



CHAPTER I

SKIP WAS to blame, of course. It was Skip's fault.

That was nothing new. If ever anything went wrong in Study Four, in the Fourth Form at Felgate, it was generally if not always Skip's fault. Skip Ruggles was born to bungle, as the sparks fly upwards.

Skip protested that it was not his fault at all. How could a fellow help losing his train, when that ruffian Bullinger actually tipped him off at the last minute? Skip, who sat down on the platform with a bump that almost shook Hodden railway station to its foundations, expected sympathy from his chums. He did not get very much. His mishap caused Tom King and Dick

Warren to lose the train too: and that was how the spot of trouble about Study Four started.

On the first day of term, there was always a crowd at Hodden, where you changed trains for Fell, and Felgate School. Felgate fellows of all forms swarmed, and those who did not get seats in the first train had to wait for the second. Nobody, of course, wanted to wait for the second train, and sometimes there was a good deal of pushing and shoving. A great man like Langdale of the Sixth, captain of Felgate, could stroll to the train in the most leisurely manner: prefects like Denver and Loring and Paynter did not need to push or to shove: big Fifth-form men like Perkinson and Purrings shouldered juniors out of their way without ceremony. But the smaller fry rushed for places, bagged them when they could, and got excited when they couldn't.

Tom King and Dick Warren were not going to wait for that second train. They were rather important members of the Fourth—Tom, in fact, captain of the form. They bagged seats in a full carriage, and bagged one also for Skip Ruggles. But Skip had fallen behind in the race, and was not even in sight on the crowded platform when they looked back for him. Guessing that the fat Skip had dodged into the buffet for something to eat on the last lap of the journey to Felgate—Skip was always thinking of something to eat!—they resolved to kick him when he did arrive: but in the meantime they kept that corner seat for him.

Keeping a seat empty on an over-crowded train was not easy. Other fellows claimed it, and did not seem to like taking "No!" for an answer. Reece and Preece of the Fourth planted themselves at the carriage door and argued the point, warmly, indeed angrily. But it booted not: Tom King and Dick Warren, in the doorway, guarded that seat as faithfully as Horatius guarded the bridge in the brave days of old. Reece and Preece were still arguing the point, with growing emphasis and excitement, when at length Skip Ruggles appeared in the offing, with a smear of jam on his fat face, and a paper bag in his plump hand: just as the train was about to start.

But he was a long way down the platform, and had simply no chance of doing the distance and reaching his chums. So he rushed for the nearest carriage, in which Bullinger and seven or eight other fellows were packed. Plump as he was, Skip might have squeezed in: but Bullinger coolly tipped him back, and Skip, instead of pushing into the carriage, sat on the platform.

He sat suddenly and hard, with a loud yell.

"Oh, that ass!" exclaimed Tom King.

"That fathead!" exclaimed Dick Warren.

At the risk, or rather the certainty, of losing that train, they jumped out to dash to Skip's aid. The moment they were out of the carriage, Reece and Preece shot into it, and banged the door after them. They had caught the train after all.

Tom King and Dick Warren had lost it. By the time they reached the

breathless, spluttering Skip, and heaved him to his feet, the train was in motion. Bullinger grinned and waved a hand from his window. From another window Reece and Preece grinned. Tom King and Dick Warren looked at Skip, as he gasped for breath, as if they could have eaten him. A good many other fellows had lost that train, it was true: but that was no consolation.

"You fathead!" said Tom.

"You born idiot!" said Warren.

"I—I say, we've lost the train!" gasped Skip.

"Just found that out?" asked Dick Warren, sarcastically. The guard's van was disappearing down the line. "Why couldn't you keep with us, you owl?"

"I—I—I—I!" gasped Skip.

"Half-an-hour to wait for the next!" said Tom King. "All Skip's fault."

"That brute Bullinger tipped me off—"

"We had a seat for you along the train—"

"Well, I—I was delayed, you know—you know how slow they are serving you in the buffet—"

"You didn't stop to scoff anything?" asked Warren, still sarcastic. "Did that jam smear itself on that Guy Fawkes mask you call a face?"

"Well, I might have had a tart or two—or—perhaps three—but—"

"What have you got in that bag?"

"Oh!" said Skip. He had recovered his breath a little, and the thought of what he had in the bag seemed to cheer him. "I say, I've got some jam tarts in this bag. Look here, let's find a seat and—and eat them while we wait for the next train—that will be all right, won't it?"

It was all right from the fat Skip's point of view. They had lost the train: but they had the jam-tarts! The world went very well, for Skip Ruggles, when there were jam-tarts.

Tom King and Dick Warren did not seem to think that it was all right. True, just then they did not foresee, or think of, the consequences that were to accrue from losing that train. But they had lost it, and they were not going to arrive at Felgate in the first flight. They were left behind, like inconsiderable fellows such as Sleake of the Fourth or Boot of the Third. They were not to be placated by jam-tarts.

"Hand me that bag!" said Warren.

"Here you are!" answered Skip, unsuspectingly. He handed the paper bag to Dick Warren.

"Hold his ears, Tom!" said Warren. "Hold his ears, while I plaster him with his measly jam-tarts."

"Oh I say!" gasped Skip. "I—I—leggo—keep off—I say—ooooch!"

Skip liked jam-tarts. But he liked them internally, not externally. Externally, even Stanley St. Leger Ruggles found them horrid.

A jammy Skip gasped and spluttered in indignant wrath. Fellows up and down the platform howled with laughter as Skip, with a fat face plastered

with jam and pastry, rushed away to get a very necessary wash. He was very red, and very indignant, when he rejoined his friends. There was plenty of room on the second train, and the three chums of Study Four packed into it, and rolled on to Felgate—little dreaming of what was awaiting them there.

CHAPTER II

REECE GRINNED.
Preece chuckled.

Both of them seemed highly amused.

Reece and Preece, of the Felgate Fourth, were not really very nice fellows. Reece was as sharp as a needle, and if ever there was some little advantage to be taken of some other fellow, Reece was the man to take it. Reece knew all the rules by heart, studying them with a view to breaking them whenever the same could be done with impunity. Reece was, in fact, as cunning as a fox, which did not make him very popular in his form. Preece always followed his lead, which was useful, for Preece was a burlier fellow, and packed a useful punch, and Reece was not of much use with his hands.

Last term they had shared No. 5 Study, which was a small room with a tiny window, the least desirable of all the Fourth-form studies: but quite good enough, in the general opinion, for fellows like Reece and Preece. Generally a fellow took up his quarters in his old study as a matter of course. So it was rather unusual for Reece to be grinning, and Preece chuckling, in Number Four. But it was in Number Four, which belonged to King and Warren and Skip, that they were now grinning and chuckling.

