

FIREWORKS at FELGATE!

FRANK RICHARDS



CHAPTER I

“KING! Warren!”

Charne, master of the Fourth Form at Felgate, barked.

“Oh!”

“Yes, sir!”

Tom King and Dick Warren came to a halt. They were coming in at the school gates, after a walk down to Fell, when Charne happened.

It was a dim November day, and the sun seemed to have forgotten to shine. But King and Warren were looking quite merry and bright: no doubt in anticipation of the morrow, the glorious Fifth, when there was going to be a bonfire in the School Field, with cracking crackers, squibbing squibs, whizzing catherine-wheels, and general uproar and hilarity. But their cheery faces became quite serious as Charne bore down on them.

At that particular moment, they would have been particularly glad not to encounter their form-master. Charne had very keen eyes, rather like pin-points, which often spotted things that fellows in his form would have preferred Charne not to spot.

Those pin-point eyes were fixed on King and Warren, very sharply.

“You have been out of gates!” said Mr. Charne.

"Yes, sir."

"Where have you been?"

"Only a walk down to Fell, sir, before class."

King and Warren answered in turn, looking, to the best of their ability, as if butter would not have melted in their mouths.

Charne seemed suspicious.

On Bonfire Day, Felgate fellows were permitted to revel in fireworks to their hearts' content and the old school echoed and re-echoed with bangs. But there was a strict rule on the subject. Explosives in the studies were deemed dangerous by the powers that were. On the morning of the Fifth, fellows could splash all the cash they possessed, on fireworks, if they liked. But not a single cracker was allowed over-night. It was a good and useful rule, no doubt: but schoolboys do not always see eye to eye with school-masters: and that rule was sometimes more honoured in the breach than the observance. For instance Skip Ruggles, who chummed with King and Warren in No. 4 Study, had been caught with crackers, regardless of rules: and Skip was still wriggling, after a visit to his form-master's study, when King and Warren walked down to Fell.

Perhaps that was why Charne was suspicious. At any rate, his keen eyes seemed almost to stick into King and Warren like pins. Warren wondered uneasily whether a slight bulge in his pocket was visible. Little escaped those pin-points.

"I trust," went on Mr. Charne, and his voice was deep. "I trust that you have not forgotten, King and Warren, that fireworks must not be smuggled into the school."

"Oh, no, sir!"

"We remember, sir."

The answer was prompt and veracious. King and Warren certainly had not forgotten. Perhaps they had disregarded: but undoubtedly they had not forgotten!

"Ruggles has been caned for doing so!" said Mr. Charne.

King and Warren were not surprised to hear that. Skip was the fellow to be caught. They hoped for better luck for themselves.

"Very well!" said Mr. Charne, after a brief pause. "You will be well-advised to remember that rule, King and Warren."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"Certainly, sir."

"And no doubt," added Mr. Charne. "You will have no objection to showing me what it is that is bulging in your pocket, Warren."

Only too clearly, Charne was suspicious! Skip had been caught: and these

two juniors were Skip's chums. And that bulge, slight as it was, had not escaped the pin-points.

"Oh, certainly, sir!" said Warren.

His hand went to the bulging pocket. Tom King almost ceased to breathe, as Warren drew out a packet therefrom. It was a cardboard carton, and on it was the familiar legend: TOOTLE'S TEMPTING TOFFEE.

Mr. Charne gave a slight start.

Then his stern brow relaxed.

It had looked suspicious. Skip Ruggles had had crackers—and King and Warren were his study-mates in No. 4: and they had gone down to Fell just before class, and a pocket was bulging when they returned! Undoubtedly, there had been grounds for suspicion.

But the sight of that toffee-carton disarmed Charne. Certainly there was no harm in a Felgate fellow dropping into the village shop for a packet of the harmless and necessary toffee!

Charne's severe face not only relaxed. He smiled.

"Oh!" he said. "I see! Very well—you may go."

