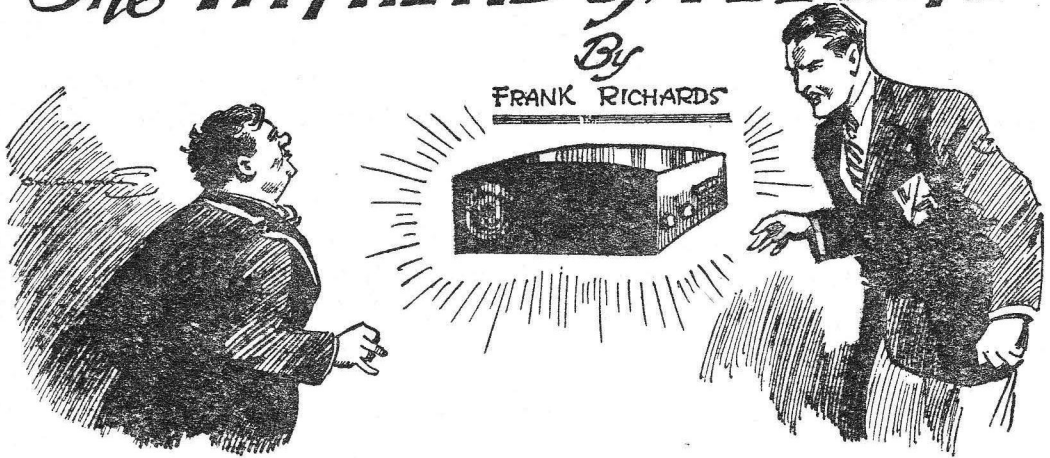


The FATHEAD of FELGATE

By

FRANK RICHARDS



CHAPTER I

“LET him wait!” said Skip, darkly.

Tom King and Dick Warren looked at Skip Ruggles, looked at one another, and then looked at Skip again. They did not quite know what to say.

Of course, they sympathized.

Skip had been kicked: apparently hard. He was still wriggling from the effects, when his chums found him in Study Four.

But though they sympathized, Skip's pals could not help thinking that he had asked for it. The fat Skip was always asking for it. Not that Skip ever meant any harm. He never meant harm. But he did quite a lot without meaning to. Anyhow, Denver, of the Sixth had kicked Skip, and Skip was wrathful. He was going to get back on Denver: which was quite a wild idea, for of course you couldn't get back on a pre. Sixth-Form prefects at Felgate were tremendous personages, not to be got back upon by mere juniors in the Fourth Form.

It had come about in this wise. Denver, of the Sixth, was a keen radio fan. A kind uncle had presented him with a portable radio at Christmas, and Denver had brought it back to Felgate with him. Often and often it was heard in Denver's study: oftener, perhaps, than other members of the Felgate Sixth quite relished. Doors of other studies were sometimes heard to slam when Denver's radio was on. When it was going strong, it could be heard as far as the Prefects' Room, where the strains of brassy bands were not always welcome. Denver seemed never to tire of it. He would listen to the comedians, and laugh over their jokes, just as his grand-father had laughed over the same jokes in his time. The deepest depression that ever spread from Broadcasting House never

bored Denver. He revelled in radio. More than once, he had had to be fairly dragged away from it to play Soccer.

When Langdale, the captain of Felgate, sent Skip to Denver's study with a message, the radio was on, as a matter of course. Denver was reclining in the window-seat, the portable standing on a little round one-legged table close at hand, discoursing sweet music. Skip had to give Denver Langdale's message, but he could not make his voice heard above the din. Denver only gave him a careless glance as his fat face appeared in the doorway, and did not turn the thing off. Skip came across the study and shouted:

"Langdale says go to the changing-room at once."

Denver did not hear, with the radio going full blast. Neither did he seem to want to hear. He motioned Skip impatiently away. But Skip simply had to speak. A message from the captain of Felgate had to be delivered, though the skies fell. He leaned over to shout at closer range—and that did it! Even a four-legged table was hardly safe from Skip, who was as clumsy as he was plump. A single legged table had no chance at all. Skip, of course, did not intend a fat elbow to knock that table over. The fat elbow did it unintentionally.