Looking from the window, they could see King and Warren and Skip in the quad, among the late arrivals. And the sight of them seemed to amuse Reece and Preece. It was a bay window—Number Four was the only study in the Fourth that had a bay window, and a comfortable window-seat in the bay. It looked out on the Felgate quad, which was another advantage, and it was roomier than most of the other studies. Altogether, it was very much preferable to No. 5. There was ample room for three fellows in No. 4: while in No. 5 there was none too much for two. A change of studies would have been a boon to Reece and Preece, though the reverse to Tom King and Co.

"There they are!" grinned Reece.

"Too jolly late!" chuckled Preece.

"Sort of!" agreed Reece.

"There'll be a row!" remarked Preece. "I say, you're sure you've got it right, Reecey?"

"Right as rain!"

"Fellows usually take their old studies—"

"I know! But they needn't!" said Reece, coolly. "Nobody's study belongs to him after the term's end. First in the field has the choice of studies, in the new term. That's the rule, and has always been. Think I don't know the rules?"

"Yes: but—!"

"I've spoken to Charne. We're within our rights, but it's safest to have beak's leave too."

"They'll kick—!"

"Let them!"

"I mean, suppose they pitch us out on our necks? They could, the three of them," said Preece, a little dubiously.

Reece shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"They can't kick against Charne! As we applied for the study first, he said yes, without even thinking about it. He can't go back on it."

"Here comes somebody!" said Preece, hurriedly, as there were footsteps in the passage.

Tom King appeared in the open doorway of the study. He came in, without even noticing that it was occupied, and slammed a bag on the table. Then he stared at the two fellows who had turned round from the window.

"Hallo! What are you fellows doing here?" he asked. Tom was not on the best of terms with Reece and Preece, and the argument at Hodden Station had not poured oil on the troubled waters: so he was surprised to find them in his study.

"Oh, we're just fixing up our study, you know," answered Reece, carelessly.

Tom King stared.

"Your study?" he repeated.

"Just so!" Reece nodded. "Ours this term! Mind?"

"Well, yes, I do mind, just a little," said Tom. "This happens to be my study—"

"Last term isn't this term!" Reece reminded him.

"What difference does that make?"

"Lots!"

Tom King stood silent for a moment, looking at them. It dawned upon his mind that Reece and Preece were taking advantage of their earlier arrival to bag his study. The captain of the Fourth was not likely to stand for that.

"Mind getting out of my study?" he asked at length.

"Ours!" said Reece.

"I've heard that one! Now get out."

"You don't seem to catch on, King," said Reece, patiently. "First in the field has first choice. That's the rule—"

"Never mind the rule! Get out."

"We've chosen this study, and we're sticking to it," said Preece. "If you wanted it this term, you should have turned up on time to claim it."

"Exactly!" said Reece. "Take that bag away with you, King."

The captain of the Fourth breathed hard.

"I'm keeping my temper," he said. "I don't want to start the term with a row. But this is my study, and you fellows are getting out of it. Are you going on your feet or on your necks?"

Preece pushed back his cuffs, apparently in readiness for hostilities. Reece backed a little behind him. Reece's favourite weapon was cunning: and knuckles had no appeal for him.

Tom King also pushed back his cuffs. No doubt Reece, in a legalistic way, had a good claim: but fellows did not do these things. Tom King would never have thought of bagging Reece's study, if it had been as roomy and commodious as the Head's study itself. Reece was the fellow to look out some obscure rule and take advantage of it. Tom was not. But Tom was not the fellow to have his study bagged, as the glint in his eyes revealed very plainly.

"Going?" he asked.

"Not so's you'd notice it!" jeered Preece.

"I fancy I can handle you, Preece," said Tom, "and Reece thrown in won't make much difference. I'm chucking you out if you don't clear. Now, then!"

"This is our study this term—!" said Reece.

"That will do! Are you going?"

"We've asked Charne—"

"Never mind Charne! Get out."

"Rats!" said Preece.

That did it! Tom King came across the study with a rush, and there was war. Preece put up quite a respectable scrap, but he was no match for the captain of the Fourth. Reece lent him but feeble aid: a back-hander sent him tottering across the room to the window-seat, where he sat down very suddenly—and stayed.

Preece whirled in Tom's grasp, and whizzed through the doorway. It was exactly like Skip Ruggles to arrive at the study that very moment. The fat Skip was about to step in, when Preece whizzed out, and there was a terrific crash, as they met.

"Whooooooh!" roared Skip. He staggered across the passage, while Preece rolled at his feet.

Tom King turned to Reece, in the study. Reece, sitting breathless in the window-seat, found that he had breath enough to jump up and bound for the door. It was a rapid bound, and Reece was inches ahead of Tom King's foot as he flew into the passage. There he stumbled over the sprawling Preece, and came down on him with a heavy thud.

"Oooogh!" moaned Preece.

Skip stared at both of them, and then at Tom King, looking out of the doorway. He spluttered for wind.

"I say—!" gasped Skip.

"Help me kick them down the passage," said Tom.

"Oh, all right."

Skip did not yet know in what manner Reece and Preece had offended. But he was an obliging fellow, and did as his chum requested, helping to kick Reece and Preece down the passage. They disappeared yelling. When Dick Warren came up to the study, he found his friends in possession there; and none of the three expected to hear any more from Reece and Preece about the ownership of that study. But it was the unexpected that was scheduled to happen.



He stumbled and came down on him.

CHAPTER III

MR. CHARNE, master of the Felgate Fourth, looked in at the doorway of the Pound, an hour or two later. The Pound, the apartment where Lower boys most did congregate, was crowded. There was often a good deal of noise on the first day of term, before fellows had settled down to the collar, as it were: and there was a good deal in the Pound when Charne looked in. Charne rapped out a name unheard. Many fellows in the Fourth were discussing the affair of Study Four. Public opinion in the form was largely on the side of Tom King and Co. Reece, with his sharp ways, was too much of a lawyer for the taste of most Felgate juniors. Bullinger and Carton inclined to his side, chiefly because they were "up against" the captain of the form on principle: almost all the rest backed the claim of Tom King and Co. to their old study. And in fact Bullinger expressed himself so emphatically on Reece's side, that Tom King and Dick Warren were in the very act of banging his head on the table, when their form-master looked into the room: a sight that did not please Charne. Nor was Charne at his bonniest on the first day of term. There were too many spots of bother in the first day for any form-master to be at his bonniest.

"King!" he rapped out, a second time.

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom. This time he heard the rap, and released Bullinger as suddenly as if Bullinger had all at once become red-hot. "Yes, sir."

Charne frowned at him.

"You are captain of my form, King! You should be keeping some sort of order here, even on the first day of term!" he rapped.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" Tom King mentally promised Bullinger another bang on the table later: but for the moment, he tried to look as if banging a fellow's head was the last thing of which he would have thought.

"I came here to speak to you, King," said Mr. Charne, still frowning.

