

FIRST MAN HOME!

By FRANK RICHARDS



I

“HA, ha, ha!” roared Tom King and Dick Warren.

Skip Ruggles blinked at them. Skip, apparently, could see nothing to laugh at. It seemed that his chums could, for Study Four in the Fourth echoed to their mirth.

“Look here——!” hooted Skip.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Why shouldn’t I have a chance in the Grind?” demanded Skip.

His chums could only chuckle. The reasons why Skip Ruggles shouldn’t, wouldn’t, and couldn’t have a chance in the “Grind” were really too numerous to mention.

The Grind was a walking-race. It was well-named, or nicknamed, for

undoubtedly it was a grind towards the end. Of all the Lower School at Felgate, probably Skip Ruggles had the smallest and slightest chance of getting in first, of getting in at all, indeed of getting in alive. Stout fellows in the Shell might walk Tom King and Dick Warren off their legs: but Skip hadn’t an earthly even against small fry in the Third.

Skip was plump. He was extremely plump. He was short of wind. He was extremely short of wind. He was fond of sweet and sticky things—he was extremely fond of sweet and sticky things. With so much weight to carry, with little wind to carry it on, and on a diet of all the jam-puffs and cream tarts he could lay his fat hands on, it

seemed improbable, at least, that Skip would stay the distance. Nine miles would be enough for King and Warren—for their fat comrade, nine furlongs would have been too much—indeed Skip did not really like walking nine yards if he could help it. So it was no wonder that Study Four echoed with mirth.

Study Four were going to pull off the Grind if they could. But the idea of Skip having a chance was too funny.

Skip glowered.

“You can cackle——!” he hooted.

“Thanks!” said Tom. “We will! Ha, ha, ha!”

“You jolly well bar me out of the football,” said Skip, aggrieved. That was an old grievance with Skip. “Do I get a chance in the Soccer?”

“But you can’t play Soccer, old man.”

“Well, you can’t bar me out of the Grind,” said Skip, “and if you fellows think I can’t walk nine miles——”

“Ha, ha, ha!” yelled King and Warren. They really could not help it. The bare idea of Skip walking nine miles, and living to tell the tale, might have made a stone image laugh.

Skip breathed hard through his little fat nose.

“All right!” he said. “You’ll see! I’m going to train——”

“On dough-nuts?” asked Tom.

“Or cream puffs?” asked Warren.

Skip paused. Dough-nuts and cream puffs were dear to his fat heart. Jam-tarts made life worth living. Skip was not, perhaps, very bright: but he was bright enough to know that a fellow couldn’t train for the Grind on sticky pastry. The prospect of keeping

off sticky tuck for a week was dismaying—indeed overwhelming. Almost was Skip tempted to give up the idea there and then. But he drove away the thought. Skip, as keen on games as any fellow at Felgate, never had a chance in games: he was simply no good at them, though he failed to realise it. But they couldn’t bar him out of the Grind: and this was his one opportunity to show what he was made of. If he lasted the distance, that was something: if he got in first, that was a dream of glory. And why shouldn’t he? The innumerable reasons why he shouldn’t were not apparent to Skip.

“I’m going to train hard,” he said, determinedly. “I shan’t touch another spot of pastry before next Wednesday. I won’t go near the tuck-shop——”

“It will draw you like a magnet, old fat bean,” grinned Warren.

“And if anybody offers me a jam-tart, I—I’ll refuse it——”

“I can see you doing it!” chuckled Tom.

“Hard tack and hard training,” said Skip. “You’ll see! You fellows fancy I can’t play games. You fancy I can’t walk either, do you? You’ll see.”