The table tipped, and the portable shot off, landing on Denver's knees. It rolled from his knees to the study carpet. There was sudden silence, as the set shut off.

"Oh! Sorry!" gasped Skip.

Skip was sorry—and he was still sorrier the next moment. Denver bounded from the window-seat, with an expression on his face that made Skip bolt for the door without even delivering Langdale's message. The radio was silent: and silence, though said to be golden, was not what Denver wanted. But that was not all. Denver had no doubt that the set was damaged, having shut off so suddenly: in his mind's eye he saw a long bill for new valves and things. A long bill—and perhaps days before he heard another sound from Broadcasting House! In the circumstances, it was not really surprising that, as Skip bounded for the door, Denver bounded after him, and kicked.

Denver packed a tremendous kick, Skip had the full benefit of it. It fairly lifted him, and landed him in the passage without. He alighted there on fat hands and knees, roaring. But he did not linger to roar. Denver was coming out of the study after him. Skip flew. Denver went back into his study and picked up the radio. He took it up tenderly, treating it with care. He made the happy discovery that it was not damaged, after all: contact with the carpet had simply turned the knob, shutting it off. The next minute that portable was going as strong as ever: and in his happy relief, as he listened in, Denver rather regretted that he had kicked that young idiot, Ruggles, quite so hard. Still, that was an unimportant episode, which Denver of the Sixth soon forgot.

Skip, naturally, had a longer memory for it.

He was twisting most uncomfortably in Study Four, in the Fourth when he

told his friends, about it. King and Warren sat on the study table while they heard the tale of woe. Skip stood. There was an armchair at hand, and Skip loved armchairs. But at the moment he had no use for a chair of any kind. He twisted as he stood, and wriggled like a plump eel. And he boiled with indignation.

"Booting a man!" said Skip, in almost shrilling tones. "I only went to his study because old Langdale sent me, you know. His radio was making an awful row, and I couldn't make him hear. That's how it happened. Was it my fault the beastly thing went over, when I just touched the table—barely touched it, really. And he booted me right out of the study. Wow! He seemed to fancy that he was kicking for goal on Big Side! Wow! Think I'm going to stand it? Let him wait!"

"Tough, old man!" said Tom King, sympathetically.

"Rough luck!" said Warren.

"But—!" went on Tom.

"But—!" added Warren.

"Let him wait!" said Skip, vengefully. "I'll jolly well show him whether he can boot a man for nothing!"

"Well, it wasn't quite for nothing, old boy," said Tom, soothingly. "If the radio was damaged—"

"It wasn't! I heard it kicking up an awful row again after I got away."

"Well, I expect he thought it was damaged—!" said Warren.

"I don't care what he thought! I tell you he fairly lifted me off the floor with his foot!" hooted Skip. "Let him wait! If he wasn't a pre. I'd punch his head. But you can't punch a pre's head!"

"You can't!" agreed Tom.

"Not quite!" assented Warren.

"Besides, he's too big for me, anyway," added Skip, perhaps remembering that he would have required a step-ladder, or at least a chair, in order to get within punching distance of Denver's head, "I can't punch him. He would just whop me."

"He would!"

"Hard!"

Skip's chums did not always agree with his views. But in this they agreed heartily. It was passed nem. con. in Study Four that Stanley St. Leger Ruggles couldn't punch Denver of the Sixth!

"He's got it coming, all the same!" said Skip. "A man isn't going to boot me on the trousers, and get away with it. I'm getting back on him, see?"

"You can't get back on a pre," said Warren shaking his head.

"Can't I?" said Skip. He seemed to think that he could.

"Denver ain't a bad chap, really," said Tom. "Fellows like him, you know. He just lost his temper—"

"After all, if you barge into a pre's study and knock things over—" argued Warren.