"Yes, sir!" murmured Tom, meekly.

"I understand, King, that you have taken possession of Number Four study, which was claimed by two other boys in the form immediately on their arrival here, and which was assigned to them"

"Oh!" breathed Tom.

Dick Warren looked serious, Skip dismayed. Evidently, Reece had taken his tale of woe to Charne, and the "beak" was intervening.

"It's our old study, sir!" ventured Warren.

"That is immaterial, Warren."

"But, sir——"

"You need not speak, Warren. I am addressing King."

"I say, sir——!" bleated Skip.

"You may be silent, Ruggles. Number Four Study was assigned to Reece and Preece, and unless you have already found other quarters, King, you will take No. 5."

Tom was silent, with deep feelings. The Co. had been too sure of possession of their old study to think of looking for other quarters. All the studies were booked by this time, and nothing was left but Reece's old study—the most undesirable in the passage.

"Did Reece tell you that he had my permission to take Number Four Study, King?"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" It was not to be denied. Reece certainly had mentioned it, though Tom had not heeded him. He realized now that this would annoy Charne, if it came to his ears—as clearly it had!

"In spite of this, King, you seem to have turned him out of the study."

Tom was silent.

"You will understand, King, that the study is assigned to Reece and Preece, and if there is further trouble on the subject, I shall deal with it personally."

"Very well, sir!" said Tom, quietly.

Mr. Charne paused a moment. Then he said more kindly:

"If Reece and Preece care to change back to their former study, King, there is no objection of course. Otherwise, matters remain as they are."

Charne glanced across at Reece and Preece as he said this. Both of them carefully avoided meeting his eye. Neither had the slightest intention of changing back if it could be helped.

Mr. Charne did not speak again. He had said what he had come to say, and now he revolved in the doorway, and rustled off.

There was a buzz of voices in the Pound when he was gone. Reece winked at Preece, who grinned: Bullinger chuckled. Five or six fellows told Reece, all at once, what they thought of him, in the first place for bagging another fellow's study, in the second place for going yowling to Charne about it. Reece did not mind: he was accustomed to being told what fellows thought of him, and what they thought was seldom complimentary.

"You ass, Skip!" said Tom.

"You fathead, Skip!" said Warren.

Skip looked indignant.

"My fault, as usual?" he snorted.

"If you hadn't lost that train, Reece couldn't have cut in and pinched our study!" hooted Warren.

"Well, look here," said Skip, "I've got an idea——"

"Take it away and boil it!" King and Warren seemed to have no use for Skip's idea, whatever it was.

"Do listen to a chap——"

"Oh, rats!"

"I tell you I've got an idea," howled Skip. "You heard what Charne said. Those two ticks can change back if they like."

"Think they'll like?" snapped Warren.

"That's the idea!" explained Skip. "Let's jolly well punch their heads till they agree to change back, what?"

"Cave!" called out Parrott, as a grim face reappeared in the doorway. Skip spun round and stared in dismay at that grim countenance. It had not occurred to him that Charne might come back. Charne had. And clearly he had heard Skip proposing that drastic method for getting the study back.

"Ruggles!" thundered Charne.

"Oh, crikey!"

"I heard what you said, Ruggles."

"Did—did—did you, sir!" babbled Skip.

"I came back to tell you, King, to remove your belongings from Number 4 Study at once," said Mr. Charne, who had overlooked that item on the agenda. "Do so without delay."

"Yes, sir!" breathed Tom.

"And now I will add, after hearing what Ruggles was saying, that if any attempt be made to compel Reece and Preece to make a change against their will, I shall deal with it with the greatest severity," said Mr. Charne, sternly, "Ruggles!"

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Skip.

"You will take a hundred lines, and hand them in to me to-morrow."

"Oh, lor'!"

Charne departed again: this time for good.

If Tom King and Dick Warren had fancied acting on Skip's bright idea, they fancied it no longer. Charne was not a man to be trifled with: and they did not need telling that he would have an eye for any dispute about the ownership of Study 4. Reece called out to Tom:

"Mind going up and clearing your things out, King? We want to get our own things in the study, you know."

Tom, with some difficulty, refrained from going across to Edgar Reece and punching his head.

"Come on, you chaps!" he said.

The three left the Pound, and went up to the studies. In Study 4 they exchanged glum glances. They really did not want to get out of that study. It was old and familiar; a sort of home-from-home. And it was their study, whatever Reece might claim, even backed up by Charne. They liked their old room, they had been very comfortable there last term: and there was a loss of prestige, too, in being diddled out of their study by a tick like Reece. But there was no help for it, and they had to get on with the moving.

Skip sadly prised up the short board in the corner, under which he was accustomed to use a hide-out for articles he did not desire to meet the public

eye. He had already deposited in that obscure hide out a water-pistol—strictly forbidden at Felgate—a bundle of gaudy comics, on which Charne would have frowned, and—sad to relate—a crib to Virgil. These he now extracted from their hiding-place, for conveyance to No. 5 with other properties. He jammed back the board very carefully, so that not a sign could be seen that it was movable: he was not going to let Reece discover it, and use it as a hide-out for cigarettes and sporting papers.

It was quite a sad removal. No. 5 Study was rather pokey. There was no view of the quad from the window. There was no hide-out for Skip's water-pistol, comics, and crib. It was a change very much for the worse, and Tom King and Co. were feeling sore—and but for Charne's authority, would doubtless have made Reece and Preece feel sore too!

But if the three chums were dissatisfied, Reece and Preece rejoiced. They installed themselves in their new quarters, with much satisfaction. They had scored over the captain of the Fourth, and they had the best study in the passage, and were going to keep it: so Reece and Preece, at least, felt that they had started the term well.

CHAPTER IV

“OH, you ass!”

“Oh, you fathead!”

That was the kind of thing Skip Ruggles was used to hearing from his chums. They liked old Skip: but they seldom measured their words in telling him what they thought of him. And Skip, really, was sometimes quite the limit. His unsuspecting innocence was, no doubt, a credit to him: but it was possible to have too much of a good thing. Any fellow with a clock that wouldn't go, or a pocket-knife with the blades broken, could always “swop” it with Skip for something more valuable. Skip accumulated all sorts of useless and valueless articles to lumber up the study. But this time Skip had, so to speak, out-Skipped himself, in the purchase of a basket of eggs he had brought in from Fell. It was surprising that the rich aroma of those eggs had not struck Skip, even in the open air, as he walked back to the school with them. It struck Tom King and Dick Warren very forcibly in Number 5 Study.

The term was now several days old. Tom King and Co. had settled down in Number 5, as there was no help for it. Skip, always good-natured and obliging himself, had an idea that Reece and Preece might relent, and change back, like decent fellows. King and Warren expected nothing of the sort. They made the best of it, as there was nothing else to be done: and were in fact fairly cheerful about it, having neither time nor inclination to weep over spilt milk. Just now they had come up to No. 5 to tea: and as they entered

their new study, they were struck by a scent that was nothing at all like attar-of-roses. It seemed to proceed from a basket on the study table, at which they stared while they sniffed.

