

SKIP'S STRATAGEM!

By FRANK RICHARDS



He backed away, very cautiously, from the big oak

CHAPTER I

SKIP was not really to blame.
It was all Reece's fault.

Skip had no more idea of shying that mouldy orange at Perkinson of the Fifth, than of shying it at his own beak, Mr. Charne, or even at the Head, the majestic Dr. Leicester himself.

In fact he did not even see Perkinson, until it happened.

Reece of the Fourth was the original possessor of the orange. Having ascertained that it was too far advanced in over-ripeness for mastication, Reece found another use for it. He buzzed it at Skip Ruggles in the quad, neatly catching Skip on a plump chin. Skip, in surprise, clapped a fat hand to a juicy chin, as the missile dropped at his feet. And Skip immediately did what any other Felgate fellow would have done in his place: he grabbed up the orange, and hurled it back at the hurler.

But Skip, as his chums in Study Four often told him, was cack-handed. Either Tom King or Dick Warren would have landed that squashy missile fair and square in the middle of Reece's features. Skip missed him by a yard or more, and the orange whizzed on its way past him. It was sheer ill-luck that Perkinson of the Fifth was passing at the time.

Perkinson, a big hefty senior, a great games-man, was taking no heed of the juniors. Possibly he was thinking of the goals he was going to score against Dolcot: or perhaps of his last spot of bother with his form-master, Kye. Anyhow he was not thinking of Skip Ruggles or of mouldy oranges, and that whizzing chunk of squashiness came to him like a bolt from the blue. It squashed on his left ear, and juice ran down his collar. And the glare that Perkinson cast about him was like unto the petrifying glare of the fabled basilisk, only more so.

"Oh!" gasped Skip, when he saw what he had done.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Reece.

To Reece it seemed funny. But it did not seem at all funny to Skip Ruggles, when a towering Fifth-form man strode at him.

"You cheeky little tick!" gasped Perkinson. "You little fat footling freak, why, I'll smash you up into little pieces for that. I'll—I'll—"

Skip did not wait to hear what the Fifth-form man was going to do. He had no time to explain. Moreover, explanation would not have removed fragments of mouldy orange from Perkinson's ear, or the juice that was oozing down his neck. Prompt retreat was indicated. The big senior's grasp was almost upon him. Skip fled for his life.

After him rushed Perkinson.

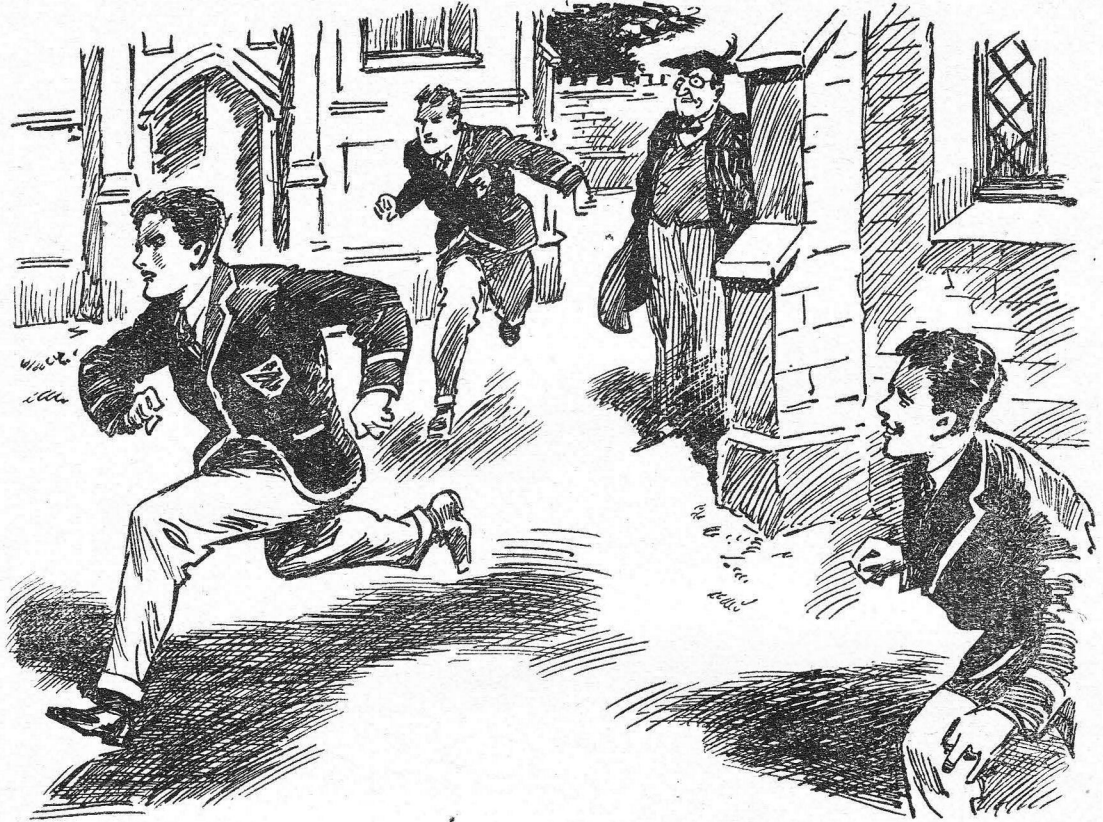
"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Reece. He was quite enjoying himself.