"I'll knock a few more over, before I'm done with him!" said Skip, grimly. "I can't punch him, and I can't boot him like he did me, and I can't even tell him what I think of him without bending over and taking six for it. But there's one thing I can do, and I'm jolly well going to do it."

"And what's that?" asked Tom.

"Ship his radio!" said Skip, triumphantly. "What do you think of that? What do you think Denver will feel like, when he misses his radio, and finds it standing in a bath full of water?"

"Wha-a-a-t?" stuttered King and Warren together. They gazed at their plump chum in horror. "His—his—his radio! Oh, crikey!"

"Think he would be wild?" grinned Skip.

"Wild?" gasped Tom King. "No, not just wild! Mad as a hatter—dangerous as a hungry tiger—why, you mad ass, if you touch his radio—!"

"I'm going to."

"You're not!" yelled Warren.

"I jolly well am!" declared Skip. "That will jolly well get back on him—booting a man on his trousers! Wow! I'm going to nip into his study when he's not there, snoop that portable, and take it up to the bathrooms—"

"You mad ass—"

"Fill a bath with water, and stick it in! Denver can hunt for it when he wants it, and find it! Ha, Ha!"

Skip laughed! Evidently he was greatly tickled by the idea of Denver of the Sixth missing his radio, hunting for it, and finding it in a bath of water. He was so tickled that he almost forgot the lingering effects of that hefty kick. He roared. Study Four echoed to his mirth.

Skip seemed to expect his friends to join in his merriment. But they did not. They only stared at him, with a horrified stare.

"You mad ass!" repeated Tom King. "If you go ragging in a Sixth-form study, you'll get the whopping of your life."

"Who's to know?" grinned Skip. "I shan't leave my card on Denver's table."

"Look here, you fat ass," said Dick Warren. "Just forget all about it, see? That radio's the apple of Denver's eye. Why, everybody knows that he's nuts on it. You're not going anywhere near Denver's radio."

"Ain't I?" said Skip. "Ain't I just!"

"No!" hooted his two chums, together.

"I want you fellows to back me up," said Skip, unheeding. "They're at soccer practice now—hardly a man in the Sixth form studies. I want you fellows to come and keep cave in the passage, while I nip into Denver's study—"

"Fathead!"

"Forget it!"

"If you won't—!" snapped Skip.

"No 'if' about that!" said Tom King. "We won't, and you won't either!"

You're not going to land in the biggest row of your fatheaded life, if we can stop you."

"You just try stopping me!" said Skip, with a warlike look. "I'm going to Denver's study now, and if you fellows won't keep cave, I'll chance it! And that's that, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it."

And Skip, indignant, marched towards the door.

But "that" was not quite "that". Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged a glance, and then they pinned Skip Ruggles by either fat arm.

"Coming out for a walk, Skip?" asked Tom.

"No!" roared Skip.

"You are!" said Warren.

And Skip did. With a loyal pal gripping either arm, Skip had no choice about going out for a walk. He went protesting—but he went. And his friends did not walk him back to Felgate till tea-time, when there were plenty of seniors about the Sixth-Form studies, and even Skip was not ass enough to think of carrying out his fell designs on Denver's radio.

CHAPTER II

"THIS way, fathead!"

"Hurry up!"

"The bell's stopping, Skip."

"This way, you ass!"

It was "break" the following morning. Crowds of fellows were out in the quad. Among them were the three chums of Study Four: one of whom—the fattest member—cast inimical glances at a tall Sixth-form man on the Sixth-form green. Denver of the Sixth was unconscious of Skip's existence. He had quite forgotten kicking Skip, and probably forgotten that there was such a junior at Felgate at all. Denver was talking to Langdale and Loring, of his form, and Skip might have directed at him a frown as frightful, fearful, and frantic, as that of the Lord High Executioner, without Denver dreaming of noticing it. However, when the bell rang for third school, fellows headed for the form-rooms: and Skip went in with the rest. But before reaching the Fourth-form room, he quitted his chums, and cut off in another direction—Tom King and Dick Warren staring after him, and calling after him, and wondering what Skip fancied he was up to.

