



by Frank
Richards

Skip the fighting man

SKIP cut in at the gateway. He cut in so suddenly, and so swiftly, that he cannoned into Twist, of the Shell, without seeing him. Both of them tottered from the collision.

"Oh! Sorry!" gasped Skip.

"You clumsy fat ass!" spluttered Twist.

"Sorry! It's that brute Chucker - I just dodged him!" gasped Skip.

The next moment, a figure appeared from the road, grinning in at the gate. It was that of a burly youth with a pug nose and a bulldog jaw. But Master Chucker did not follow Skip in. He contented himself with grinning at the breathless Skip, and then slouched on his way and disappeared.

Skip Ruggles panted for breath.

"He jolly nearly had me, Twist," he

said, "Sorry I barged you - ."

"Funk!" said Twist.

Skip crimsoned.

"Who's a funk?" he hooted.

"You are! Bolting from a village lout!" said Twist, disdainfully. "Bolting like a fat rabbit - ."

"He's too big for me," hooted Skip, indignantly. "Twice my size! Think I wanted my head smacked when I couldn't do anything about it? You'd jolly well have bolted, Twist, and you jolly well know it."

Which was probably true. Twist of the Shell was rather an aggressive fellow, given to throwing his weight about among the fags. He would cuff Boot of the Third, or Sykes of the Second, from sheer arrogance. In fact he bore a strong resemblance, in his manners

and customs, to the redoubtable Chucker, who was the terror of small boys in Fell and Hodden. Often Twist was in a row, and sometimes in a scrap, but never with a fellow like Tom King or Dick Warren or Reece: he preferred easier game. It was extremely probable that, had the burly Chucker borne down on him in the road, he would have dodged in at the gate just as hurriedly as Skip Ruggles had done. But he did not like being told so.

"Funk!" was his retort to Skip.

Skip breathed wrath. Really and truly, Skip was no funk. It was only common sense to dodge a bullying fellow who could have knocked him into a cocked hat with one hand, almost with one finger. And that he was no funk, Skip demonstrated the next moment.

Smack!

Twist tottered again, as a fat hand contacted his features. The next moment, he fairly hurled himself at Skip. Another moment, things would have been as bad for Skip as if he had stayed outside the gates and let Chucker do his worst, for he was of no more use in Twist's hands than in Chucker's. But at that exciting moment came an interruption.

"Here! Stop that! Do you hear?"

It was Langdale of the Sixth, the captain of Felgate. He came striding up with a frowning brow. Langdale's word was law. Twist's fists, about to crash on Skip, dropped.

Langdale gave them both a glare.

"Any more of this, and I'll have you both up in my study for six!" he snapped. And the great man walked on, leaving the two juniors glaring at one another, but quite reduced to order.

"You fat funk!" breathed Twist, "I'll give you smacking my face. After tiffin behind the gym - Langdale won't spot us there. If you funk turning up, I'll

come looking for you, you fat worm."

"I'll turn up all right," snapped Skip, defiantly.

"Mind you do."

With that, Twist stalked away, rubbing the cheek contacted by the fat hand. And Skip rolled on to the House, not in a happy mood: booked for a scrap with Twist of the Shell, who could make rings round him almost as easily as Chucker could have done.

II

"COME on!" said Tom King.

"But - !" bleated Skip.

"This way!" said Dick Warren.

"But I tell you - ."

"March!" said King and Warren together.

Skip had to march. He had no choice in the matter, with his devoted chums linking arms with him on either side. He objected. He protested. He wriggled. But he had to march.

It was a half-holiday at Felgate. Tom King and Dick Warren were going to walk over to Hodden, across the heath, to watch a Ramblers' match there. It was rather a long walk: and, in ordinary circumstances, Skip Ruggles would not have joined in it - an armchair in Study Four, or a stool in the tuck-shop, being more in Skip's line than a long walk on little plump legs. But the circumstances that afternoon were not ordinary. Skip had to meet Twist of the Shell behind the gym that afternoon. His chums had been dismayed by the news. They knew, as indeed Skip himself knew, that he hadn't an earthly with Twist. Twist was going to punch him right and left, and enjoy it. Twist was the kind of fellow to enjoy an easy victory over an adversary who hadn't an earthly. Nor was he a fellow to



spare the punches in such a case. Skip was, in fact, going to play the part of a punch-ball, so long as he stood up to it: and Skip, who really was as plucky as he was plump, resolute not to give in so long as he could stand, was quite certain to be reduced to a state of gasping wreckage. Which did not seem good enough to his comrades in Study Four.