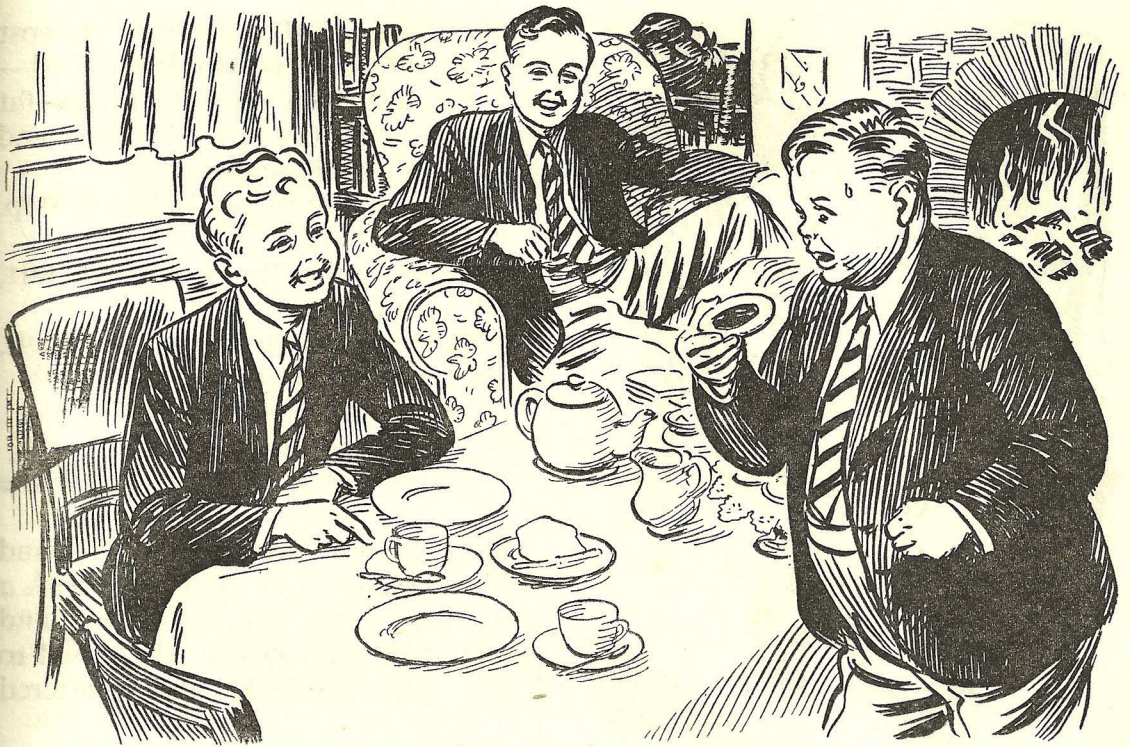
“My dear old porpoise——!” said Tom, soothingly.

“That’s enough!” barked Skip. “You’ll see.”

“No reason why you shouldn’t start with the rest, old fat bean,” said Dick Warren. “You might do the two miles across Hodden Heath, to the plank bridge over the Fenny—that’s your limit, Skip.”

“You’ll see!” hooted Skip.

“Three miles on to Ruddy—think you’ll live to see Ruddy?”



His mouth watered for that jam tart.

“Yah!”

“Three more round from Ruddy to Fell. How are you going to walk three miles without legs?”

“Without legs?” repeated Skip, puzzled.

“They’ll have dropped off at Ruddy—if you get that far!” explained Warren.

“You silly ass!” roared Skip.

“And if you get to Fell—without legs!—it’s still a mile home,” said Warren. “Skip, old man, what’s left of you won’t be in till midnight——”

“More likely with the milk in the morning,” said Tom, shaking his head.

Stanley St. Leger Ruggles breathed hard, and he breathed deep. They were great pals, Skip and King and Warren: but, at that moment, Skip

could have found solace and satisfaction in taking King and Warren by the backs of their necks and knocking their heads together—hard!

He rose from the table in Study Four, where they had been having tea. He gave his chums a look—an expressive look—and rolled doorward.

Warren winked at Tom King.

“You’ve left a tart on your plate, Skip,” he called out.

“Oh!”

Skip revolved promptly on his axis. It was true: in his deep interest in that argument, and in his indignation, he had overlooked the fact that there was one more jam tart on his plate—a circumstance that, probably, had never happened before in Skip’s fat life. Skip had a memory that was rather like a



After breakfast he walked, and walked and walked.

sieve, in other matters: but in matters of tuck he had never been known to forget. Now for once he had actually forgotten a jam-tart—which showed how deeply he was stirred.

However, reminded of it, he cut back to the table. A fat hand clutched up the tart and it was in transit to a capacious mouth, when Skip caught the grinning glances exchanged between King and Warren. He checked the fat hand. His mouth watered for that jam tart. He longed for it. He yearned for it. And, after all, could one jam tart matter, before he went into strict training for the Grind? Surely not? His fat hand checked for a moment, rose again.

“Ha, ha, ha!” yelled King and Warren.

Skip lowered the jam-tart. It cost him an effort—a tremendous effort—but he did! The struggle in his fat heart was reflected in his fat face, and it made his study-mates howl.

“You can snigger——!” hissed Skip.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I ain’t going to scoff that tart, see?” yelled Skip.

“What are you going to do with it, then?” grinned Warren.

“I’m going to give it to you.”

“I don’t want it——”

“You’re going to have it all the same.”

Skip leaned over the table, and dabbed the jam tart. It landed with a squash on Dick Warren’s nose, and spread over his features. He ceased to laugh, quite suddenly, and spluttered instead.