Skip explained. He had been down to the village after class, and had made rather a bargain there—a cheap line in eggs. Eggs, of course, were always welcome at tea-time in a junior study. They were too expensive to figure very often on the menu: schoolboys' pocket-money being limited. Skip was as pleased as Punch by his bargain. No fewer than three dozen eggs were packed in that basket, and Skip had bought the lot at a bargain price. It had not occurred to his simple mind to inquire into the age and quality of those eggs. But even Skip, after he had landed them in No. 5, was feeling a little dubious. He had not noticed, at first, the rich aroma that spread out from the basket. It had not been so striking in the open air. In the close confines of a small study it was very striking indeed.

"What's in that basket?" asked Tom.

"Eggs!" said Skip.

"Not a dead cat?" asked Dick Warren.

"Or a nineteenth-century fish?" inquired Tom King.

"They're not so jolly bad!" said Skip, defensively. "The man said that they weren't new-laid—I didn't expect it at the price, you know—but—but—but they ain't too jolly high, you know—it—it's just the smell——"

"You blithering ass!"

"You howling fathead!"

"Well, I thought you fellows would like some eggs for tea," said Skip, warmly. "We don't get too many—and they were a cheap line——"

"If you gave more than a bad penny, you were done," said Warren.

"Not worth that much!" said Tom King, shaking his head.

"I—I—I think perhaps we'd better not boil them" said Skip, cautiously. "But—but what about scrambled eggs? I can scramble them in the pan, and you don't notice the flavour so much when they're scrambled——"

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

It was kind and thoughtful of Skip to secure an ample supply of eggs for No. 5. But he received no gratitude whatever from his study-mates. He had taken the combined cash resources down to Fell to get something decent for tea in the study. He had returned with those aromatic eggs, and nothing else. It was Skip all over—just the sort of thing that Skip would do. There was no tea in No. 5 for King and Warren, unless they felt disposed to dispose of those eggs—the mere thought of which made them feel faint. Skip hoped that scrambling them might disguise a flavour that would be undoubtedly very rich. Skip had a hopeful nature.

King and Warren backed to the door. No. 5 was not an attractive study anyhow: and with those eggs in it, it was quite uninhabitable.

"Tea in hall, after all," said Tom.

"Look here, I'll scramble them—!" pleaded Skip.

"You won't!" said Dick Warren. "You'll get them out of this study. Hold your silly nose with one hand, and carry them with the other. Get them out of the study anyway—"

"But I've spent the money on them—"

"You would!" said Tom King. "We're not going to slay you, Skip, because you can't help being the biggest idiot at Felgate; but we shall slay you if those eggs are in the study when we come up again. If you want to go to bed alive to-night, get rid of those eggs."

"But I say—" pleaded Skip.

"Chump!"

"Chucklehead!"

With those final remarks, Tom King and Dick Warren left No. 5, leaving Skip alone with his bargain. Tea in hall was the only resource now: and with considerable self-restraint, they went down to tea in hall without first slaying Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

Skip, left alone with his eggs, gazed at the basket dolefully.

"Rotten!" he said.

He was not referring to the eggs, though really he might have been. He was referring to the sad outcome of his shopping expedition.

Sniffing, Skip had to admit that, so far as scent was concerned, there was a strong resemblance between his basket of eggs and a slimy old ditch suddenly stirred up. Still, cookery could effect all sorts of things: even those eggs might be made edible, and even palatable, by his skill in cookery; if only his comrades had been a little more patient and reasonable. Scrambling them, with lots and lots of salt and pepper, might have worked the oracle.

But his comrades were not patient and reasonable, at least on the subject of those eggs. They were going to slay him if the eggs remained in the study, and Skip could not even cook them for his own behoof, and try his luck with them. It was hard luck on a fellow who, after all, had only done his best. Skip shook a sad head as he sniffed. He simply could not throw away that bargain: after expending all the available cash resources of the study on it. On the other hand he had to get rid of the eggs. He decided to park them somewhere—somewhere where their scent would not betray them to King and Warren—and go down to tea in hall. Later he could decide on some method of cookery which would, after all, justify his expenditure on those aromatic eggs. He would have to choose a time when King and Warren were not likely to come up to the study: perhaps next day when they were at games-practice.

But where could he park those eggs? If he had still inhabited No. 4 Study, the hide-out under the floor would have been the ideal place: the keenest nose would not have scented them through thick oak planks, at all events if they

were not left there too long. But he was no longer in No. 4: he was in No. 5. Those cads Reece and Preece—.

But, after all, why shouldn't he use his own hide-out in what was, really and truly, his own study? If Reece and Preece weren't there at the moment, it was quite easy: and he could choose another moment, later, when they weren't there, to recover his eggs, when he wanted them.

Skip cut out of No. 5, and looked into No. 4. The study was vacant: Reece and Preece were at tea in hall. The next minute, Skip was carrying that egg-basket out of No. 5 into No. 4.

He prised up the short board in the corner with his pocket-knife. Under the floor-boards was an open space, between beams, about eighteen inches deep. Into that space Skip carefully lowered the basket of eggs. Then he replaced the short board, securing it in place with the greatest care, very cautiously leaving no sign that it had been shifted. Reece and Preece were quite capable of bagging a fellow's eggs, if they found them in their study! But there was no danger of that: and Skip retired from No. 4 easy in his mind, and went down to tea in hall.

In No. 5 that evening, at prep, his friends remembered the eggs. That they were no longer in No. 5 was certain: no fellow with a nose could have been unaware of them.

"What did you do with that scent-packet?" asked Warren.

Skip stared.

"That what? Oh, if you mean the eggs—they're not here now—"

"I know that!" Warren sniffed. "If they were, I'd lay hold of them and plaster your silly head with them."

"They're not so jolly bad," argued Skip. "I can jolly well tell you that I know how to cook eggs, and I—"

His chums stared at him.

"Mean to say you're keeping them?" exclaimed Tom King.

"Well, you see—!"

"Now, look here, Skip," said Tom, "you can't help being an idiot, and you can't help being a fathead, and you can't help being the biggest ass that ever assed about at Felgate. But we're not going to let you poison yourself with those eggs. You're not going to cook them—you're not going to do anything with them at all—and unless you promise here and now, honour bright, never to touch those eggs again, we'll jam your silly head in the coal-locker, and pour the ink down your neck. Now, then!"

"Look here—!" objected Skip, feebly.

King and Warren rose to their feet. King opened the coal-locker, and Warren picked up the inkpot. Skip, having watched those proceedings, did not wait for them to proceed further.

"I promise!" he said, hurriedly.