That was why they were taking Skip for that walk to Hodden. Twist could wait behind the gym as long as he liked, while Skip was watching the Ramblers' match at Hodden with his friends. King and Warren were quite determined that that unequal combat would not take place. And if Twist, as he had threatened, came looking for Skip afterwards, they were prepared to give him a lesson on the subject of bullying smaller boys: but they were not, in any circumstances, going to let him lay a fin-

ger on Ruggles.

That, to King and Warren, seemed a satisfactory solution. It did not seem so to Skip. Skip objected strongly. Skip wasn't going to be looked after like this, if he could help it. The fighting blood of the Ruggleses boiled at the idea. Only - he couldn't help it.

"I'm going to fight him!" hissed Skip, for the umpteenth time, as his friends walked him along the road over the heath.

"You're jolly well not," said Tom.

"He called me a funk!" hissed Skip.

"I'll call him one, next time I see him," said Warren.

"I'll do the same," said Tom. "Then he can scrap with one of us, if he's so keen on scrapping. You can keep time old chap."

"Will you leggo my arms?" yelled Skip.

“No!”

And they didn't! Skip's fat arms were still linked, when they walked into Hodden. There was no escape for the warlike Skip – so far! But he was only biding his time. It was a good Soccer game at the Ramblers' ground, and quite exciting to watch. It was only natural that King and Warren, both keen footballers, watching an exciting game, became a little negligent of their charge. They did not notice, at the moment, when Skip quietly slipped away, backing into the crowd: and when they looked round for him, he had vanished.

“That ass!” said Tom.

“That fathead!” said Warren.

But it was futile to think of hunting for him in the crowd. Unwillingly, but inevitably, they had to leave Skip to his own devices.

Skip's devices led him back to the Hodden road, at a trot. But trotting did not agree with a fellow who had as much weight to carry as Skip. Half-a-mile out of Hodden, he slowed to a walk: and then to a crawl. However, he was heading for Felgate, and when he arrived at long last, he was going to show that swob Twist whether he funk'd him or not. But –

But then Chucker happened.

III

CHUCKER chuckled.

Chucker was sprawling on a wayside seat, smoking a cigarette. He grinned, and he chuckled, as he watched a little fat figure coming down the road. Chucker was a big, hulking fellow, as hefty as a Sixth-Form senior of Felgate. He had a “down” on Felgate fellows, whom he regarded as “swanky”. He never lost an opportunity of ragging a Felgater when he chanced on one of

them. That morning, Skip had barely eluded him, cutting in at the school gates. Now the same little fat fellow was walking fairly into his hands. Chucker had nothing to do that afternoon, and he was quite pleased to see Skip turn up to provide him with a little entertainment. Skip did not notice him till he was quite near. Then Chucker tossed away the stump of his cigarette, jumped up from the bench, and lounged into his way. Skip came to a dismayed halt, Chucker grinned at him.

Tom King and Dick Warren had – so far – saved Skip from Twist's punches. But they had, so to speak, landed their fat chum out of the frying-pan into the fire. For Chucker was ever so much more formidable than Twist. If Skip hadn't an earthly with Twist, he hadn't the ghost of an earthly with Chucker. If Chucker chose to sit him down in the roadside ditch, there was nothing to stop him.

Skip, dismayed, halted, and backed away. Chucker followed him up, grinning. He commenced operations by snatching off Skip's cap. Skip panted.

“Gimme my cap, you lout!” he howled.

“Go and fetch it!” suggested Chucker: and he tossed the cap into the ditch. It splashed in muddy water.

Skip rushed after it, to rescue it before it soaked and sank. Chucker, hugely amused, let out a foot after him, landing it on plump trousers. Skip sprawled headlong.

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared Chucker.

Chucker, having enjoyed his spot of fun with a Felgater, would have left it at that. But Skip did not leave it at that. The blood of the Ruggleses was up. He scrambled to the ditch, grabbed the cap and jerked it out, dripping. Then he whirled round on Chucker, and hurled the cap, wet and muddy,

into his grinning face.

"Oooooogh!" spluttered Chucker, as he received it full on his pug features. It smothered his unprepossessing face with wet mud.

