

SPORTSMAN!

by *FRANK RICHARDS*

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DICK WARREN tossed the ball high into the air, to catch as it came down, in sheer exuberance of spirits. Warren, the best junior bowler at Felgate, loved the 'feel' of the round red ball in his hand, he liked to play tricks with it, tossing and catching, showing his friends and himself, his complete mastery of it. Certainly, it might have been considered a little injudicious to play tricks with a cricket ball while crossing the study leading to the stairs, for goodness only knew where that ball might go if he failed to catch it in its descent from the high ceiling far above. But as Dick Warren never missed a catch, it was as safe as houses. Tom King, his chum, and half-a-dozen other fellows on the landing, did not suppose for a moment that their heads were in danger. But they, and he, reckoned without Skip Ruggles.

King and Warren were going down to the nets for a spot of practice, all ready for the Form match on the morrow, Fourth v. Shell. Dick Warren's bowling was a rod in pickle for the Shell. He was always good, but now, as it happened, he was at the very top of his form; and Fourth-form men doubted whether even Selwyn, the captain of the Shell, and

a good man with the willow, could stand up against him. Even Tom King banked more on his chum's bowling than on his own batting to put paid to the Shell. Had not Warren, at games fagging, cleanbowled Parkinson of the Fifth – a tremendous feat? It was no wonder that Dick was in exuberant spirits that sunny afternoon: no wonder that he tossed the ball up to the high ceiling – but it was unfortunate, all the same.

For, at the psychological moment, Skip Ruggles happened.

Skip was coming down to the nets with his chums, and being a minute or so after them, he hurried. And so it happened that, as the ball whizzed up high into the upper spaces, the fat figure of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles came hurtling out of Study Four, across the landing. That wouldn't have mattered, if the fat and fatheaded Skip could have hurtled without bumping into his comrades as he overtook them. But he did bump into them breathlessly, and Tom King tottered to the right, and Dick Warren to the left. Neither would that have mattered a boiled bean, had not the cricket ball, having nearly reached the high ceiling, started to descend. Obeying the well-known law of gravitation

so ably propounded by Sir Isaac Newton, that cricket ball shot downward from ceiling to landing – and Dick Warren’s hand, instead of being ready, was a yard away.

The ball banged on the old oak planks, shot off through an interstice of the oaken balustrade, and dropped into the well of the staircase.

‘Oh, you ass, Skip!’ exclaimed Tom.

‘You burbling, blitherer –!’ exclaimed Dick Warren.

‘Oh! I say!’ gasped Skip.

They all expected to hear the sound of the cricket ball banging from stair to stair on its way to the ground floor.

But that was not what they heard. What they heard was a loud yell, followed by a frantic babble in the well-known voice of Monsieur Pin, the French master at Felgate, on its highest note.

‘Mon Dieu! Qu’est-que-c’est? Vat is zat? Je suis frappé sur la tête – Mon Dieu! I am hit on ze head! Who zrow zat ball? Ciel!’

‘Oh, scissors!’ breathed Skip.

‘Mossoo –!’ articulated Tom King.

‘He’s got it – on the napper!’ breathed Warren. ‘Hook it – sharp.’

There were eight or nine Fourth-form fellows on the landing, when that cricket ball dropped on Monsieur Pin’s head on the stairs. But two or three seconds later, not a man was to be seen there. A cricket ball dropping on a beak’s head – even a French master’s head – was too serious a matter for any fellow to want to be caught on the spot. By passages and upper stairs, the juniors vanished; and the landing was left as bare as Mother Hubbard’s cupboard.

They heard the shrill, indignant and anguished babble of Monsieur Pin, mingled



‘Mon Dieu! I am hit on ze head!’

with the deeper voice of Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth, and the rather oily voice of Pook, a Sixth-Form prefect, inquiring what the matter was, as they fled. But they did not stay to listen. They disappeared into space: and when, hardly a minute later, Mr. Charne and Pook came up to investigate, the landing was totally uninhabited; and if beaks and prefects wanted to know who had dropped that cricket ball on Monsieur Pin’s napper, they had all Felgate School to pick and choose from.

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‘YOU howling ass!’

‘You dangerous lunatic.’

Tom King and Dick Warren made those

remarks, at prep in Study Four that evening. Skip's fat face, usually sunny, was clouded as he heard them. King and Warren had been making such remarks at intervals for quite a long time.

Skip was well known in the Felgate Fourth to be every known kind of an ass. It couldn't be helped, and his chums were usually content to take their Skip as they found him. But this was the limit. All Felgate was in a buzz about that episode on the staircase. What would happen to Dick Warren, if it came out that he had tossed up the ball that had fallen on Mossos's head, was an awful question. Whether it had been done intentionally, or whether it was an accident, counted for little.