Skip was much too plump for a foot-race, especially with a long-legged senior like Perkinson. He put on speed: he panted, he puffed, and he blew: but Perkinson gained at every stride. Very fortunately for him, Mr. Kye, the master of the Fifth, bore down on the scene.

"Perkinson! Stop!" boomed Kye.

Perkinson reluctantly came to a halt. Kye frowned at him thunderously. He was never quite pleased with Perkinson, whose howlers in the Fifth-form room amused the Fifth but quite failed to amuse the Fifth-form beak. Only that morning, Perk had mixed his subjunctives in a way that showed that he was thinking more of Soccer than of the stately tongue of Horace and Cicero. And now Kye caught him in the act of chasing a fat fag across the quad. Kye let the thunder roll.

"Disgraceful!" boomed Kye. "You, a senior boy, chasing about with small boys in the quadrangle—absurd! Childish! Behave yourself with more circum-



Skip fled for his life

spection, Perkinson! Have some sense of propriety! Do not let me see you racing about with small boys again!"

With that, Kye rolled on, frowning: leaving Percival Perkinson in almost a foaming state. In the meantime, Skip had escaped: which was so much to the good from the point of view of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. But he had a well-founded apprehension about what might happen the next time he met Perkinson: and during that day, it was a watchful Skip, with an alert eye wide open for Perkinson of the Fifth.

CHAPTER II

"ASS!" said Tom King.
"Fathead!" said Dick Warren.

That was all the comfort Skip obtained from his chums in Study Four.

However, they were prepared to stand by him, if Perkinson came up to the junior studies on the war-path. But a battle in Study Four, with so mighty a man as Perkinson, was a very doubtful proposition. Skip himself was of little use as a warrior: and while King and Warren were both strong and sturdy, they were only juniors, and Perkinson was a huge senior in the Fifth, capable of dealing with juniors like Gulliver with Lilliputians. Fortunately for Study Four, Perk did not come up. Skip, indeed, was far from anxious to commit his chums to so terrific a combat on his behalf. He was very relieved that Perkinson did not come up to the junior studies.

In fact, as the day waned, he began to hope that Perkinson had let the matter drop, as nothing had been heard from him.

Nevertheless, when after tea he rolled in the quad, a glimpse of Perkinson in the distance sent him scuttling for cover. Perkinson was walking with Purrings, his pal in the Fifth, and frowning as he walked and talked. Skip, spotting him from afar, backed promptly round one of the old Felgate oaks. There was a bench under that oak, and Skip had been going to sit down on it,—instead of which, he backed round the massive old trunk, and palpitated there out of sight, waiting till the two Fifth-form men walked on and disappeared.

But his luck was out. They walked on, but they did not disappear. They walked as far as the bench under that oak, and sat down on it. Skip trembled on his side of the trunk.