Charne resumed his walk in the quad.

King and Warren were glad to go. Never, indeed, had they been so glad to lose the company of their form-master.

"Oh, what luck!" breathed Tom, when Charne was out of hearing. "If you hadn't thought of that dodge, Dick—"

"Or if Charne had!" murmured Warren.

They smiled as they walked on to the House. At the door they came on Skip Ruggles. Skip was not smiling. Skip was looking sad and sorrowful. Every now and then he wriggled.

"I say, I've had whops!" mumbled Skip. "Charne spotted those crackers I had—"

"Fathead!" said Tom King.

"Ass!" said Dick Warren.

That was all the sympathy the fat Skip received from his study-mates. They passed on, and left him to wriggle. They were rather anxious to get up to the study, with that packet labelled: "Tootle's Tempting Toffee". Considering what it actually contained, it was only prudent not to carry it about.

In No. 4 Study, in the Fourth, Dick Warren extracted it from his pocket once more and dropped it on the study table. Across the table, the two young scamps grinned at one another.

"If Charne had guessed—!" said Tom.

"Well, he wouldn't!" said Warren.

"No—of course he wouldn't!" agreed Tom King. "Nothing to make a beak suspicious, in a packet of toffee!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, we've got our jumping-crackers now," said Warren. "Lucky I thought of jamming them into that toffee-carton at the shop, what? You can't be too careful, and a pre. might have stopped us and asked questions. Any fellow might have a packet of toffee in his pocket."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We can't let them off till after dark," went on Warren. "Then there's going to be some bang! And the beaks and pre's can wonder who had fireworks."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the chums of the Fourth, eminently satisfied with their success as smugglers, quitted No. 4, laughing.

CHAPTER II

"OH!" gasped Skip. "Good!"

His fat face brightened.

The bell was ringing for class. Ruggles had come up to his study for a book that was wanted in form with Charne. It lay on the study table, and he picked it up: and was turning to the door, when another object on the table caught his eye. He turned back.

He had no time to waste. The bell might stop any minute, and Charne was always sharp, if a fellow was late. Skip had no more than time to get down to the Fourth-Form room.

Nevertheless, he turned back. TOOTLE'S TEMPTING TOFFEE were magic words to Skip Ruggles. Skip liked toffee. More precisely, he loved it, Skip was always a little sticky.

He grabbed up that packet.

Skip had been feeling down on his luck. He had lost his crackers, and he had had whops from Charne. Since they had come in from their walk down to Fell, Tom King and Dick Warren had been punting a football, in company with a crowd of other Fourth-form fellows. But Skip had not been in the least disposed to join the crowd with the footer. He had leaned on a buttress. slowly—very slowly—recovering from Charne's whops. He had not stirred till the bell rang, and then he stirred unwillingly. It was a sorrowful Skip.

But TOOTLE'S TEMPTING TOFFEE made a tremendous difference.

It brightened life for Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. He was still feeling twinges from Mr. Charne's cane. But he forgot them now, as he clutched up that packet.

"Good!" gasped Skip.

He had no doubt that King or Warren had brought that toffee in from Fell, as he had not seen it in the study before. They wouldn't mind if he sampled it. They wouldn't mind very much if he scoffed it entire. Not that Skip was going to scoff it entire—if he could resist its lure after sampling it! But undoubtedly he was going to sample it. Skip was in need of consolation: and here was the very identical consolation he would have chosen! He would have been up in the study much earlier, had he known that toffee was there.

But, even as he clutched up the packet, the bell ceased to ring.

There was no time for sampling that toffee on the spot. He dared not be late for class. He had had enough trouble with Charne for one day: and he did not want Charne's eyes pinning him as he came late into form. Reluctantly, but inevitably, Skip Ruggles shoved that carton into his pocket, to be sampled later at the first convenient opportunity, and hurried out of the study.