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" said Skip, sadly.

"That's that!" said Tom, and he sat down again.

That was that: Skip, who was a slave to his word, had to keep it. He said a silent farewell to that bargain in eggs: and relinquished all idea of testing his skill in cookery upon them. Those eggs were gone from his gaze like an unbeautiful dream: and the following day Skip had forgotten all about them.

CHAPTER V

Skip grinned happily.

Gudge, the house-porter, had left the garden-hose lying unattended on the edge of a flower-bed. Gudge had been using that hose, but had been called away; being a man of many duties. He had turned it off at the nozzle, but it was still dripping a little when Skip observed it. Skip probably would merely have given it a cursory glance in passing, but for the fact that Reece and Preece were in the offing. Skip Ruggles, in his own esteem at least, was the man for ideas: and an idea shot at once into his fat brain: as he glanced at the dripping, unattended hose, and then at Reece and Preece.

Those two ticks had bagged No. 4 Study. The former owners of that study were accepting the situation with philosophic cheerfulness: nevertheless, it was a sore point. If ever a pair of sly, underhand ticks deserved to get it in the neck, Reece and Preece did. Punching their heads was out of the question! there was Charne to be reckoned with. But a plausible accident might very easily happen if a fellow handled a hose carelessly: and a drenching from head to foot was as good as a head-punching.

Skip, grinning, stooped and picked up the nozzle of that hose.

Reece and Preece were standing with their backs to him, only six or seven yards away, in conversation. They had not even observed Skip. They were going to observe him shortly, in a very sudden and surprising manner.

Other fellows were about, at no great distance. Some of them, perhaps, might get a spattering, when Skip weighed in with the hose. That could not be helped: Skip did not, in fact, think of it. A fellow couldn't think of everything at once. At the moment, Skip was concentrated on drenching Reece and Preece in retaliation for their unscrupulous appropriation of No. 4 Study.

It was easy work—for any fellow but Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. But if it was barely possible to make a bungle of anything, Skip Ruggles was the man to make it. He turned on the hose, streaming water over the flower-bed. The next act was to swing it round, as it were carelessly, directing the stream at those two ticks. At that point Skip inadvertently stepped on the hose, and stumbled over it. In consequence of that stumble, the nozzle took a wrong

direction—it aimed itself, not at Reece and Preece, but right at Skip's own fat face, and a blinding torrent of water swamped into the middle of his plump features.

"Oooooogh!" gasped Skip, taken by surprise.

He staggered, dropping the nozzle to the ground, and clawing at a streaming face. How a fat leg became entangled in the wriggling hose, Skip did not know. It was the sort of thing that would happen to Skip Ruggles. Blind to the world, with his eyes and nose and mouth full of water, Skip tottered, and rolled over, mixed up with the hose, the nozzle, still streaming, jamming under a fat arm.

Skip's frantic ejaculations were heard far and wide. Reece and Preece looked round, stared, and then roared with laughter. How and why that utter goat, Skip Ruggles, had got himself mixed up with a streaming garden-hose, they did not know, but they found the sight amusing. Other fellows came running up.

"Skip, you ass!" shouted Tom King.

"Skip, you goat!" yelled Dick Warren.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bullinger. "Here's Ruggles taking a bath with his clothes on! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Urrrggh!" spluttered Skip, frantically. He struggled to release himself from the entangling hose. The nozzle shifted from under his arm, and landed under a fat chin. Then it visited a fat ear. Skip spluttered and rolled and squirmed in a sea of streaming water.

Tom King and Dick Warren rushed to the rescue. It was rather dangerous work, for that nozzle might have turned on them at any moment. Others kept at a safer distance, watching out warily, and yelling with laughter. The mixture of a fat Fourth-former with a tangled hose did not seem funny to Skip himself: but in other eyes it had a comic aspect.

"Oh!" gasped Tom King, as the nozzle, quitting Skip, dashed against his legs, drenching his trousers. "Whooh!"

"You mad ass!" shrieked Dick Warren.

"Oooooooooo!" spluttered Skip. "I say—woooooogh!"

"Go it, Skip!" roared Bullinger. "Give your pals a wash!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick Warren plunged at the nozzle to grab it. Skip, unluckily, plunged at it at the same moment. Two heads came into contact with a sharp crack.

"Ow!"

"Wow!"

The nozzle squirmed on the earth. It was at that moment that Mr. Charne, attracted by the uproar, arrived on the scene. Charne's brow was thunderous.

"Ruggles! Warren! King! How dare you play tricks with that hose!" he thundered. "You are drenching yourselves with water! Turn off the water at once! At once! Do you hear?"

Skip grabbed the hose, and groped at it, to turn off the water. In his drenched, confused, and bewildered state, perhaps it was not surprising that Skip, always clumsy, was a little more clumsy than usual. Certainly he never intended to turn the nozzle in the direction of his form-master. Skip would never have dreamed of such a thing. He just did it.

"Oh!" stuttered Mr. Charne, as his gown was suddenly turned into a limp rag hanging round him. "Oh! Stop it! Upon my word! Ruggles! I—I—ooooogh!"

Charne bounded. It was the first time Felgate fellows had ever seen Charne bound, in the quad. Now they saw him bound like a kangaroo.

It was Langdale of the Sixth who rushed up, and somehow got that nozzle away from Skip without further disaster. He shut off the water.

Tom King and Dick Warren stood wet and dripping. Skip sat in almost



"Oooooogh!" gasped Skip.

an ocean. Reece and Preece, dry as dust, did not even know what a narrow escape they had had. Charne looked down at his drenched gown, and the expression on his face would have made that of the fabled basilisk, by comparison, look like a kindly smile.

"Ruggles!" he articulated. "Follow me to my study! King, Warren, take three hundred lines each."

Charne's impression was that the three of them had been larking with that hose. There were lines for King and Warren: Skip, as the worst offender, was to be dealt with more drastically. A dripping Skip followed an incensed form-master to his study.

As he followed him in, Skip gave a loud, prolonged sneeze. He repeated it as Charne picked up his cane from the table.

"Now, Ruggles—"

"Aytishoooooooooh!" sneezed Skip.

Charne looked at him. He was very keen to get going with that cane. But he felt that he couldn't, in these circumstances.

"You utterly absurd and stupid boy, Ruggles—"

"Woooooh! Oooooh!"

"You have caught a cold—"

"Oooooch! Atchoooooh! Aytishooooh!"

"I shall take you to the matron," said Charne. He laid down the cane. "Follow me, you inexpressibly stupid boy."

In third school that day there was no Skip. Skip Ruggles, in the throes of a severe cold, had been packed off to the school sanatorium and the care of the Felgate nurse. It was just as well for Skip, in some respects: for King and Warren, with three hundred lines each to write as a result of Skip's antics, were in a mood to boil their fat chum in oil. It was not till the lines had been written, and duly delivered to Charne, that they felt a spot of sympathy for poor old Skip, and wondered how the fathead of the Fourth was getting on in "sanny".