“Forget it, old man!” he heard Purrings say.

“Don’t be a silly ass, if you can help it,” came a growling reply from Perkinson. “How would you like a mouldy orange banging in your ear, and mouldy juice running down your neck?”

Skip was glad that that oak was between him and Perkinson! Evidently, Perk was not letting the matter drop! His wrath had not abated. Probably it had improved, like wine, with keeping.

“Not only that!” went on Perkinson. “But Kye! Old Kye! He spotted me chasing that cheeky young scoundrel, and jawed me! Does he ever lose a chance of jawing me! He fancied I was playing games with a small kid—what are you grinning at, Purring?”

“Oh! Nothing! But—”

“Nothing to grin at, is there, in old Kye making silly mistakes, and talking rot?” snorted Perkinson. “Me, a man in the First Eleven, called over the coals and jawed for chasing about with a fag! The old ass! I’d a jolly good mind to tell Kye where he got off.”

“My dear chap—”

“Well, I can’t slang old Kye, but I can jolly well give that cheeky little fat rascal the licking of his life!” said Perkinson. “And that’s what I’m going to

do. I've had an eye open for him, but he seems to be keeping out of my way, and if I go up to the studies after him, that means a row, and Kye would butt in again if he got half-a-chance. But I know how. I've looked into the Fourth Form dormitory, and picked out young Ruggles' bed."

"What the dickens for?"

"I'm going to drop into that dorm after lights out, with a box-strap—."

"Oh, my hat!"

"A dozen or so with a box-strap will teach him not to buzz mouldy oranges at a Fifth-form man, I fancy. It won't take a couple of minutes."

"If you start a rough-and-tumble in a junior dormitory—."

"Rot! I shall be through, and gone, before the other young ruffians know what's happening, or that anything is. They won't even know who came. I suppose you know it's dark after lights out."

"You're not a cat, Perk." Purring pointed out. "You can't see in the dark. If you pitch into the wrong man—."



Skip trembled on his side of the trunk

"I tell you I've located his bed. It's the sixth from the window end. There'll be a bit of a glimmer from the window. I shall get the right man all right."

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Skip, inaudibly.

He backed away, very cautiously, from the oak. Keeping it between him and the bench, he retreated with infinite caution: and vanished from the spot without either Perkinson or Purring having the slightest idea that he had been there. He retreated safely: but in a dismal and apprehensive frame of mind. Only too clearly, Perkinson was not letting that matter drop, till he had administered the licking which, in his opinion, Ruggles of the Fourth richly deserved. And there was nothing to stop him. Once in the dormitory, there was no escape for Skip: and Perkinson was coming to the dormitory after lights out with a box strap! Skip could almost feel that box strap impinging upon his plump limbs. It was a very painful prospect.

CHAPTER III

REECE, who had caused that spot of bother in the first place, quite inadvertently and unintentionally solved that problem for Skip Ruggles.

It was a worried Skip who came up to the dormitory with the Fourth that night. There was a weight on Skip's plump mind. The impending visit of Perkinson of the Fifth, after lights out, hung over his fat head like the sword of Damocles of old. He could see no escape from the box-strap. There was no hope that Perkinson would miss him in the dark: for had not Perk ascertained which was his bed, counting the sixth from the window end. In the merest glimmer of starlight from the window, Perk could easily pick out the sixth bed. And a box-strap in a hefty hand was to come down on the inhabitant of that bed!

True, his chums would stand by him, if he called on their aid: but that was not really much of a resource: for the three of them could hardly have handled so redoubtable an athlete as Perkinson of the Fifth: especially wielding a box-strap. Such intervention was likely to lead to thrashings for three instead of for one. An alternative idea was to remain awake that night, and dodge under the bed when the avenger came. But Skip was doubtful whether he could remain awake—he was much better at sleeping than at waking, at the best of times. And if he did, could he dodge Perkinson?

It was a worried Skip: and his worry showed in his lugubrious fat face, and seemed to amuse Reece. Reece grinned at him, as he sat on the edge of his bed, slowly removing his socks.

"That Fifth-form man, still after you, fatty?" asked Reece.