He cut down the staircase, and cut for the form-room. He was the last to arrive there, and he arrived breathless. The juniors were going in.

"Hurry up, fathead," called out Tom King, from the form-room door.



Skip liked toffee. He grabbed the packet

"Sprint!" called out Dick Warren.

Skip sprinted, and reached the door just before it closed. Mr. Charne gave him a look as he rolled in breathless. However, Skip was just in time, and Charne let it go at that.

Skip Ruggles took his place in form, with the rest. The lesson was history, but seldom had Skip been less interested in the annals of his native land. He could not help thinking of that packet in his pocket.

He had not had a chance of opening it. He longed to open it and get at the contents. But it was too awfully risky, with Charne. Charne was fearfully severe about such things—a fellow who brought "stickers" into the form-room was simply asking for the vials of wrath. Once or twice Skip slipped a fat hand into his pocket, to feel the carton there. But he dared not draw it forth. Even when Charne's back was turned, you never knew—he might whirl round quite suddenly, and spot a fellow.

Skip's plump mouth watered for the contents of that packet. His fat hand, in his pocket, caressed it lovingly.

Certainly, it would have ceased to water, had Skip been aware that that toffee-carton contained, not toffee, but closely-packed jumping-crackers, surreptitiously smuggled into the school under the harmless label of toffee. But Skip was not aware of that. A packet labelled Tootle's Tempting Toffee was, to Skip, a packet of Tootle's Tempting Toffee: merely that, and nothing more—just as it had been to Charne.

"Ruggles!" Charne's voice came suddenly.

Skip jumped.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" he gasped.

"Why are you fumbling in your pocket, Ruggles?"

"Oh! Was—was—was I, sir?" stammered Skip.

"I have noticed it several times, Ruggles. Kindly sit still, and give attention to the lesson."

"Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir."

Skip sat still, and gave attention to the lesson—as much attention as he could. Most of the Fourth were giving attention. Many of them, probably, were thinking more of the morrow, the Fifth of November, than of the Spanish Armada, the subject of the lesson. Tom King and Dick Warren, certainly, were thinking of letting off those jumping-crackers, after dark, which they had so successfully smuggled into Felgate. But you had to be wary, with Charne. Even Skip tried to dismiss toffee from his fat mind, and take some interest in the defeat of the Spanish invaders, and the exploits of the great Drake who had drummed them down the Channel long ago.

But if the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. Skip longed for that toffee.

He yearned for it. And when Mr. Charne noticed that the form-room fire was low and picked up the poker to give it a stir, it seemed to Skip that a chance had come.

Charne's portly back was turned. Even Charne had no eyes in the back of his head. He was poking at a knob of coal in the grate, and it seemed a rather obstinate knob—Charne poked again and again.

Skip slipped his hand into his pocket.

