.

There had been an early fall of snow at Felgate. There was not much of it, but here and there the wind had drifted it under the old oaks, and Skip had scraped up enough to knead a quite substantial snowball. That missile he intended for Selwyn of the Shell. Selwyn was sauntering in the quad, with his hands in his pockets, and his usual air of self-satisfaction, looking rather as if all Felgate belonged to him. To

Skip, it seemed quite an idea to catch him in the ear with a sudden snowball: which would undoubtedly have had the effect of diminishing his self-satisfaction on the spot. Had not Selwyn declared, in the Pound, that he could run any man in the Fourth off his legs, and even challenged Tom King, the captain of the Fourth, to a run across country to put it to the test, and advised his friends to follow on with a hurdle or something to carry their champion home when he conked out? Such swank, in Skip's opinion, was justly rewarded with a snowball in the ear.

So Skip chucked it.

The snowball whizzed, with all the force of a fat arm behind it.

Crash!

Skip was what his friends called cack-handed. If Skip handled a cricket-ball, only the wicket was safe from him. He had no more luck with a snowball. That whizzing missile missed Selwyn and his ear by a good yard, as he strolled under the study windows. He strolled on, not even conscious of a narrow escape. He did not look round till he heard a crash behind him, and even then he did not know that he had been the target.

"Oh!" gasped Skip, in surprise and dismay.

"Oh!" gasped Tom King and Dick Warren, in dismay but not in surprise.

The snowball, whizzing past Selwyn with plenty of impetus, had landed on a study window. There was a gap in that window, and shattered glass flew in all directions within the study. It was Charne's window - and Mr Charne, the master of the Fourth, must have been considerably startled. Certainly he was very considerably annoyed. The sash flew up, and Charne's face appeared at the window, with quite a terrific expression on it. Selwyn strolled on, grinning: but three Fourth-formers were rooted to the spot by Charne's glare.

"King! Warren! Ruggles! How dare you play at snowballing so near the windows of the House?" thundered Charne.

"I - I - I - I never meant - !" stut-tered Skip.

"You have broken this window! Look at it!" The thunder rolled. "I am expecting a visitor this afternoon, and you have smashed my window! Disgraceful! The bill for repairs will be sent to your parents. You will take five hundred lines apiece."

"But, sir - ."

"Silence! Each of you will write five-hundred lines from the Sixth Book of

the Aeneid, and you will remain within gates until you have written them and handed them to me."

"But, sir - !"

"Bah!"

The window slammed shut.

"You ass, Skip!" breathed Tom King.

"You clown!" hissed Warren.

"I - I - I meant it for Selwyn - " mumbled Skip, "I - I don't know how it missed him - !"

"Fathead! Clumsy ass! Shut up! This washes out your run with Selwyn this afternoon, Tom. Boot the silly ass!"

"Here, I say - yoo-hoop!" roared Skip.

Booting Skip Ruggles was only a slight solace. Study Four were gated for the half-holiday that afternoon, and that was that.

II

"HERE, King!"

"Well?"

"Isn't it time you got a move on?"

Eric Selwyn, of the Shell, looked in at the doorway of Study Four in the Fourth, as he asked that question. There was a sarcastic expression on Selwyn's face. He had already changed, and had an overcoat on over his running kit. But there was no sign about Tom King of readiness for a cross-country run.

Study Four, generally as cheery as any at Felgate, had a glum look. Three juniors were seated round the study table, grinding at lines. That grind was scheduled to go on during most of the afternoon. Five hundred lines was a tremendous imposition. From "Sic fatur lacrimans" to "Genus alto a sanguine Teucrici," the hapless three had to grind on, and hand in the result to Charne before they could get out. Selwyn sur-

veyed the busy trio sarcastically. Tom King snapped an answer.

"Nothing doing, Selwyn. The run's washed out. Sorry! Shut the door after you."

"Backing out?" inquired Selwyn.

Tom flushed angrily.