Skip gave him a glare.

"It's all your fault," he snapped. "I never meant that orange for that Fifth-form fathead—."

"Ha, ha, ha!" chortled Reece. "Well, you're all right now—but look out for him to-morrow."

Skip grunted. He was not thinking of to-morrow: it was to-night that worried him, though Reece, of course, was not aware of that.

"You're so jolly cack-handed," grinned Reece. "If you chuck a thing at a chap, you should chuck it like this!"

Reece was standing at his wash-stand, with a sponge in his hand. He suddenly whizzed that sponge at Skip, as he sat on his bed. Reece, at any rate, was not cack-handed. The sponge flew straight to its target, catching Skip in a fat neck.

"Wow!" gasped Skip, as water spurted over him. "Why, you cheeky rotter!" He rolled off the bed, and clutched up the sponge. It whizzed back at Reece, missing him by a foot or more.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Reece.

It was the last straw! Skip had had enough,—more than enough—from Reece. With a flaming fat face, he grabbed up the water-jug from Reece's wash-stand and turned on him, swamping water from the jug.

"Take that!" he roared.

Reece did not "take it". He dodged in time, and the torrent of water passed him by. It did not touch Reece: but it landed in a flood on his bed. Reece's bed almost swam in water.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Reece. "You clumsy ass, look what you've done!"

Skip looked!

"Serve you jolly well right!" he retorted.

"Hear, hear," chuckled Tom King. "You've asked for that, Reece. You'll be a bit damp in that bed."

"Just a few!" grinned Dick Warren.

Reece was not laughing now. He stared at his bed, swimming in water. It did not look inviting. Like many practical jokers, Reece did not enjoy a joke when he was at the unpleasant end. His face was furious.

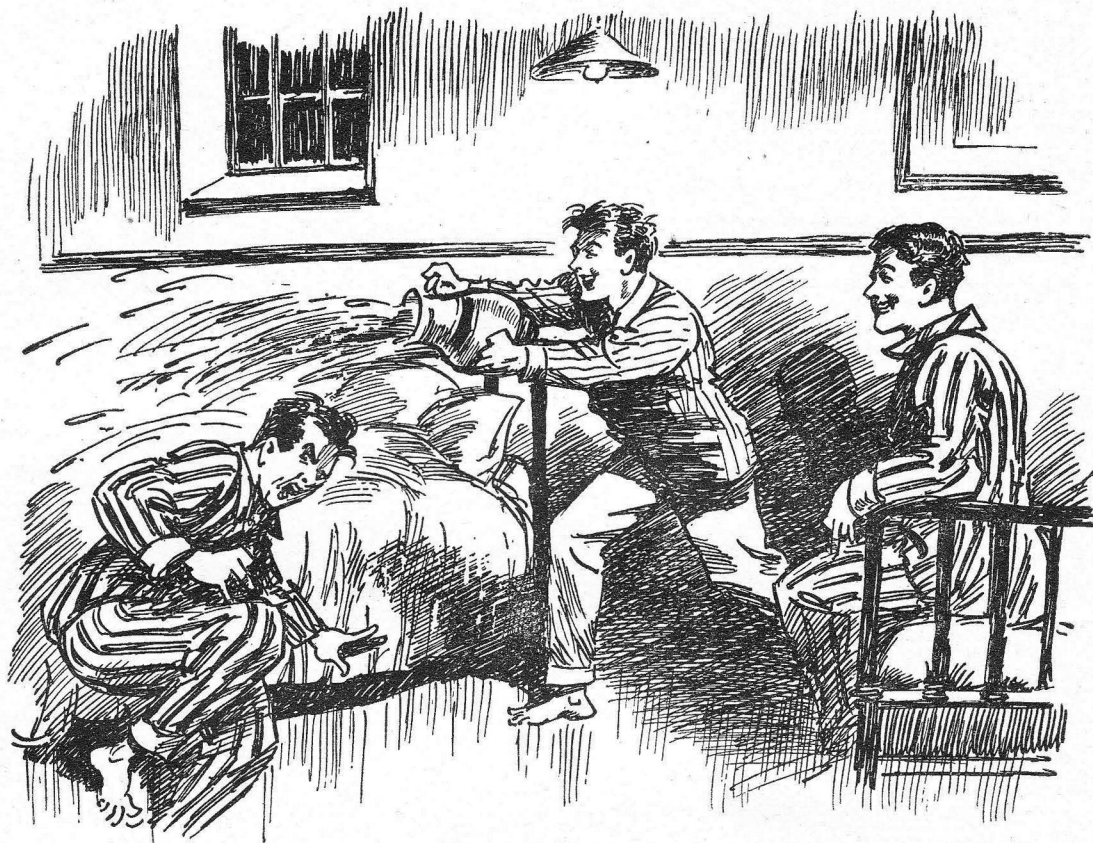
"You've drenched my bed!" he howled.