"You needn't wait for me!" Skip called over a fat shoulder, and then he disappeared up the staircase.

"That ass!" said Tom.

"That goat!" said Warren.

And they went on, to the form-room, with Bullinger, and Reece, and

Preece, and Carton, and the rest of the Felgate Fourth. Had Skip cut off in the direction of the Sixth-form studies, they might have suspected that he still had designs on Denver's radio. But the Sixth-form studies were on the ground floor, and Skip had cut up the staircase: so it was not that. Which was a relief: for quite probably Denver had gone to his study for his books, for class with the Head: and Skip might have run into him there.

Mr. Charne, the master of the Fourth, let in his form, and noted the absence of his plumpest pupil with a frown. However, Skip was not very late. The others had taken their places, when Skip burst in, panting and breathless. Evidently he had hurried.

"Ruggles!" rapped Mr. Charne.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Skip.

"You are two minutes late."

"I—I—I hurried like anything, sir!" gasped Skip: and it was so clear that the breathless Ruggles had hurried, that Mr. Charne left it at that, and only motioned him to go to his place.

Skip sat down, breathing rather hard but with a lurking grin on his face. Tom King and Dick Warren eyed him. They were well aware that Skip had not abandoned his intention of taking reprisals on Denver of the Sixth. He had recovered from that hefty kick of the day before: but it lingered in his memory. He was going to "get back" on Denver, if he could: and if his loyal chums could not stop him. They had done their best, so far: keeping an eye on Skip, ready to head him off if he made a step in the direction of Denver's study. It annoyed Skip, in fact it exasperated him: but that could not be helped: they were going to keep him out of an awful row, if they could. Now, however, he was safe in form, under Charne's eye: and Denver's radio was safe while Denver was in class with the Head. Yet they could see that something was working in Skip's fat brain.

What it was, they did not know. But they knew ten minutes later, when there was a fat squeak from Skip.

"If you please, sir—"

Mr. Charne glanced at him.

"What is it, Ruggles?"

"I—I remember I—I left the bath-tap running, sir!" stammered Skip. "M-m-may I go up and—and turn it off, sir?"

Mr. Charne gave him a grim look.

"You may certainly do so, Ruggles, and at once: and you will take fifty lines for your carelessness."

"Yes, sir!" said Skip, meekly.

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Tom King. He looked at Warren. Both of them understood. In fact, Skip gave them a fat wink, as he rolled to the door.

"The artful ass!" breathed Warren.

They could do nothing! Skip had leave from the form-room to go up and

turn off that bath-tap. It was, of course, a pretext to get out of the form-room, while Denver was safe in class with the Head! Not a man would be in the Sixth-form studies—Denver's radio was at Skip's mercy: once he was out of form.

That was why he had cut up the stairs when the bell was ringing for third school. He had cut up to the bath-rooms to turn on a tap!

He had told Mr. Charne that he had left a tap turned on! So he had! Skip was a stickler for the truth. He had specially turned on that tap, so that he could tell Charne that he had left it turned on. Besides, he needed a bath of water, when he got hold of Denver's radio!

But his loyal pals were helpless now. Out of form, they could keep a watchful eye on Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. Now they could do nothing: they could not chase out of the form-room in class, after Skip! Ruggles, like an obstinate horse, had to be given his head.

"The ass!" murmured Tom.

"The goat!" muttered Warren.

"If he's spotted—"

"Let's hope he won't be!"

That was all that Skip's anxious chums could hope now. After all, Skip had laid his plans with unexpected artfulness. Denver would not even know that the portable was gone from his study till after his hour with the Head. He would hunt for it, no doubt wild with wrath: and ultimately discover it in a bath of water. Unless Skip left some clue, how was anyone going to know that Skip had had a hand in it? If it had been any fellow but Skip, King and Warren would have felt easier in their minds. But the fathead of the Fourth was born to bungle. They could only hope fervently that he would not bungle this time.