"Can't you see we've got impots?" he snapped, "Charne's got to have his lines. Like me to tell him that he can't have them, because I'm booked to run a swanking ass off his legs?"

"Charne's got his back up," explained Dick Warren, more mildly, "That ass Skip bashed in his study window with a snowball, and he's expecting a visitor this afternoon—I've heard that it's his old tutor from Oxford—some doddering old bean that he's very particular about. A broken window in his study isn't what he wanted for a very special visitor. He lined us all round."

"Fellows have cut, and chanced it before now!" drawled Selwyn. "Look here, King, if you've bitten off more than you can chew, as you jolly well have, why not own up about it. Hiding behind Charne - !"

Tom King's colour deepened to scarlet.

"You silly, cheeky, swanking ass!" he exclaimed, "If you're asking to have your cheeky head punched - ."

"Not at all," drawled Selwyn, "I'm not looking for a row; I'm looking for the fellow who fancied he would keep his end up in a run with me. I'm not holding you to it if it's dawned on you that you haven't an earthly. But don't beat about the bush. If you're backing out, say so."

"I've got to hand in these lines to Charne before I can get out."

Selwyn shrugged his shoulders.

"Any excuse is better than none, I suppose," he said, "Fact is, I hardly

expected you to play up. You're all gas in this study. Back out if you like: but don't tell me funny stories about lines for a beak. That won't wash."

Tom King sat and looked at him, for some moments. Then he laid down his pen, and rose quietly from the table.

"That will do, Selwyn," he said, "I'm coming."

"Sure you don't funk it?" smiled Selwyn.

"Get out before I chuck you out."

"I'll wait for you outside the gates," said Selwyn. "Don't keep me waiting till calling-over."

With that, Eric Selwyn strolled away. Tom King's chums regarded him uneasily. His face was set: he had made up his mind.

"You can't cheek Charne like that, Tom," said Warren, "He would be as mad as a hatter if you cut without doing your lines."

"I'm chancing that," said Tom.

"But - !" bleated Skip.

"You dry up, you fat ass!"

"But if Charne spots you going out - ."

"He won't," said Tom. "I can get changed, and slip out by the back window in the Pound. Charne won't know a thing till afterwards." He reflected for a moment or two. "Mightn't know anything at all, if you help me through, Dick."

"How come?" asked Warren.

"I've done a third of the lines. You carry on from there, after you've done your own. Make your fist as like mine as you can. I'll be back in time to take them in to Charne."

"I'll do that, of course," said Warren, "But - ."

"No time for butting," interrupted Tom, "I'm going to take that swanky ass Selwyn down a peg, Charne or no Charne. But I don't want him marching



me off to the Head, so do your best for me, old chap."

Further argument was cut short by Tom King quitting the study. Skip and Warren were left to their lines. Far from easy in their minds, they settled down again to the grind. But after all, the prospect was hopeful. Tom, they had no doubt, would run Selwyn to a standstill, and take him down the necessary peg. He would be back in time for Charne. Complete impots would be handed in: and Charne would never know that one member of the study had been out at all. With luck, it might be all right with Charne.

But alas for the hopes of Study Four! Half-an-hour later, two pens instead of three were grinding industriously in the study, when a heavy tread came up the

passage to the door. Skip and Warren exchanged a startled glance. They knew that tread! In dismay, they rose to their feet as Mr Charne looked in. Had Charne had doubts about strict obedience to his commands? It looked as if he had! His keen eyes pin-pointed two dismayed juniors.

"Where is King?" Charne's voice was deep.

Silence.

"Has King gone out, in direct disobedience to my order?"

Still silence! But Charne did not need a reply. His lips were set.

"Very well!" said Mr Charne, "When King returns, Warren, you will tell him to come directly to my study, to be taken to his head-master. Dr Leicester



will deal with him for this flagrant disregard of authority.”

Charne, with grim brow, rustled away. He left a silence of utter dismay behind him in Study Four.

III

SELWYN paused – but only for a moment.