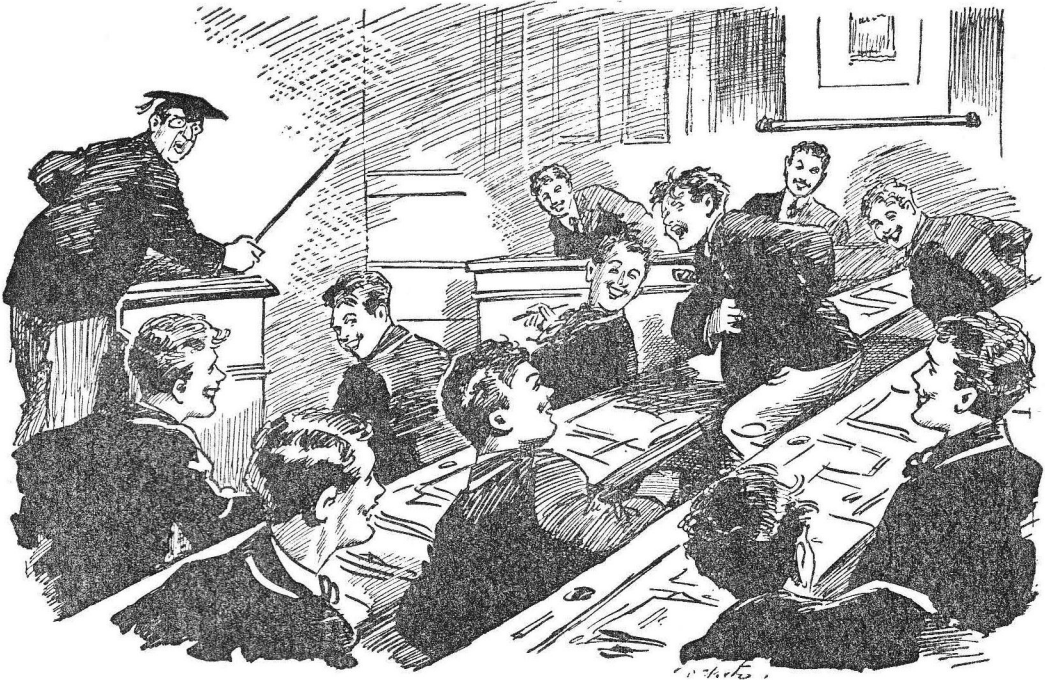
He dared not draw forth that packet and open it. But he could wriggle the end of the carton loose in his pocket, and draw forth a single chunk of toffee with his fat fingers. Once popped into his mouth, it would be all right. Really, he needed only seconds.

He wriggled at that packet with plump fingers.

"Ruggles!"

"Oh!" gasped Skip.

Another moment, and fat fingers would have been digging into that packet for a chunk of toffee. But that moment was not granted Skip. Charne whirled round. Skip's hand flew from his pocket—empty! Charne's eyes pin-pointed him.



"What is it in that pocket, Ruggles?"

"Ruggles! You are fumbling in your pocket again! What is it you have in that pocket, Ruggles?"

"Oh!" mumbled Skip. "I—I—I—er—oh—I—I—" Skip's voice trailed away. The game was up. It was not the first time that Skip had been caught with "stickers" in the form-room. He could see that Charne guessed!

"Ruggles! Stand out before the form."

Skip stood dismally out before the form. All eyes were on him—Tom King's and Dick Warren's rather anxiously. Certainly, they had not the remotest idea that their plump chum had annexed that packet they had left in No. 4 Study. But they could guess, as Charne did, that he had "stickers" about him: and they were anxious for him. Charne was looking quite fierce.

"Now, Ruggles—!"

"Yes, sir!" moaned Skip.

"Turn out that pocket on my desk."

Skip could almost have wept. He had not tasted that Tempting Toffee—he had not even got the packet open—and now he had to give it up: it was going from his gaze like a beautiful dream!

Slowly, very slowly, he extracted Tootle's Tempting Toffee from his pocket, and laid it on the master's desk.

Mr. Charne picked it up.

"Toffee!" he said, grimly.

"Ooogh! Yes, sir!" mumbled Skip.

"You have been punished more than once, Ruggles, for bringing comestibles into the form-room. You will take two hundred lines, Ruggles. Go back to your place."

"Yes, sir!" Skip backed a step: then he paused. "If—If—if you please, sir—"

"Well!" rapped Mr. Charne.

"Mum-mum-mum-may I—may I have my toffee after class, sir?" stammered Skip.

Charne gave him a freezing look.

"You may not, Ruggles! There!"

Charne, with a sweep of his hand, tossed Tootle's Tempting Toffee into the fireplace. Skip's eyes followed the packet, as it landed. Evidently, he was not going to have that Tempting Toffee after class. Charne was making an end of that Tempting Toffee. As sadly as Dido's sorrowful eyes watched the departing sails of Aeneas, did Skip's gaze follow that packet. Sparks rose, as it dropped into the embers, and the flames licked round it.