"The ass—!" murmured Tom.

"The burbling chump—!" muttered Warren.

Mr. Charne glanced up from his desk with a frown.

"Silence in the class!" he rapped. Whispers seemed to have reached him.

And Skip's chums ceased to confide to one another what they thought of Skip! They were doing Latin papers in the Fourth, under Charne's eye. There was silence in the form-room, save for a scratching of pens. But Tom and Warren, in their anxiety for their chum, were producing the two worst Latin proses that had ever been seen in Mr. Charne's form-room. It could not be helped. They were too worried about their fat and fatuous chum to concentrate. Where was Skip, and what was he up to?

They suddenly knew!

The silence was broken with startling suddenness. From somewhere came a burst of unexpected, amazing, startling, thundering sound! It was the sudden roar of a band, playing the "Grand March" from Tannhäuser, and playing it at full force and close range. That sudden burst of march music echoed in every corner of the school. It was heard in every form-room—in every other inhabited spot—It roared, it bellowed, it thundered. Latin in the Fourth-form room

ceased as suddenly as Greek in the Sixth. Mr. Charne, generally the calmest of men, bounded. Tom King, Dick Warren, and every other Fourth-former, jumped, and stared, and exclaimed.

Never, at Felgate, had lessons been interrupted in so extraordinary a manner before. It was amazing—incredible—unbelievable! But there it was! Felgate echoed and re-echoed to the roar of the Grand March from Tanhäuser, going full blast. Charne rushed to the door—every other master at Felgate came out of his form-room—even the majestic Head himself, Dr. Leicester, emerged from the Sixth.

“What—?”

“Who—?”

“How—?”

“Skip!” groaned Tom King. “He’s done it, now!”

Skip had!

CHAPTER III

SKIP told his chums afterwards that it was not his fault. It was just one of those things! Just rotten luck! The sort of thing that a fellow really couldn’t help! Undoubtedly it was the sort of thing that Skip couldn’t help. If there was the remotest chance of bungling anything, the fathead of Felgate was not the man to lose that chance.

It had all gone beautifully according to plan—up to a point. Skip had laid that plan with uncommon artfulness. He was out of form, when every other fellow was in. He had the run of the House unobserved and unsuspected. Denver, in class with the Head, couldn’t even dream that his precious radio was in danger. There was no one to interfere with Skip. Skip Ruggles was free to do that which was right in his own eyes: and that which was right in Skip’s eyes was bagging Denver’s radio, and consigning it to a bath full of water, in reprisal for the kick in the pants bestowed on him by Denver. Skip was grinning all over his fat face, as he trod into Denver’s study, in the Sixth, and picked up that portable. He was grinning as he left Denver’s study, with the portable under a fat arm. Portable as that radio was, it was a little heavy for Skip to carry: and it nearly slipped from under the fat arm in Denver’s doorway. But he retrieved it, and marched on. He reached the staircase.

All that remained was to carry the portable up, deposit it in the bath, and then return to his form-room, triumphant. But the portable, as stated, was heavy for Skip to carry: and it was not surprising that he stumbled on the stairs with it. Skip was the man to stumble. He was on the fourth stair when he stumbled, and the radio, this time, did slip from under his fat arm, and bumped on the stairs.

That would not have mattered so much, if the bump had not shifted the knob that turned it on!

But it did!

Instantly, and with a suddenness that deafened Skip, the radio burst into music. They happened, at that moment, to be broadcasting the Grand March from Tannhäuser: a sufficiently emphatic piece of music. The Grand March blared out of Denver's radio at full blast.

That radio was turned full on: and when it was turned full on, it was a goer. It roared—it blared—it bellowed!

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Skip.

He plunged at the dreadful thing to stop it.