“Wurrrrghh!”

“Now laugh that one off!” said Skip. And he left the study—rather hurriedly. A laugh followed him from Study Four: but only one fellow was laughing now. The other was dabbing at the jam on his face and was no longer mirthful.

II

SKIP RUGGLES often drew attention in the Fourth Form at Felgate. The way he handled a bat in the summer, and his extraordinary antics with a Soccer ball in the winter, made him a man of mark, in his own peculiar way. His belief that he could play games, that he could run, or jump, or even walk, might be pathetic: but it was also funny. Nobody in the Felgate Fourth believed for a moment that Skip could do anything but cause

a shortage of grub in Study Four. When it became known that Skip was going into training for the Grind, the news added considerably to the gaiety of existence in the Fourth.

His chums in Study Four, having had a good laugh over the idea, dismissed it from mind. They expected Skip to forget it too. Unexpectedly, they found that their fat chum was in deadly earnest.

Skip might be a rabbit at cricket, a dud at footer, a hopeless clown in everything that required the use of limbs, hands, or feet. But he was a sticker. He was going to show them!

In fact, the very next morning, when the rising-bell rang, Skip, instead of frowsting in bed till the latest possible moment, rolled out, first man out in the Fourth. Instead of his accustomed catlick, he seized a towel and scudded down the passage for a shower.

That was a good beginning. But it did not end there, as everyone naturally supposed it would. After prayers Skip did a trot round the quad before the breakfast bell rang. After breakfast he walked, and walked, and walked, till the bell for class. In form that morning he looked ruddy, and fresh: but he was tired—he was unaccustomed to such strenuousness, and it told on him. Charne, his form-master, found him vague and inattentive, which really was only to be expected in the circumstances: but Charne knew nothing of Skip's wild ambition to excel in the Grind, and he gave Skip lines.

Did that dismay or deter Skip? It did not. Skip had got his teeth into this as resolutely as he had ever got them into a steak-and-kidney pie. In break

that morning, he did not go near the tuck-shop. Luckily, he had no pocket-money left, or his resolution might have trembled in the balance. But he did not ask King or Warren if they had a bob to lend a fellow. Flinging aside temptation, Skip trotted: and it was a breathless Skip that came in for third school.

It was a strenuous day for Ruggles of the Fourth. In Study Four that evening he nodded over his prep. The bell for dorm was music to his fat ears. He fell into bed and did not reopen his eyes till the rising-bell rang. But he was prompt out of bed all the same, and the first man to seize a towel and rush for a shower. If Skip hated anything, it was a cold shower: but he rushed for it as if he loved it.



He kept up with his pals.

Charne was shirty with him in form. Nodding over prep did not produce results gratifying to Charne. Skip's con, always bad, was the worst on record. He gathered more lines. He did not seem to care.

After dinner, Tom King and Dick Warren watched him roll out of the House, and watched him walking—walking—walking—on the path under the old Felgate oaks. They smiled at one another.

“Old Skip means business,” remarked Warren.

“He will melt into tallow at this rate,” said Tom, “but it will do him good. You wouldn't think he was the laziest fat ass at Felgate now, would you?”

And indeed nobody would have. They joined Skip in the quad. He glanced at them, but did not stop. If they wanted his company they had to keep in motion. It was far from a warm autumnal day, but perspiration was trickling down Skip's fat face. He breathed in jerks. He would have given anything to roll into Study Four and collapse in the armchair. But he wasn't going to.

“Don't overdo it at first, old chap,” said Tom, kindly. “Festina lente, you know.”

“Rot!” said Skip.

“Moderation in all things, old man,” said Warren.

“Bosh!” said Skip.

Skip was not in need of advice. He was chiefly in need of wind.

“We're going as far as the Fenny bridge after class,” said Tom. “Come?”

“What-ho,” said Skip.

It was two miles, rugged going,

across Hodden Heath to the upper Fenny, where it was crossed by a plank bridge. King and Warren did it with an easy swing. Skip did it with his little fat legs going like clockwork. He kept up with his pals. He did not know that that was because his pals kindly slowed to let him keep up.

Tom glanced at the plank bridge. There had been heavy rains that autumn, and the Fenny was full to its banks, and overflowing them. Water washed over the plank bridge.

“We shall get our feet wet next Wednesday,” remarked Tom.