The beaks were taking an extremely serious view of the incident. All the Sixth-Form prefects had been instructed to exert themselves to discover the culprit. Pook, who was by nature nosy, and liked to curry favour with the beaks, was known to be untiring in the quest, even if men like Langdale and Denver were a little careless about it. True, there was no clue to the culprit. But there was much uneasiness in Study Four: and King and Warren seemed to find some consolation in telling Skip Ruggles what they thought of him. And everything they thought of him seemed to be frightfully uncomplimentary.

'Look here,' said Skip, goaded at last into resistance, 'It wasn't my fault! If Warren can't catch a ball, he shouldn't chuck it about.'

'You benighted, blethering bunnyrabbit,' said Warren, in concentrated tones, 'I should have caught it if you hadn't barged into me.'

'That's all very well,' said Skip. 'But you

didn't catch it. You jolly well know that you shouldn't play tricks like that inside the House. Chucking a cricket ball about on a landing—'

'You piffing, pie-faced lump of tallow—'

'Oh, can it,' said Skip, 'Calling a fellow names won't make out that you caught that ball, when you didn't. You fellows make out that I can't play cricket, and you go chucking a ball about on beak's nappers! I should have caught that ball all right, if I'd chucked it up. And if you get bowled out, and can't play in the Form match tomorrow, it won't make the skies fall, either.'

'You potty packet of doughnuts,' said Tom King, 'We can't beat the Shell without Dick's bowling. Who's to take Selwyn's wicket?'

'I will!' said Skip.

'What!' roared both his chums together.

'Give a fellow a chance in the game, and see,' said Skip.

Skip's pathetic belief that he could play cricket might have made his pals laugh at any other time. But they did not feel like laughing now. Things were too serious for that. The captain of the Fourth picked up the inkpot from the table, with a concentrated glare at Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

'See that?' he asked, 'Well, another word of blether from you, Skip, and you get it, ink and inkpot. Now shut up.'

Prep proceeded in Study Four in rather an electric atmosphere. After prep, there was an uneasy interval in the junior day-room; but when the bell rang for dorm, King and Warren were feeling easier in their minds. No discovery had been made—it was not even known for certain that the guilty man was in Charne's form at all. Pook of the Sixth

was still nosing about: but the other prefects seemed to have tired a little of the affair.

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'CAN it!' hooted Tom King.

'Run away and play!' hooted Dick Warren.

'Look here - !' hooted Skip.

They all hooted together.

They were always very pally in Study Four. It was a grievance with Skip that his own familiar friend, Tom King, captain of the Fourth, couldn't or wouldn't give him a chance in games. But friendship survived that difference of opinion. When Skip urged his claims to score duck's eggs for Felgate, Tom was wont to be gentle and soothing. Now, however, he was neither.

That episode on the staircase was a haunting worry on his mind. Warren was the man who would have to stand the racket, if it came out: but it was all that ass Skip's fault. Nothing had come out so far, and it looked as if nothing would - but you never could tell! It was almost time for stumps to be pitched for the Form match; but even in a matter of minutes, something might happen. It was no time for Skip Ruggles to let gas escape on the subject of his claims to be considered a cricketer. Tactlessly he tackled Tom King outside the pavilion, to raise once more the same old topic. And Tom, who had his bat under his arm, not only told him to 'can' it, but looked strongly disposed to handle the bat, with Skip in the place of the ball!

'You potty rhinoceros,' said King, in measured tones, 'You can't play cricket. You can't even play marbles. When I try to teach you as much as a fag in the Second



'You can't even play marbles'

Form knows without being taught at all, you turn my hair grey. You hold a bat like a cokehammer. You can't hit anything except a wicket. You couldn't catch a ball if it was handed to you on a silver salver. You can't do anything but stuff dough-nuts and stickers. That's your line of country. Look here, I'll lend you a bob, and you can go to the tuck-shop and stuff stickers, while we play cricket. You've done enough damage already. Now shut up.'

Skip gazed at him, more in sorrow than in anger. Seldom or never had the captain of the Fourth talked in such exceedingly plain English to him. But the possibility of something yet happening to dish the Form match, was too much for Tom King's patience. So his language, for once, resembled that of Truthful



'Well bowled! Good old Warren!'

James's partner – it was 'frequent and painful and free.'

'I'll put a tanner to it,' said Dick Warren. 'You can go and stuff, and stuff, and stuff, and forget all about cricket.'

Skip breathed hard.

'I like that!' he said, 'You fancy yourself a bowler, do you – and where do you land a cricket ball when you chuck it about? I can handle a ball without nearly braining a Froggy, and chance it.'

'Mum!' breathed Tom King, hastily. The rather lean figure of Pook, of the Sixth, came round the pavilion as Skip was speaking.

'Oh!' breathed Warren.