He was well ahead. It was a long run, round by High Fell, across Hodden Heath, and home by the Fenny Meadows. It was telling on Selwyn. He had started with unbounded confidence. He had shot ahead, and kept his lead. But on the rugged slopes of High Fell he felt the strain: on Hodden Heath he had to realise that he had bellows to mend:

and he was panting a good deal when he came to the Meadow Brook, with half-a-mile still to go. Tom King, a good distance behind, was not in the least alarmed. He knew that he had much more in hand than his rival, and he was keeping it in reserve for the final spurt – content so far to keep Selwyn in sight. It was at the plank bridge over the brook in the Fenny Meadows that Selwyn came to a momentary pause – only momentary. He had almost reached the plank, when, from the other side, a venerable-looking gentleman, with a rim of silver hair under a top hat, stepped on it. It was not a wide plank – there was little room for two persons to pass one another. At any other time, Selwyn would have stopped, and allowed the old gentleman to cross first and

get clear. But – !

Minutes were too precious now. Already a doubt was in Selwyn's mind: and a vision of grinning faces in the Pound, if he failed to make good his boast. He had to beat Tom King on that run, though the skies fell. Dozens of silver-haired old gentlemen in the way would not have made him throw away a second. There was space – with care – to wind round the old boy on the plank, as he jogged on with slow and cautious tread. Selwyn cut on, brushed past the old gentleman, leaving him rocking, and dashed on by the footpath across the further meadow. He did not waste a backward glance – he scudded on and disappeared, beyond a fringe of willows. He did not hear a light splash, as a top-hat, dislodged as the old gentleman rocked, tipped into the brook.

Tom King came on at a steady pace. He grinned, at the view of a bareheaded old boy on the plank, on his knees, his silvery locks blowing wildly in the winter wind, clutching after a top-hat in the water. He had no time to lose: or he would willingly have stopped to lend a hand in fishing for that hat. But he had to beat Selwyn – after risking it with Charne, he simply had to pull off that run: it would be too utterly rotten to be beaten by that swanking ass after taking such risks. He was not going to stop. He was going to wind round that old boy, as Selwyn had done, though a little more carefully, and leave him to fish for his hat. It couldn't be helped.

Splash!

“Oh!” gasped Tom.

The old boy on the plank had fished for that hat not wisely but too well! Right under Tom's startled eyes, he over-balanced, and went headlong off the plank into Meadow Brook. A suffocated howl reached Tom's ears, as a

silvery head was swept down the stream. In summer time the Meadow Brook was shallow – in the winter it was full to the banks, and ran hard and fast. Tom King ran on the plank, halted, and stared at that silvery head – for a second. Then he put his hands together and dived. The rival run, Selwyn's swank, prospect of a row with Charne – all were forgotten: at the sight of a helpless man drowning under his horrified eyes. There was a second splash in the Meadow Brook, and then Tom's grasp was on the old boy, and the sinking silver head was dragged up from the water.

The next five minutes were hectic. Clutching hands almost dragged Tom King down, as he struggled to the bank with a helpless burden. The water was deep: the current strong. Twice, and thrice, he was at the bank, but the rush of water tore him on. Then, at last, a grasp on a drooping willow gave aid, and Tom dragged himself from the stream, and his burden after him.

They sprawled in the damp grass panting.

But Tom was on his feet again in a few moments. The silver-haired gentleman sat up, gasping and gasping and gasping, and blinking at him with a wet blink.

“All right now, sir!” panted Tom.

“Urrggh! Yes! Thank you, my boy! Urrggh! I might have been drowned! Urrggh. You are a brave lad – urrggh! Good boy – very good boy! Urrggh!”

“There's a farm-house in the next meadow, sir –,” Tom pointed. “They'll let you dry your clothes there – follow that path, through that gap in the hedge – better hurry, or you'll catch cold – good-bye.”

“My dear, brave lad – .”