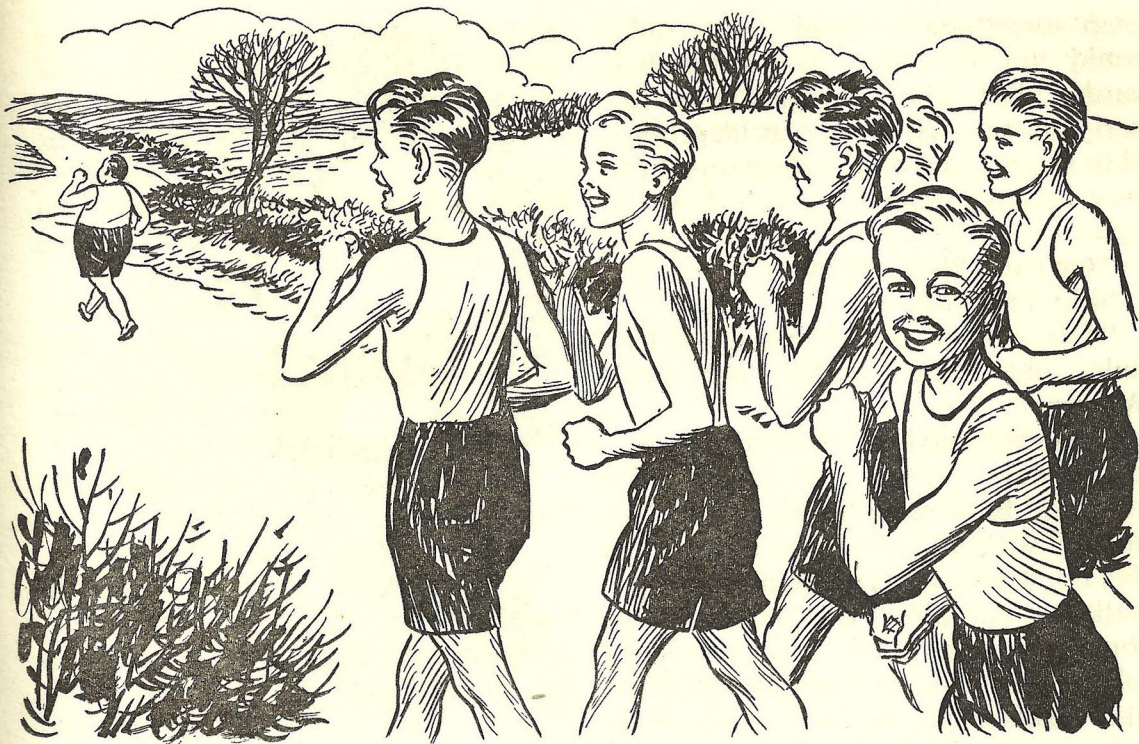
“Who cares?” said Skip, valiantly.

It seemed quite a new Skip. Skip hated getting his feet wet. Now, apparently, it was a trifle as light as air.

Skip had done the two miles out. The drawback of two miles out was that it implied two miles back again. Quite how he got back to Felgate, Skip hardly knew. King and Warren smiled at one another over Skip's fat head as they slowed down to a snail's pace. In Study Four that evening Skip did not merely nod over his prep. He went to sleep over it.

Fortunately, the next day there was no trouble with Charne. Charne was an observant gentleman. If Skip was having a shot at shining in athletics, Charne was the man to give him a chance. He could make allowances, and he did. He even forgot to ask Skip for long overdue lines.

King and Warren, though they still smiled, backed Skip up heartily in his new efforts. It really began to look as if their fat chum might do three, or even four, miles, before he had to beg, borrow, or steal a lift home. Reece,



Skip, well ahead, was feeling pleased with himself.

who was rather a mischievous fellow, tempted Skip with jam-tarts. Skip nobly spurned the temptation. He even excluded pudding at dinner. He promised himself a tremendous feed—a feast of the gods—after the Grind. But till then, Skip was determined to be a model of abstemiousness. And marvellous to relate—marvellous to everybody who knew Skip—he kept to that resolve. And it was an undoubted fact that every day, and in every way, he grew better and better.

III

LANGDALE of the Sixth looked over the array at the gates of Felgate on Wednesday. Langdale, captain of Felgate and Head of the Games, was

superintending the Grind. He was going over the route with the Grinders—an easy walk for Langdale, though it was likely to tell on younger and less muscular legs, and to thin out considerably the crowd of keen starters.

Skip was feeling unusually fit. Training, undoubtedly, had done him worlds of good. He had an unaccustomed lightness and springiness. How long that would last under the strain of mile after mile, Skip did not know, and perhaps he felt some inward doubt. But unless he burst by the wayside, Skip was going through that walk. He was going to show them!

Langdale gave the signal, and they started. Every fellow excepting Skip knew that at the start of a nine-mile walk it was necessary to go easily, and

keep something in hand. Nine miles could not be taken like a hundred yards. But Skip Ruggles was impervious to such sage considerations. Skip stepped out to it. He stepped out very briskly. Tom King called out to him.