CHAPTER VI

REECE sniffed.
Preece sniffed.

Then they sniffed together.

They looked round Study 4, then they looked at one another: and then they both sniffed again.

"Queer!" said Reece.

"Queer and nasty!" said Preece.

"What on earth's wrong with this dashed study?"

"Something jolly well is."

"Must be the drains!" said Reece. "But I never heard of anything the matter here last term, when King's gang had it."

"I've noticed it several times—but it's getting worse," said Preece.

"Putrid!"

They had come up to No. 4 to tea.

Several times, of late, the new proprietors of No. 4 had fancied that there was a queer smell about the study. Several times they had looked about the room, looking for the cause, but without discovering any cause. It had been just noticeable, but not very noticeable, at first: but, as Preece said, it was getting worse. During the past two or three days, while Skip Ruggles had been in the sanatorium, his fat existence forgotten by Reece and Preece, that mysterious scent in No. 4 had grown more and more perceptible. Now it was really very unpleasant.

"A dead rat behind the wall, perhaps," said Reece.

"Or under the floor," said Preece.

"Or the drains—"

"Or goodness knows what."

"I wonder if Bullinger will notice it," said Reece. Bullinger was coming to tea in No. 4, and they did not want Bullinger to pass unpleasant remarks about their study.

"Bound to," said Preece, shaking his head. "Blessed if I make it out. It's pretty sickening."

There was a tramp of heavy feet in the passage, and the burly Bullinger came in. He gave Reece and Preece a nod: and they looked at him almost stealthily, wondering whether he would detect anything unpleasant about their study. They need not have wondered—Bullinger immediately gave a loud and emphatic sniff.

"What on earth have you fellows got here?" he exclaimed.

"Notice anything?" asked Reece.

"Notice it!" repeated Bullinger. "I should jolly well say I do. Have you been letting off a stink-bomb?"

"Of course not—"

"What is it then?"

"Well, we don't quite know," said Reece. "Only noticed it just lately. There's a niff from somewhere—a dead rat or something—"

"Rot!" said Bullinger. "An army of dead rats wouldn't put up that scent. Been playing about with chemicals?"

"Nothing of the kind. I daresay it will clear off—I'll open the window!" said Reece.

"Sit down, old chap," said Preece.

Bullinger did not sit down. He gave another prolonged and emphatic sniff, and backed to the door.

"If you fellows can stand that niff, I can't!" he said, and he walked out of the study. Bullinger, evidently, was not staying to tea!

Reece and Preece looked, and felt, intensely annoyed. They did not expect much in the way of manners from Bullinger: but this was very disagreeable.

"Dash it all, this won't do," muttered Reece. "This study will get its name up in the Fourth, at this rate. What on earth can be the matter?"

"No. 5's better than this!" grunted Preece.

Reece's narrow eyes glinted.

"By gum! King and Warren have been taking it pretty quietly—I wonder if they found out that there was something wrong with the study, and were glad to get shut of it!—landing it on us, and getting ours." Reece's suspicious mind jumped to that, as it were.

Preece whistled.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said. "Anyhow they've got our study, and we're landed with this reeking hole. Not so jolly clever as you fancied, Reece—doing them out of their study this term."

There was a step at the door, and Parrott of the Fourth looked in, with a grinning face.

"I say, Bullinger says he was coming to tea with you chaps, but he was stunk out of the study," said Parrott. "What—oh, my hat!" Parrott sniffed. "What have you men got in this study?"

"Nothing—!"

"Never heard of nothing with a niff like that. Look here, you ought to keep the place a bit cleaner," said Parrott. "You'll have the house-dame on your track if you make your study smell like this—"

"We didn't—"

"Why, you could cut it with a knife." Parrott retreated into the passage. "Look here, if it isn't the study it's you—have't you washed yet this term? You'd better, or Charne will notice it in form, and you'll get whops."

Parrott departed with that.

But Reece and Preece were not left long alone. Other fellows heard the strange news, and came along to Study 4 to look in and inquire. Reece and Preece, in a very worried and excited state, hunted round the study once more in the hope of tracking the scent to its lair. But there was absolutely nothing in the study of an odorous nature. That scent was quite inexplicable. The worst of it was, that it was getting worse—distinctly worse. It had been mild, so to speak, when it first made itself manifest: but it had strengthened since, and gone on strengthening. This afternoon it was not only worse than it had ever been before, but was really getting quite awful.

Sleake, Valence, Wate, and other Fourth-form fellows looked in. They only looked in—the scent that greeted them made them unwilling to enter. The remarks they made about fellows who kept their study in such a state were neither grateful nor comforting. Some of them seemed to believe that it was

Reece and Preece themselves who were responsible, owing to lack of washing: which was most unpleasant. Reece slammed the door on grinning faces.

"It must be the drains," he said. "I—I wonder if King and Warren knew all the while—the rotters!"

"If it was the drains, the other studies would get it," said Preece. "It's something wrong with this beastly study. I jolly well wish we'd never bagged it! You had to be so jolly clever, as usual!"

"You were as keen on it as I was!" snapped Reece. "We jolly well did King and Warren in the eye, anyhow."

"Fat lot of good doing fellows in the eye—giving them a decent study, and taking over this filthy place for ourselves," jeered Preece.

"Charne said we could change back, if we liked—"

"It takes two to make a bargain! Catch King changing back, once he puts his nose into the room and catches the niff."

Reece breathed hard. He stood by the open window to do it: it was quite unpleasant to breathe at all in any other spot in that odorous study.

"We can't tea here," he said. "Let's go down to hall—it may clear off before we come up for prep—I'll leave the window open."

They went down to tea in hall. Grinning faces greeted them when they arrived there. Study 4 was the topic among the juniors now: and several fellows made it a point to keep a good arm's length from Reece and Preece, as if fearing a noxious contact. Reece and Preece did not stay long at tea. They went up to the studies again, and looked into several: satisfying themselves that there was no "niff" in any of them. Study 4 had that mysterious aroma all to itself. It was mysterious, inexplicable, unaccountable, unnerving. They looked into No. 5, where Tom King and Dick Warren were finishing tea—a rather more ample tea than usual, in the absence of their fat chum.

King and Warren waved dismissing hands at the sight of them.

"Keep out!" said Tom. "You're too whiffy to come in here."

"Keep your attar-of-roses for yourselves," said Dick Warren.

Evidently, King and Warren had heard!

Reece gave them a bitter look.

"You jolly well knew that there was something whiffy in No. 4," he snarled. "You jolly well knew—"

"Nothing whiffy in No. 4, except you and Preece," answered Tom. "It was all right when we had it."