"Now go back to your place, Ruggles," said Mr. Charne, sternly. "And if anything of this kind should recur, I shall—Oh! What—what—Oh!"

BANG!

CHAPTER III

BANG!

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Every fellow in the Fourth form-room jumped. Mr. Charne jumped. Charne was a portly gentleman, and did not look much of a jumper. Never before had his form seen him jump. Now they did! He jumped clear of the form room floor.

Bang! bang!

No doubt it was very startling. A toffee-packet had been tossed into the fire. Toffee was not explosive. It should have been consumed quietly, and disappeared without a sound. Instead of which, it exploded right and left, scattering sparks and cinders and smoke, as if Charne had pitched a bomb into the grate.

Every fellow was on his feet. Skip, tottering, blinked at the explosive fireplace in dizzy amazement.

Bang! bang! bang!

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Charne. "What—what—what—"

Bang! bang! bang!

"It's fireworks!" gasped Tom King.

"Fireworks!" breathed Dick Warren. Then he guessed it! "Oh, that clown—that chump—that fathead—he must have bagged it in the study, thinking it was toffee—"

Bang! bang! bang!

From the midst of the fire something leaped out. It was a jumping-cracker! It landed almost at Mr. Charne's feet. It banged there, and Charne gave another convulsive jump. Just as if it had a will of its own, that cracker jumped after him, and banged again, and yet again. Charne, clutching up his gown, jumped and jumped, unintentionally giving a very good imitation of a very active kangaroo.

Bang! bang! bang! bang!

"Oh, crumbs—!"

"Fireworks—"

"That ass Skip—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

BANG!

It was the final bang. The packet of crackers was exhausted at last. Scattered fragments of fireworks, scattered cinders, gushing smoke, and a smell

of gunpowder, remained. Some of the juniors were laughing. But they ceased to be amused, as Charne's eye glittered over the form. Charne's expression did not encourage merriment.

"Ruggles!" Charne's voice was like the grinding of a very rusty saw. "Ruggles!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"Ruggles! How dare you? It was not toffee in that packet—"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped the bewildered Skip. "It was—was—was toffee, sir—at least I thought it was—it was labelled toffee, sir, and I—I thought—oh, crumbs!"

Charne's cane was in his hand now.

But he paused. The bewildered dismay in Skip's face was convincing. He realized that Ruggles couldn't have known what was in that packet.

He gave Skip a searching look. Then the glinting eyes pin-pointed two other members of the form.

"King! Warren! Stand out!"

Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged an eloquent look. They could guess that Charne remembered, now, that innocent-looking packet, labelled toffee, that they had brought in from Fell. Sadly they stood out before the form.

"King! Warren! Shortly before class, when you came in from Fell, you showed me a packet marked toffee. I believed that it contained toffee. Was it the same packet that Ruggles believed to contain toffee?"

There was no help for it!

"I—I—I suppose so, sir!" mumbled Tom.

"It did not contain toffee?"

"Nunno, sir."

"It contained fireworks—fireworks concealed in a toffee packet!" thundered Mr. Charne. "Fireworks smuggled into the school in disregard of the strict rule on the subject!"

Tom King and Dick Warren stood silent. A little too late, they wished that they had paid a little more regard to school rules! But it had seemed so safe—that packet had actually passed under Charne's own eyes unsuspected. It had seemed safe as houses—only they hadn't counted on Skip!

There was nothing for them to say. So they said nothing. Charne swished the cane, and then pointed with it to a desk.

"Bend over!"

What followed was quite harrowing!

CHAPTER IV

AFTER class, two members of the Felgate Fourth, still feeling severe twinges, found a little solace in booting Skip. Skip, having realized what he had done, was sorry—sincerely sorry that he had landed his chums with a licking. He was sorrier still when those exasperated chums were through with him! Not one of the three members of Study Four had a happy recollection of those Fireworks at Felgate.

THE END