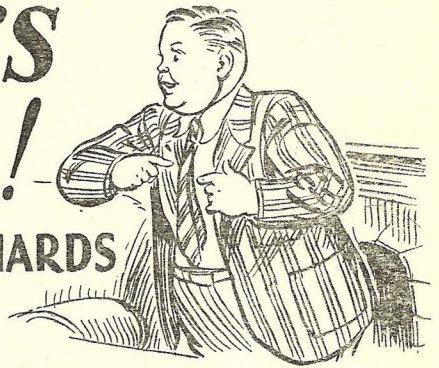


SKIP'S RUN!

By
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I.

“ME!” said Skip.
“Um!” said Tom King.
“Um!” said Dick Warren.

Skip Ruggles looked at his chums in Study Four. Like the elder Hamlet, his expression was more of sorrow than of anger.

“I said me, and I mean me!” he said. “Call yourselves pals? Did I get a show in the cricket? Am I getting a show in the football? Ain’t a fellow ever to get a show at all? Me for hare! Think I can’t run?”

They were discussing hare and hounds in Study Four. Tom King, captain of the Fourth, had thought of Dick Warren as his fellow-hare in the run. Or he might have picked Reece, or Preece, or Carton, or Parrott. He hadn’t thought of the plump Skip. It seemed that Skip had!

“You see——!” said Tom, slowly.

“I don’t!” contradicted Skip.

“You’ve got a lot of weight to carry, old man,” murmured Warren.

“I’m not bony like you, if that’s what you mean, Warren.” Skip

breathed hard, through his little fat nose. “Look here, if you’re going to leave me out of the paper-chase, as you jolly well leave me out of everything else——”

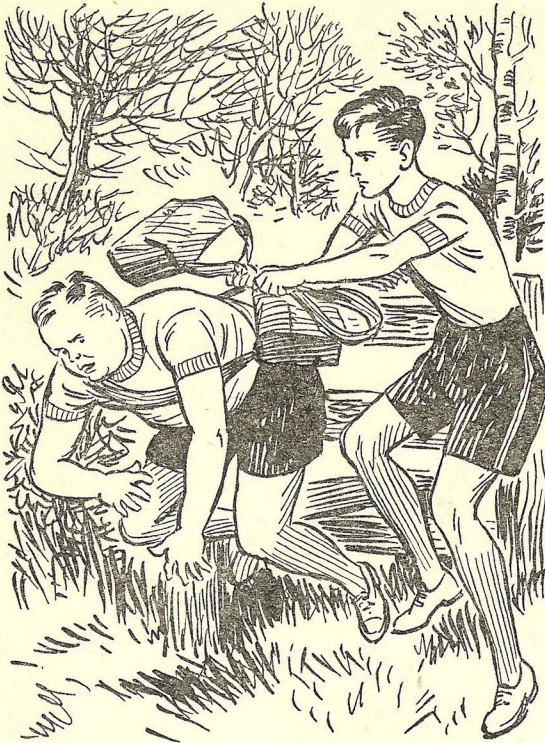
“You can run with the pack, you know,” said Tom.

“Blow the pack!”

“Um!”

It was true that Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was left out of games. He had to be! His cricket was a sight for gods and men. His football was a sight for gods and men and little fishes! Skip bore it with more or less resignation. But he did not see why he shouldn’t come in at hare and hounds. True that he resembled a fat rabbit rather than a hare. Still, a fellow wanted a show in something or other. Besides, Skip believed that he could run. Nobody knew how or why he believed it: but he did.

“It’s a fairly tough run, Skip!” said Tom King. “Round Fell Wood, right across High Fell—across Fell Water by the stepping-stones—and back by Hodden Heath—you’d be pumped out——”



He assisted Skip's descent.

"You'd burst in Fell Wood, expire on High Fell, perish at Fell Water, and peg out on Hodden Heath," said Warren.

Snort, from Skip.

"Leave me out, then," he said. "If that's what you call pally, leave a chap out, and go and eat coke."

Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged glances. They could feel for old Skip. A chap who was keen on athletics, and couldn't begin to do a thing in that line, was really deserving of sympathy. They were willing to stretch a point, indeed all the points of the compass, to gratify old Skip for once. Not to save his fat life could Tom have played him in the summer game or the winter game. But a paper-chase—

"Oh, let's," said Warren.

Tom King made up his mind.

"Look here, you'll have to run, Skip," he said. "You'll have to keep up somehow. Once you're started, no good telling me you want a rest after the first half-mile. You can't sit out a paper-chase. And if I catch you scoffing jam-tarts or doughnuts before the run, I'll scalp you bald-headed."

"If you keep up with me, we shall be all right," said Skip, confidently.

"I'll try," said Tom, sarcastically.

"Try hard, and you'll be all right," said Skip.

"Oh, my hat!"

Skip, undoubtedly, believed that he could run. His chums could only hope that, on this occasion, there might turn out to be some foundation for that belief. They had a misgiving that the pack might make a catch within the first half-mile. But it was settled now, for better or for worse. Skip Ruggles was going to have a "show".