"Why the dickens don't you fellows wash?" asked Warren. "I know you're a pair of slackers: but there's a limit."

"It's the study—!" howled Preece.

"Rot!" said Tom. "Nothing wrong with that study that I know of. We had it last term, and never noticed anything, at any rate."

"Something must have happened in the hols, then, to make it niff like that."

"Something happened on the first day of term, you mean," answered Warren. "It was all right before you fellows got into it."

Reece slammed the door, and went along to No. 4 again with Preece. They looked into No. 4: but did not step in. They had been absent only half-an-hour, but even in that short space of time, the mysterious malodorous scent had distinctly intensified. It was almost appalling.

"We can't stand much more of that," muttered Reece.

"I can't stand any more of it," said Preece. "I'll ask Bullinger to let me do my prep in his study this evening."

"I'll ask Parrott," muttered Reece.

That evening, at prep, No. 4 was a deserted study.

CHAPTER VII

"IF YOU please, sir—"

"What is it, Reece?" rapped Mr. Charne.

He was in his study, after class the next day, when Reece came into speak to him. He rapped at Reece. Charne often rapped: but his rap was a little sharper with Reece than with others in his form. Reece was rather cunning, and rather sly, and a little oily: none of which qualities recommended him to his form-master. Also, Charne was not wholly pleased about the affair of the changed study. The rules were in favour of Reece, and so Charne had upheld his claim: but he did not quite like it, all the same. So, though Reece's manner now was extremely mild and meek and respectful, Charne rapped.

"It's about my study, sir—!" said Reece.

"Well?" another rap.

"We've been thinking it over, sir—Preece and I—and—and we think that King and his friends ought to have it," said Reece. "We—we didn't think much about it at first, but all the fellows seem to think that we've treated King rather badly, and with your leave, sir, we'd like to change back."

"Oh!" said Mr. Charne.

He regarded Reece with a rather less grim eye. This seemed to him rather decent of Reece: it raised him a little in his form-master's estimation.

"Certainly you have leave to change studies, if you desire it, Reece," he said. "I believe I have already said so. You may arrange the matter with King and Warren and Ruggles."

"Thank you, sir." Reece hesitated just a moment. "May I tell them that you have told us we may have our old study, sir?"

"Certainly, if they agree to the exchange," said Mr. Charne. "If they prefer to keep their new study, of course they will do so."

Reece did not let his disappointment show in his face. He had hoped to get

something from Charne in the nature of a direction which Tom King and Co. could not disregard. Charne's authority had served him, in effecting the exchange: he would have liked it to serve him in changing back whether Tom King and Co. liked it or not. However, he said "Thank you, sir," again, very meekly, and retired from his form-master's study.

He joined Preece, and they went out into the quad. Preece eyed him inquiringly.

"Well, did it work?" asked Preece.

"Only as far as leave to change over, if King and his gang agreed," said Reece.

"We had that much! Catch them agreeing!" said Preece. "Think they'll change back into that stinking study if they can help it?"

"We're going to work it somehow," said Reece. "We simply can't stick that study. I just can't imagine what's the matter with it: but I jolly well know that I'm fed up with it, and don't mean to put a foot into it again. I tell you we've got to land it back on them, and get ours back."

"Well, Charne won't order them to change back."

"No, blow him!" Reece wrinkled his brow in thought. "I—I suppose it's no good offering it back to King and Warren—now they know what it's like. If we'd kept it dark about that scent, we might have—"

"Couldn't keep it dark," said Preece. "It's getting worse and worse. You can smell it now as you pass the study, with the door shut."

"I know! No good tackling King and Warren, and Charne isn't any help. But what about that goat Ruggles?" Reece brightened up. "He's coming out of sanny this afternoon, and—"

"First thing he'll hear is that we're stunk out of Study 4—catch even a goat like Ruggles taking it on, after that."

"Might, get at him before he hears—"

"Um! Might! He would smell a rat, though—what would we want to part with the study for, if there was nothing the matter with it?"

"Well, Ruggles is fool enough for anything! If we get him to agree, King and Warren may follow his lead." Reece nodded with satisfaction at his own cunning. "Look here, if Ruggles agrees to changing back, he will have to stick to it, and King and Warren wouldn't let him down. You know how those three fellows stick together—King and Warren have got into lots of scrapes through sticking to that goat. I jolly well tell you that if we can wangle it with Ruggles, it will see us through."

"Um!" said Preece, dubiously. "Well, no harm in trying it on, and we can watch out for Ruggles when they let him out of sanny."

It seemed the last chance of getting rid of that obnoxious, malodorous study. Reece and Preece were waiting for Skip Ruggles, when a little later, he came out of "sanny". They watched him leave the building, and roll down the garden path, and met him as he let himself out of the gate into the quad.

"Hullo, old chap, feeling fit again?" asked Reece, affably.

"Glad to get out?" asked Preece, equally affably.

Skip nodded and smiled.

"Jolly fit, and jolly glad," he answered. "Grub was pretty thin in there, you know! By gum, I hope Tom and Dick have got something decent for tea." He was about to push on, when Reece caught his sleeve.

"Hold on a minute, Ruggles," said Reece. "We were awfully sorry you were ill, Reece and I—"

"Only a cold," said Skip.

"Well, we were jolly sorry, and we've been thinking it over while you've been in sanny, and we're sorry we bagged your study," said Reece, "and look here, if you like you can have it back again."

Skip, about to push on—he liked neither Reece nor Preece—paused. This was unexpected, and it was very gratifying news. He beamed on Reece and Preece.

"Oh! I say, that's jolly decent of you fellows," he said. "Look here, if you mean it—"

"Of course," said Reece. "Like your old study back?"

"What-ho!" said Skip, joyously.

"Well, it's yours, then," said Reece. "You agree, Preece?"

"Certainly," said Preece, heartily. "Have it back, Ruggles, and we'll have our old study back, as soon as you like."

"Well, you fellows really ain't the pair of rotters I thought you were," said Skip. "It's a go, then. I say, King and Warren will be jolly glad to hear this!"

Reece and Preece rather doubted that. But they did not say so.

"It's settled, then?" asked Reece. "I suppose your pals will agree? Can you promise for them?"

Skip chuckled. Happily unaware of the unsavoury reputation Study 4 had acquired, he had no doubt that his pals would be as eager as he was to get back into their old quarters. He had no hesitation whatever in promising for his pals.

"Bank on it," he said.

"Is it a promise?" asked Reece, categorically.

A more suspicious fellow than Skip might have become suspicious, at that. But the excellent Skip never suspected anybody of anything.

"Promise, honour bright," he said. "Blessed if I know why you're so jolly particular: we shall all be jolly glad to get No. 4 back. But it's a promise, if you like."

"O.K." said Reece.

Skip hurried off to find his friends and tell them the good news. He left Reece and Preece grinning. They felt that they were as good as rid of that smelly unpleasant study, No. 4: and they wished Tom King and Co. joy of it!