But Tom was gone. He had lost minutes. In those minutes he had, in all

probability, saved a man's life. But he had no time to listen to thanks. The peril once past, he remembered Selwyn, and Selwyn's swank, and his determination to beat him. Far away across the meadows, Eric Selwyn was little more than a dot, by that time. Tom's jaw set grimly. He had to spurt now, and put in all his reserves; and there was a chance yet.

His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. Slowly, but surely, the distance between them diminished. But Selwyn was still a good thirty yards ahead when he reached the stile on the Hodden road, and Felgate's red roofs were in sight. But he was very nearly all in: and he stopped to lean on the stile and pant for breath. Behind him, Tom King came up like a whirlwind. That spurt was telling on Tom: he was near the end of his tether: but grim determination carried him on. He did not stop at the stile. He cleared it with a bound, passing Selwyn, and shot away down the road. A second later, Selwyn was running hard at his heels. But it was his last effort. When Tom looked back from the school gates, Selwyn was no longer running. He was twenty yards behind, and tottering.

IV

"TOM, old chap!"

Tom grinned breathlessly.

"Okay, Dick. If I've not been missed, it's all right."

Warren and Skip were waiting for him, outside the gates. They hardly wasted a glance on the tottering figure down the road. Selwyn looked like crawling in on his hands and knees - beaten to the wide. He had set out to run Tom King off his legs. Tom had run him

off his own. That was satisfactory, so far as it went. But they had bad news for the victor.

"Come in, old chap," said Warren, "No need to climb in where you got out - Charne knows."

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

"He came up to the study!" said Skip, dolefully, "You're to go to him, Tom. And - and - and you're booked for the Head!"

Tom King drew a deep breath. He had chanced it, and the chance had gone against him. He had called the tune, and he had to pay the piper! He had to go to Charne - Charne in his grimmest mood! - and then - the Head! It was a hard knock. But Tom could take it on the chin.

"I'm for it, then," he said, quietly, "Well, Charne will have to wait till I've had a rub down, at any rate. Let's get in."

He went in with his chums.

It was considerably later that he made his way to Charne's study. But he had to go, and at last, he went. Reluctantly, but inevitably, he arrived at the dreaded door. It was half-open, and there was a sound of voices in the study. Charne was speaking.

"My dear Professor, you are sure that you feel no ill effects?"

Tom paused. He remembered that Charne had a visitor that afternoon - some old tutor from Oxford, or something of the kind. That visitor, evidently, had now arrived, and Charne wouldn't want to be interrupted by a delinquent junior. It was a chance to put off the evil hour! Almost he decided to postpone his call on Charne. But he shook his head. He had to go through with it, and it was better to get it over. He tapped at the door and stepped in.

Two sharp eyes pin-pointed him as he

did so. Charne, a moment before, had been looking quite amiable, no doubt for the benefit of his visitor. But he did not look amiable now. He frowned thunderously.

"King! So you have returned! Professor, you will excuse me for a few minutes – a matter of discipline –."

Charne was interrupted.

A figure rose from an armchair.

It was that of a silver-haired old gentleman, at whom Tom King stared with popping eyes. He had seen that silvery top-knot before!

"Bless my soul! That is the boy!" exclaimed the Professor.

"The boy!" repeated Charne, blankly.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Tom King.

"The boy I have told you about, Charne – that good boy – that brave lad – who saved me from drowning –."

"Eh?"

"I had no idea that he was a Felgate boy. Is he in your form, Charne? You should be proud of such a lad in your form, my dear fellow. How glad I am to see you again, you dear brave lad, and to thank you –."

Charne stared from one to the other. But he assimilated it.

"Oh! The boy – then – then it was you, King –."

"Yes, sir!" gasped Tom.

There was a moment's pause. But only a moment's. Then Charne spoke again, in a milder voice than Tom had ever heard before from his form-master.

"Very well! In the circumstances, King, you are excused for your unruly conduct this afternoon. You may leave my study, King."

Tom King had come up the corridor to Charne's study, slowly, reluctantly, and despondently. He went down it again almost dancing.

THE END