Skip's cue was silence. He did not want to attract attention while he was conveying Denver's radio from the Sixth-form studies to a bath-room. But he realized that he must be attracting attention now. Only an extremely deaf person, if there had been any such at Felgate, could have remained unaware of the Grand March from Tannhäuser. He plunged wildly at the radio, his hurried grab pushing it from the fourth stair to the third, and a second hurried grab helping it on to the next below: and Skip, losing his footing in those hurried grabs downward, slipped over and rolled after it.

It was, as Skip said sadly afterwards, really rotten luck. When he had knocked over that radio in Denver's study the day before, it had turned the beastly thing off. Now dropping it had turned it on! It was almost as if the wretched thing had a will of its own, and was bent on bothering Skip. Even rolling from stair to stair did not stop its thunderous roar. It landed at the foot of the staircase, with Skip sprawling headlong after it, and roared on.

A minute ago, Skip had been quite on his own. But in less than a minute, the spaces round Skip became quite thickly populated, with amazed masters billowing out of form-rooms. The Sixth-form room being nearest, Dr. Leicester was first on the scene: and he gazed in wrathful astonishment at a plump junior sprawling, and a radio roaring, at the foot of the staircase, Mr. Charne was only a moment or two after him, from the Fourth-form room. Mr. Morney, from the Shell, Mr. Kye, from the Fifth, Gudge the house-porter, Monsieur Pin the French master, arrived—and Langdale, Denver, Loring, and other prefects followed the Head. Many eyes fixed on Skip Ruggles as he scrambled up: Charne's with a deadly gleam in them.

"Boy!" gasped the Head.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Skip.

"Ruggles!" thundered Mr. Charne.

"My radio!" almost yelled Denver of the Sixth.

"Stop it!" Dr. Leicester put his hands to his ears. "Stop that dreadful noise—stop it at once!"

Denver jumped at the radio. He grabbed it and shut it off. Silence, blessed silence, fell on the scene: and never had silence seemed so golden.

Skip stood almost gibbering. Denver gave him a look, which hinted of things to come. Charne's eyes fairly glittered at him. The Head's face was like a thundercloud.

"Is—is—is that dreadful instrument yours, Denver?" gasped the Head.

"Yes, sir—it's my radio—"

"Take it away."

Denver took it away.

"Mr. Charne!" Dr. Leicester gazed at the Fourth-form master. "This boy, I think is in your form—"

"Yes, sir—Ruggles of my form—"

"I am amazed, Mr. Charne! I fail to understand this! The boy is out of form in third school—he has caused a disturbance interrupting lessons—a dreadful disturbance—an unheard-of disturbance—This is not what is expected, Mr. Charne, of a form-master at Felgate!"



The radio burst into music.

Mr. Charne had to take that, as it came from the Chief. The Head turned, and rustled back to the Sixth form room. Charne's eyes almost burned into Skip.

"Ruggles!" His voice was like the filing of a saw.

"Oh, dear! Yes, sir!" moaned Skip.

"Follow me at once."

Skip limped after his form-master to the Fourth-form room. Tom King, Dick Warren, all the Fourth, stared at him, as he came in. Mr. Charne picked up the cane from his desk.

"Bend over, Ruggles!"

"Oh, lor!"

What followed was painful: very painful. Charne had had to take it, from the Head: Skip had to take it, from Charne. It was a suffering Skip that wriggled, and wriggled, and wriggled, during the remainder of third school.

SKIP's chums walked Skip off to Study Four after third school, and sympathized. But they could not help grinning while they sympathized. It was so like Skip—it was just exactly Skip—it was Skip all over! They sympathized and chuckled.

"Poor old Skip—ha, ha!"

"Rough luck, old fellow—ha, ha, ha!"

"Wow!" moaned Skip. "Ow! wow! I say, Charne laid it on! Wow! Ow!"

Skip wriggled and wriggled.

But there was at least one good outcome: Skip was no longer on the war-path. He had had enough of the war-path. Denver had kicked him—and in fact, during the next day or two, Denver gave him a few extra ones. But Skip planned no more plans: that radio in Denver's study was, henceforth, quite safe from the fat hands of the fathead of Felgate.

THE END