CHAPTER VIII

"YOU ASS!"
"You fathead!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Skip.

He really had not expected this.

He found Tom King and Dick Warren in No. 5, and burst in with the good news. He expected them to beam as he himself had beamed. He looked for joyful manifestations. Instead of which they called him names. Skip was rather accustomed to being called uncomplimentary names by his friends—it was no new experience for Skip. But it did seem rather hard this time.

"Ain't you glad?" he asked.

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"But we get our old study back!" exclaimed Skip. "Don't you understand? Reece and Preece ain't such ticks, after all—they've thought it over, and decided to do the decent thing—"

"Oh, slay him!" said Dick Warren.

"Look here—"

"You benighted, unmitigated owl!" roared Tom King. "Have you ever known Reece or Preece do the decent thing? Couldn't you understand that they were pulling your silly leg?"

"But we get the study back—"

"And why do you suppose that Reece and Preece want to get shut of it?" howled Dick Warren.

"Do they?" asked the innocent Skip.

"They do, ass! They do, fathead! They've been stunk out of that study, and so they've pulled your silly leg to get this one back."

"Oh, I say!" gasped Skip. "But what's the matter with the study? It was all right when we had it before—"

"It isn't all right now, you goat, or Reece and Preece would be sticking to it like glue!" snapped Tom King. "Something's gone wrong, and it smells like a chemical works, or worse. Reece and Preece had to do their prep in other fellows' studies yesterday, because they couldn't stand it. And it's worse to-day."

"But—!" gasped Skip, in dismay.

"You can niff it in the passage outside the door. Goodness knows what's the trouble, but nobody could stand that study now. It's simply mouldy," hooted Warren. "Fellows are making jokes about Reece and Preece not washing—but we've looked into it ourselves, and it's simply petrifying. We're not going back."

"No fear!" said Tom King, shaking his head. "This is a poky little study, but it doesn't whiff. We're sticking here."

"But—but—but—!" babbled Skip. "I've promised—oh, those ticks! That's why Reece made me promise, I suppose."

"Fathead!"

"Chucklehead!"

"And I—I—I promised for you fellows too—!"

"Oh, you goat!"

"Oh, you ninny!"

"Look here," said Skip. "It can't be so jolly bad as all that. It was all right last term, and on the first day of this term, too. I expect Reece and Preece have left something about—some old haddocks in the cupboard, perhaps—they're jolly slovenly, as you know. Let's go and look at it."

"Hold your nose, then," growled Tom King.

The three left No. 5, and went along to No. 4. Skip threw the door wide open. He simply couldn't believe that things were quite so bad as described by his friends. But the next moment Skip was almost tottering in the doorway of Study 4.

"Oh, crikey!" he gasped.

"Like the study now?" yapped Warren.

"Oh, scissors!"

Skip, evidently, did not like the study now. He did not step into it. Though the window was open, and there was a breeze from the quad, the atmosphere of that study was heavy with disagreeable scents. The draught from the window wafted the aroma across to the door, and the three juniors gasped.

Tom King and Dick Warren had been as eager as Skip to recover their old study. But that eagerness had completely evaporated. Indeed, as things had turned out, it seemed to them a spot of luck that Reece and Preece had bagged it. No. 5 was small. It was poky. But it was not malodorous. And that fathead, that goat, that ass, Skip, had promised to change back, for his chums as well as himself!

Skip pressed a handkerchief to his nose.

"I—I say—!" he gurgled through the handkerchief.

"You blithering ass!"

"You benighted cuckoo."

"But I say," gasped Skip. "I—I wonder if it's the eggs!"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Eggs!" said Skip.

"What eggs, you howling ass? No eggs here," said Tom King. "What are you burbling about now—if you know?"

"Well, it might be the eggs—!" persisted Skip. "I mean to say, they were pretty high, three or four days ago, and since then—"

"What eggs?" shrieked Warren.

"Those eggs—you remember!" said Skip. "I got them at a bargain in Fell, and you fellows wouldn't let me cook them, and I put them away, and—"

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom King. "Wherever you chucked them away, we shouldn't scent them from here, I suppose?"

"They're here—"

"What?"

"You see, I shoved them into that old hide-out under the floor in this study," explained Skip. "As you fellows made me promise not to touch them again, I didn't—and I forgot them afterwards—I was shoved in sanny the next day, you know, and forgot all about them—"

Tom King and Dick Warren gasped.

"You stuttering image!" breathed Tom. "Mean to say you parked those eggs in the study days ago, when they were already fairly shouting—"

"Yes, in the hide out—"

"They're still there?" howled Warren.

"Must be," said Skip. "I—I—I say, think that may be it?"

Tom King and Dick Warren looked at one another. They did not "think" that that might be it! They knew that that was it! They rushed into the study, and across to the corner. They tore up that short length of board that concealed Skip's old hideout. They held handkerchiefs to their noses—they needed to, when that board was up! In the open space was that basket of ancient, almost prehistoric eggs! The mystery of Study 4 was elucidated at last!

CHAPTER IX

REECE and Preece simply stared.

Looking in at Study 4, they beheld three juniors at tea round the table, all with smiling faces and in cheerful mood.

They sniffed! But sniffs failed to detect any unusual odour in No. 4. It had cleared off—utterly.

Tom King and Dick Warren and Skip Ruggles grinned at them. They had brought their belongings back to their old study. They were having tea in their old quarters. Once more they were established in Study 4, to their entire and complete satisfaction. A basket of ancient eggs had been conveyed, very carefully, to a distant dustbin. That had made all the difference. Study 4 was perfectly fresh and sweet.

"Thanks for changing back, Reece!" called out Tom King. "We're no end pleased to be back in this study."

"Tremendously obliged," said Dick Warren. "We've shoved your things into Study 5. You can have it back and welcome."

And Skip chuckled.

"But—but—but—!" Reece was quite bewildered. "I say, the study doesn't seem to whiff now—"

"Can't smell anything here," said Preece, blankly. "What the dickens—"

"Oh, that's an easy one!" said Tom King. "The study's all right with you fellows out of it! That was the trouble, really!"

"Just that!" grinned Warren.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Skip.

Reece and Preece went on to No. 5, utterly mystified, and considerably annoyed. They simply could not make head or tail of it. The next day they knew: when all the Felgate Fourth were chuckling over the story of Skip and his bargain in eggs, which had been forgotten in the hide-out under the study floor, and there had ripened. And then Reece and Preece felt like kicking themselves, and one another. But Tom King and Co. at all events, were quite satisfied: once more the happy and undisputed owners of Study 4 at Felgate.

THE END

NOTE. The stories of Felgate School, by Frank Richards, appear in Raymond Glendenning's *Book of Sport* annual, published by Sportsguide Ltd.