So far, Chucker had been amused. Now he was not amused at all. He was furious. He dabbed mud from his eyes and nose, and rushed at Skip. The next moment the hapless Skip was in a mighty grasp, and a large and heavy hand was smacking his head right and left.

Skip struggled frantically, twisted and wriggled, yelled and roared. He landed two or three punches, which Chucker hardly noticed. The smacks descended like hail, and his fat head fairly rang with them.

Neither of them, so hotly occupied, heard or heeded the whirr of a bicycle on the road, coming from the direction of Felgate School. But the cyclist, Langdale of the Felgate Sixth, saw, and immediately heeded, the scene ahead of him – a Felgate junior struggling and yelling in the grasp of a hefty hooligan. He put on a burst of speed and came whizzing up. He jumped down, leaving his bike to curl to the roadside, and jumped into the unequal fray. A grip on the back of his collar dragged Chucker away from Skip.

Skip, dazed and dizzy, stood tottering, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels. Chucker turned on his assailant like a tiger. Chucker was rather a ruffian, but there was no yellow streak in him as there was in Twist of the Shell. The big Sixth-former of Felgate was fully his match, and a little over: but Chucker piled in with right and left, regardless.

Skip, panting, watched with bulging eyes.

It lasted five minutes. Langdale handled his man not with ease, but quite

effectively. He was as big and strong as Chucker, and he was a good boxer, which Chucker was not. Chucker, game to the last, stood up to it so long as he could stand at all, and the punishment he received, in those five hectic minutes, was simply terrific. Finally, a jolt on the chin that came like the kick of a mule, laid him on the earth, and he stayed there. He contrived to sit up, but he could get no further: and he sat rocking, clasping his chin with both hands: licked to the wide, and utterly down and out.

Langdale wiped a trickle of red from his nose, and looked down at him.

"Had enough?" he asked, politely.

"Ooooh! You keep off!" moaned Chucker. He rocked and moaned.

"Okay! Keep clear of Felgate kids after this, that's all." Langdale picked up his bike, and glanced at Skip. "You're all right now, kid – I've got to get on to Hodden. Cheerio!"

Langdale remounted his machine, and disappeared up the road to Hodden in a cloud of dust. Skip was left rubbing his head, and blinking at Chucker. Chucker did not heed him. There was no more trouble to come from Chucker. In his present state, even Skip could have handled him with one hand. He caressed his chin, his nose, and his eye, in turn, rocked, and moaned, and looked likely to continue so to do for quite a long time to come, while Skip rubbed a dizzy head.

It was then that Twist of the Shell came up the road.

Twist had waited behind the gym in vain. Later, learning that Skip Ruggles had gone out of the gates, Twist had come out to look for him, as he had threatened to do if Skip did not turn up. Now he had found him – in very unexpected circumstances. Twist fairly jumped at what he saw – Skip standing rub-



ing his head, Chucker sitting rocking and moaning, with a streaming nose and a blackening eye and a lump on his chin: evidently thrashed to a frazzle. There was no one else on the spot: Langdale had long disappeared. There was only one conclusion that Twist could draw, Skip Ruggles had licked Chucker! He must have developed fighting qualities of which Twist had never dreamed: but there it was – he had done it! – Twist had to believe the evidence of his eyes!

To Skip's surprise, Twist did not stop. He guessed that Twist had come out looking for him: but now that he had found him, he did not seem to want him. He walked on, and he walked quite quickly: and Skip was left to tramp his homeward way to Felgate, rubbing his head as he went.

IV

“YOU ass!”

“You clown!”

Tom King and Dick Warren made those remarks. On their return to the school, they found Skip Ruggles in Study Four. They regarded him anxiously. Skip had dodged them at Hodden, and they knew why. It had worried them – to such an extent that they had not stayed to see the Ramblers' match through, but left before the finish. But they fully expected to find him in a battered, shattered, wrecked and havocked state, after Twist of the Shell had done with him. It was a relief to note that he showed no such signs. Skip looked tired, sprawling in the study armchair, but that was all. Apparently he had not, after all, encountered Twist's punches. He blinked rather morosely at his chums as they told him what they thought of him.

“You can call a fellow names,” said

Skip. "But you're jolly well not going to butt in. I dodged you to get back to fight Twist, but he was out of the gates, and I've been waiting to hear from him. When he comes in - ."