If Pook had heard – if he had understood – and it was well known that Pook was as sharp as a Sheffield blade! For a moment, the

chums of the Fourth stood in dismayed apprehension.

But Pook walked on, without taking any special notice of them, and they breathed again.

'Think he heard?' breathed King.

'Must have,' muttered Warren, 'But he didn't tumble. It would be like Skip to give the whole thing away and dish us with his burbling.'

'I never knew Pook was nosing about – !' mumbled Skip.

'Do you ever know anything? You don't even know you can't play cricket. You don't know that I'm going to jam this bat at you if you don't shut up! But I jolly well am!' said Tom King. He slipped the bat into his hands. 'Now, where will you have it?'

Skip backed away. He did not seem to want it anywhere.

'If you won't play me — !' he said.

'Did you say "play you" !' hissed Tom King.

'Yes, I did.'

'Then this is where you get it.'

Skip yelled as he got it – the business end of the bat, right in his plump ribs. After which, Skip departed – even Skip realising that there was nothing doing.

He looked on, with a morose eye, when the game started. Skip was feeling sore – especially where the bat had jammed. Selwyn of the Shell won the toss, and elected to take first knock. Reece, in the slips, missed a catch that Skip felt sure he could have taken in one hand. Preece returned a ball a second too late. Warren, with all his skill, made no impression on Selwyn's wicket in the first over. That, Skip bitterly reflected, was what they called fielding and bowling! In the

second over, the Shell batsmen were piling up runs. The Shell were an older team—indeed they esteemed themselves almost seniors—and they were good at the game: a tough proposition for the Fourth. But the latter had, at least, their demon bowler, and happily anticipated seeing Shell wickets go down at a good rate. And there was a joyous shout when Selwyn's wicket went down to a ball that came, like lightning, from Dick Warren's hand.

'Well bowled!'

'Good old Warren!'

Skip, for once, did not join in the cheers. He was disgruntled. He was peeved. Leaving the crowd of juniors shouting, Skip rolled away off the field. Far from the cricket field, Skip Ruggles leaned his fat form on the trunk of an ancient Felgate oak near the House, and ignored cricket.

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'WARREN, sir!'

'You are sure, Pook?'

'I think there is no doubt of it, sir. I caught some words among the juniors, and have since made some very careful inquiries, and I have no doubt whatever that it was Warren, of your form, sir.'

Skip Ruggles heard every word.

He could not see the speakers. Mr. Charne's study window was rather high up from the ground; and Skip, leaning on the old oak, could not see into the study. But that window was wide open to admit the balmy summer breeze; and every word spoken in the study floated out, to reach the fat ears of Skip.

'Oh, scissors!' breathed Skip, inaudibly.

That Nosey Parker, Pook, had nosed it all

out. He was reporting to Mr. Charne. Warren was found out now, and his game was up—as well as the Form game. Skip stood very still.

'Very well,' came Mr. Charne's deep voice, 'I am much obliged to you, Pook, for the trouble you have taken.'

'Not at all, sir,' came Pook's rather oily voice.

'The matter is very serious—very serious indeed. Do you know where Warren is now?'

'On the cricket-field, I think, sir.'

'Please go and call him to my study at once.'

'Very good, sir.'

'Oh, scissors!' repeated Skip.

A few minutes later, he saw Pook of the Sixth emerge from the doorway of the House, and take the direction of Little Side. He was going to call Warren off the cricket ground—in the middle of an innings—the Fourth Form were, after all, going to lose their bowler.

Skip Ruggles was disgruntled. He was peeved. He was indignant. But he forgot it all now. Not a single further thought did Skip waste upon his own fat self and his absurd grievances. The calamity that was about to fall upon his bosom pals was enough for Skip to think about. He felt it as keenly as if he had been handling bat or ball in the Form match. There was nothing that Skip would not have done to avert that calamity.

What could he do?

It was his fault. His chums, at least, believed that it was his clumsiness that had caused the ball to drop on the French master's nut on the stairs. And it was his own words that Nosey Parker, Pook, had overheard, putting him on the track. Skip

was full of remorse. But what could he do?

Suddenly it came to him. There was yet time – if he acted quickly. Skip detached himself from the oak, cut across to the doorway, and shot into the House.

A moment later, he was tapping at the door of his form-master's study.

‘Come in.’

Mr. Charne looked up, probably expecting to see Dick Warren. But it was Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

‘Well, what is it, Ruggles?’ he asked.

Skip hesitated one second. Skip was a truthful chap, and he realised that what he was going to say was, at least, sailing very near the wind. Still, if it was his fault, as undoubtedly it was, he was the man to blame – upon whom judgment ought to fall. And it would save the match for the Fourth.

‘If you please, sir, I – I want to tell you about the accident on the stairs yesterday with the cricket ball, sir.’

Mr. Charne's face became severe.