"Looks like it," agreed Skip.

"Think I'm going to sleep in that?" howled Reece. "You clumsy, cack-handed fat ass, you can have it yourself, and I'm jolly well going to have yours."

"Oh, are you?" yapped Skip.

"Yes, I am!"



The torrent of water passed him by

“That’s fair,” said Preece, who always backed up Reece.

“Not by long chinks,” said Tom King. “Reece asked for it, and he can make the best of it.”

“I’m going to have Ruggles’ bed, I tell you, as he’s swamped mine!” howled Reece.

“You’re jolly well not!” said Tom.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Skip. His fat face was suddenly irradiated. “I say, let him have it! If you really want my bed, Reece—.”

“Look at mine!” yelled Reece.

“Don’t be a goat, Skip, said Dick Warren. “If Reece bags your bed, we’ll jolly soon shift him out of it.”

Skip shook his head!

“Let him have it, if he wants it,” he said.

"Well, you're an ass," said Tom King.

"And a silly fathead!" said Dick Warren.

They left it at that. They were quite ready to stand up for their fat chum's rights. But if Skip chose to let Reece have his bed, that settled it.

And Skip did so choose!

He had good reasons. Quite a brilliant stratagem had flashed into Skip's fat brain, when Reece claimed his bed. Perkinson, as Purring had told him, was not a cat, to see in the dark. He was going to land that box-strap on Skip's bed—the sixth in the row. The occupant of that bed was welcome to the box-strap, so far as Skip was concerned. Reece's bed was certainly damp: but it was preferable to his own, in the unusual circumstances. Skip rolled up wet bed clothes, borrowed a blanket from Tom King, and turned contentedly into Reece's bed. Reece, triumphant, turned into Skip's. And when Mr. Charne had turned out lights for the Fourth, Skip grinned in the dark till he went to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

REECE hardly knew what was happening.

Who it was, how it was, why it was, he was too dazed and dizzy to begin to guess. It seemed like a wild nightmare, when his bedclothes were suddenly dragged off, and a box-strap descended on him with a terrific swipe. He heard a voice:

"Take that, you cheeky young scoundrel! And that! and that! and that! That'll teach you something about buzzing oranges! And that! and that! and that!"

Every "that" was accompanied by a swipe from the box-strap. Reece yelled and howled and roared, wriggling and twisting, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels. Swipe! swipe! swipe! Reece's frantic howls awoke the whole dormitory. But the exciting scene was brief. A good dozen from the box-strap landed on the writhing, wriggling, yelling Reece: then there was a sound of departing footsteps and a closing door. The Fourth-form dormitory was left in a buzz of excitement and astonishment, while Reece howled and howled and howled. Only Skip Ruggles did not share in the general amazement and excitement. The din awakened him: but Skip only grinned, and turned his head on his pillow, and went to sleep again.



"Take that, you cheeky young rascal!"

SKIP did not need to dodge Perkinson of the Fifth on the morrow. Perkinson, having administered that strapping to the occupant of the sixth bed in the Fourth-form dormitory, was satisfied that he had done stern justice on the hurler of that mouldy orange, and he dismissed the matter from his mind. Perkinson was done with Skip: and Skip was only too glad to have done with Perkinson. Only Reece was dissatisfied with the outcome of Skip's strategem.

THE END

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