“Go easy, Skip, old man.”

Skip did not heed.

“Don’t blow yourself out in the first mile, old bean,” called out Dick Warren.

Skip continued not to heed.

Langdale smiled. Everyone else laughed. Skip, well ahead, was feeling pleased with himself. If he could keep this up, it was going to be practically a walkover for him. The other fellows could lag if they liked—Skip was going full steam ahead. His little fat legs went like machinery. He was as fresh as paint—undoubtedly his training had done him good. Grinning fellows, at a more moderate pace, marched behind. Selwyn of the Shell wasted a little breath in remarking that they would pass Skip’s dead body on Hodden Heath. Tom King and Dick Warren did not expect it to be quite so bad as that: but they did expect to find Skip dead beat at the Fenny, scheduled to crawl home on his hands and knees. Skip, regardless, swung on, putting every ounce into it, drawing further and further ahead of the mob.

Naturally Skip had bellows to mend after a mile of it. But he glanced back, was encouraged, and plugged on, well ahead. But that burst of initial speed told on Skip by this time, and another glance back showed him that steady walkers were gaining. Selwyn of the Shell was in the lead, with Tom King



He reached the end of the plank . . . just as it tipped.

and Dick Warren a good second and third—Reece and Preece just behind: the rest strung out. Skip plodded on, panting. He was still well ahead when he reached the bank of the Fenny, where it rolled deep and swift across Hodden Heath. He paused at the plank bridge—not only to renew his depleted supply of wind, but because he did not like the look of that plank.

For weeks the flooded Fenny had been washing over it. It did not look, to Skip, merely a matter of getting his feet wet. That was a trifle, compared with being first man home in the Grind, and “showing them”. But the rushing waters had loosened the old plank. Skip could see that the further end, which rested on a large stone, had

slipped almost off the stone, under the tear of the swift water, and it did not look safe. It looked, indeed, far from safe. It came into Skip's mind, unpleasantly, that a fellow crossing that plank might very easily tip it over, and take a header into the Fenny. And as Skip's swimming was about equal to his Soccer, that was a serious outlook in deep swift waters. Skip, pumping in breath, blinked very uneasily at the plank. Then he looked back. The steady walkers behind were swinging on. If Skip was not to be passed at that early stage, he had no time to lose.

He stepped on the plank, and advanced. It wobbled under his feet, and his fat heart wobbled in unison.

Almost he jumped back.

But he did not jump back. He tramped on, the plank wobbling ominously. His heart was in his mouth: but on he went. He reached the end of the plank—just as it tipped!

"Oooogh!" gasped Skip.

He bounded—and landed. That did it, so far as the plank was concerned. Skip's backward kick as he bounded dislodged the tipping plank, and it slid off the stone, as Skip landed on the bank. But Skip was all right, and he plugged onward. He did not look back, and remained unaware that the plank, having slipped from its resting-place, had whirled end-on to the current, and was floating away down the Fenny. On went Skip, by the path through the bracken for distant Ruddy: gurgling for breath, but game as ever.

"Oh, gum!" ejaculated Selwyn of the Shell, the first to reach the Fenny. "The plank's gone."

He had to stop. The others had to

stop. Ahead of them, across the stream, a fat form had disappeared in bracken. Tom King and Dick Warren stared at the hurrying waters before them.

"I'm jolly well going in!" said Tom.

"Swim it!" said Dick.

"Too jolly risky," said Reece.

"Quite!" said Langdale. "Cut that out, King! You'll have to go round by the stone bridge."

"But—I say, Langdale——"

"That will do!" said Langdale. The word of the Head of the Games was law. They had to go down the bank to the stone bridge: a mile and a half.

When Skip Ruggles trailed perspiring into Ruddy, and looked back, there was a long untenanted lane behind him. Not a Felgate man was in sight. Skip could hardly believe that he had dropped the whole Grind so far behind. But apparently he had. Greatly encouraged, Skip trudged on, taking it more easily now. In the circumstances, he could afford to take it easily.

"RUGGLES!"

"Skip!"

"That fat ass!"

"Great pip!"

Quite a crowd of fellows, at the gates of Felgate, were looking for the returning walkers coming up the lane from Fell, late in the afternoon. They saw only one coming—and it was Skip Ruggles. Skip, red as a peony, drenched with perspiration, tired to the bone, almost dead to the world, was still plugging on mechanically—and he tottered in at the gates, first man home in the Felgate Grind. And all Felgate wondered—till they learned how it had happened.