‘I – I never knew Mossoo was on the stairs, sir,’ went on Skip, hurriedly, ‘I – I never meant the ball to fall on him, sir. It was quite an accident.’

‘Upon my word!’ exclaimed Mr. Charne, ‘Do you mean to tell me, Ruggles that you were responsible for the disgraceful episode on the staircase yesterday?’

‘Yes sir,’ faltered Skip.

Really it was true – he certainly was responsible. He hoped that Charne wouldn't question him more closely. Charne didn't – he was quite satisfied with a confession which cleared up the whole matter. His brow grew very grim.

‘I am glad that you have confessed, Ruggles. You will now take a note from me

to the headmaster. I shall explain to Dr. Leicester that you have made this confession of your own accord, and I trust that it may cause him to take a somewhat more lenient view. But you must expect a severe punishment, Ruggles.’

‘Yes, sir,’ moaned Skip.

He waited while Charne wrote the note to the Head. He left the study with that note in a fat hand. His heart was almost in his boots – he knew what was going to happen in the Head's study after Dr. Leicester had read Charne's note. But, as he headed with slow and faltering steps for the headmaster's study, he saw Pook coming into the House with Dick Warren – Pook with an oily smile on his face. Warren the picture of utter dismay. And that strengthened Skip for the ordeal before him. He stepped out quite briskly for the Head's study.

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THEY were dismayed on Little Side.

The sword of Damocles had been so long suspended, that the Fourth Form men had rather forgotten that it impended at all. In fact, after the cricket had once started, not a man gave it a thought. And now it had fallen – for that sudden summons to Dick Warren to go to his form-master's study could mean nothing else. In the hope that he would return, Tom King fielded a substitute in Warren's place – but the hope was faint, and his heart was heavy. Somehow or other, Warren had been found out – and his return to the cricket field was the unlikeliest event that could occur. Even if he did return, it would be after the Head had dealt faithfully with him – not exactly in shape to take Shell

wickets. It was as good – or as bad – as the K. O. for the Fourth Form cricketers: and faces were long in the field – Tom King’s longest of all.

And then there was a shout from the crowd – a Shell batsman had just hit a boundary, at the end of an over, but that did not cause the shout. It was caused by the sight of a figure in flannels cutting down to the cricket field at top speed. And Tom King gazed blankly at his chum, as Warren arrived breathless.

‘O. K., old chap,’ gasped Warren.

‘What did Charne want, then?’

‘Goodness knows! He told me it was a mistake, and I wasn’t wanted, and I could go! I can tell you I fairly hopped out of his study. O. K., old man!’

‘Oh! what splendid luck.’

It was luck for the Fourth – not for the Shell! The sword of Damocles, it seemed, had not fallen after all: here was Warren again, and he had come back as full of beans as ever – indeed fuller. For his next proceeding, in the next over, was to take three Shell wickets one after another, and the crowd yelled for the hat trick – happily unconscious that, in the headmaster’s study, Skip Ruggles was yelling too: though Skip’s yells, as his headmaster laid it on, did not lack vigour and were audible at a considerable distance.

But nobody was thinking about Skip. Nobody noticed that his fat figure did not appear on the cricket ground all through the rest of the match. Nobody knew, or thought, or cared, a bean about Skip: and when, at long last, the Fourth had beaten the Shell, even his chums did not remember him, and

did not miss him from the joyous crowd that celebrated the victory.

It was not till they went up to Study Four, that King and Warren remembered Skip. They had to be reminded of him then, for as they came into the study, their ears were greeted by strange sounds:

‘Ow! wow! Ooooh! Wooh! Wooh! Oh, scissors! Oh, crikey! Wow!’

‘What the thump –’ ejaculated Tom King.

‘Whopped?’ asked Warren, mystified.

‘Ow! Yes! Wow! I say, I never knew the Head packed such a muscle!’ moaned Skip.

‘But why?’ asked King and Warren together.

‘Ow! Wow! I heard Pook tell Charne that he’d found Warren out – wow! So I – I owned up!’ moaned Skip.

‘You owned up!’ repeated Tom King, blankly.

‘Ow! Wow! Yes.’

‘So that was how –!’ exclaimed Warren.

‘Ow! Wow! I say, the Head laid it on! Wow! Charne said he might be lenient because I owned up. If he was, I never noticed it! Wow!’

For a moment, Skip’s chums, regarded him blankly. Then they fairly hugged him. They told him that he was a sportsman, that he was a prize packet, that he was the pluckiest fathead that ever had a fat head – they could not make enough of him. And later, when the anguish had worn off, they marched him down to the tuckshop, where every coin in possession was freely expended in standing Skip the biggest spread ever! Skip was a man whom the study delighted to honour. He couldn’t play cricket – but undoubtedly he was a sportsman!