"Thank goodness he was out," said Tom, "He won't be long coming in - we passed him just down the road. If he comes up here - ."

"He will!" said Skip. "He said he would, and he jolly well will. He fancies I funk him, because I didn't turn up behind the gym. All your fault! I'll show him whether I funk him or not."

"If he comes up here, we'll scrag him!" said Warren.

Skip glared.

"Now, let's have this clear!" he said, "You've made me look a funk, marching me off like that when I was booked for a scrap. Think I'm going to let my pals protect me as if I were a baby? Think I'd ever hear the end of it from Twist, and from the other fellows, too? I know you meant well, but you've made me look a funk, and if you butt in again, I'll jolly well change out of this study, and never speak to either of you again. Mind, I mean that! If we're going to stay friends, you've got to steer clear, and leave me alone to fight that bully. I know he can lick me, but I'll jolly well give him a few good ones for himself, all the same. Why, I'd rather he punched me into little bits than back out. Wouldn't you fellows feel the same?"

King and Warren exchanged glances. No doubt they would have felt the same, in Skip's place. They realised that it had to be! Their well-meant intervention had only exasperated Skip, and postponed the inevitable.

"But - !" said Tom, slowly.

"But - !" said Warren.

"You can chuck butting, and leave me alone!" said Skip, "I can take a

licking, I suppose. Think I'm made of putty? Will you keep clear or not?"

"Yes, if you like," said Tom: and Dick Warren nodded. Skip, undoubtedly, had a right to stand up for himself. They had to admit that right: and contemplate, sadly, the prospect of poor old Skip being ruthlessly battered and shattered by Twist's unsparing fists.

There was rather a harassed silence in Study Four. It was broken by the sound of footsteps coming to the door.

That door opened, and Twist of the Shell appeared.

Tom King clenched his hands. So did Dick Warren. But they unclenched them again. Skip sat up in the armchair, and glared defiance at Twist. Then he rose briskly to his feet.

"Ready, Twist!" he snapped, "I was ready for you when you passed me on the Hodden road, if you come to that. I'm ready for you now. It wasn't my fault I missed you behind the gym. These fellows walked me off. But I'm jolly well here now, and I'm jolly well ready for you, you swob."

What came next was a surprise. It made Skip stare. It made Tom King and Dick Warren blink. It was so very unexpected. They did not know, and could not guess, the conclusions Twist had drawn from what he had seen on the Hodden road. They could not dream that he believed, without a doubt, that Skip had thrashed the redoubtable Chucker, and that the prospect of being reduced to a state like Chucker's made him turn cold all over. So they were simply astonished.

"I - I say, I'm sorry!" stammered Twist.

"Nothing to be sorry about," snapped Skip. "You've been looking for me - well, here I am, you bullying rotter. I'll show you whether I funk you."

"I - I mean - I - I'm really sorry!"

stammered Twist, "I - I haven't come here for a row Ruggles - I'm sorry I called you a funk this morning and - and it served me jolly well right to have my face smacked for it. I - I just looked in to - to - to apologise, old fellow. Let's wash it out, and - and say no more about it, old chap. A fellow can't do more than apologise, can he?"

"Oh!" gasped Skip. He was too amazed to say more. "Oh!"

"It's all right, isn't it?" asked Twist, anxiously.

"Oh! Yes, if you like."

Twist, with evident relief in his face, drew the door shut, and went down the passage. He left a silence of amazement behind him in Study Four.

"Well, my old hat!" said Tom King, at last, "That beats it."

"It does!" said Warren, "The fellow's a funk, but why does he funk Skip, who couldn't hurt him more than a fly?"

"Goodness knows!" said Tom. "Thank goodness it's called off, any-

way - you've had a narrow escape, Skip."

"Oh have I?" yapped Skip, "I don't know so much about that! I might have licked him - ."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

That burst of laughter indicated how likely Skip's chums thought it that he might have licked Twist! However, it was not going to be put to the test now: though why Twist had changed his mind, so completely and drastically, Study Four were left guessing.

SKIP RUGGLES had no more trouble with Twist of the Shell. Twist did not change his manners and customs - he would still cuff Boot of the Third, or chase Sykes of the Second down a corridor. But he was careful to keep out of the way of Stanley St Leger Ruggles: and when he did chance to encounter him, he was very civil indeed to Skip the Fighting Man!

THE END