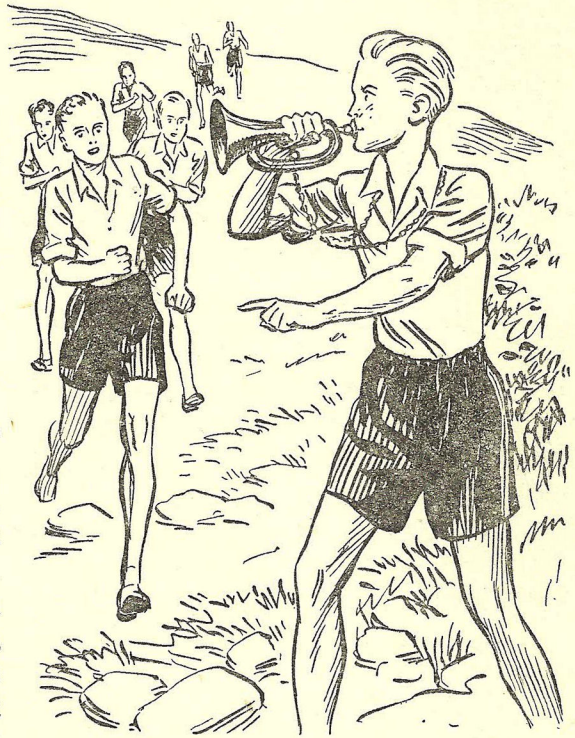
Reece and Preece, Carton and Parrott and Bullinger, and the rest, grinned when they heard that Skip Ruggles was to run as hare. Reece proposed that the pack should take the run at a walk, to give the hares a sporting chance. Preece suggested taking an ambulance, to pick up Skip's dead body after the first hundred yards. Parrott offered to help him make his will before they started. Carton advised Tom King to turn Skip sideways and roll him along like a barrel, which would be the quickest way of getting him along. In fact all the Felgate Fourth made merry over it—and Tom King was somewhat inclined to kick himself for having yielded the

point, and thereby mucked up the paper-chase. Still he hoped that his plump chum might somehow pull through: and at least he was ruthlessly resolved that Skip, having chosen to run as a hare, should run as a hare: and that an emphatic foot should be ready at all moments to re-start him when he slacked down on it.

II

LANGDALE, the captain of Felgate, gave the starting signal, at the school gates. That ancient gateway was "home", after the long run by Fell Wood, High Fell, Fell Water, and Hodden Heath. The pack—every man in the Fourth Form—were ready, Dick Warren with his bugle. The hares had ten minutes start: and they started at a gentle trot down Fell Lane. Tom King was fit as a fiddle, good for the distance or twice the distance. Skip Ruggles looked like bursting out of his running shorts, but he looked quite cheerful, and indeed merry and bright. They trotted down the lane, with their bags of "scent" slung over their shoulders, and disappeared from the eyes of the crowd at the gates, waiting there for Langdale of the Sixth to give the signal to the pack.

It was little more than a hundred yards to the stile that gave access to the footpath in Fell Wood. Tom King vaulted over it with one hand on the top bar. Skip made use of the step, and sat on the top bar before descending to the step on the other side. Tom had covered a dozen yards, scattering scent, before he realised that Skip was not at his heels, and he turned back.



Dick Warren's bugle gave the signal.

Skip, with a guilty look, began to scramble hurriedly down off the stile. Tom did not speak. He cut back, and with a single swipe of his bag of scent, assisted Skip's descent. There was a heavy bump in the grass, and a howl that awoke most of the echoes of Fell Wood.

"Wow!"

"Come on," said Tom.

"Ow! Look here——"

"Want another?"

Skip, who did not want another, scrambled up and came on. Tom set the pace, a fairly moderate one so far: but it did not seem moderate to Skip Ruggles. Even at that early stage, Skip was becoming conscious of a handicap in the matter of weight, and of a

shortness of breath. In Study Four Skip esteemed himself a runner equal to any man in the Fourth, and was full of beans. On the actual run he did not feel quite the same.

But he was for it now: and Skip was valiant. He was not going to let his comrade down: neither did he want any more swipes from the bag of scent. He pounded on. They left the footpath and wound through the wood, leaving the trail of torn paper for the pack to follow. Skip was growing redder and redder, and perspiration dotted and clotted his plump face. But he pushed on gamely, and was still going strong when they came out of the wood, on the lower slopes of High Fell.

Their way lay across those rugged



That unspeakable idiot Skip had rolled down the steep bank.

slopes, where scattered cattle grazed. It was tough going. It was quite likely that some of the pack would conk out at that stage, and trickle home by easier ways. Now, for the first time, Skip rather wished that he had consented to run with the pack, free to trickle home by an easier way if the spirit moved him so to do. But there was no easy trickling for a hare, and he had to keep on.

Tom King looked back. Skip was dropping astern.

"Keep level!" rapped Tom.

"All right!" gurgled Skip.

He surged on. The day was cold, with a sharp wind: but by this time it seemed a warm summer's day to Skip. He almost swam in perspiration. As they came to a rugged acclivity, up which Tom King seemed to go almost like a bird, Skip Ruggles came to an involuntary stop.

He pumped in breath.

Tom looked round again.

"What's the game?" he called out.

"J-j-just a minute," gasped Skip.

"Let a fellow get his breath! There ain't all that hurry!"

"Get on, fathead!"

"J-j-just a t-t-tick!"

Ta-ra-ra-ra-r! rang from the distance. Looking back, Tom King could see the hillside dotted with blue shirts.

The hares had been sighted, and Dick Warren's bugle gave the signal. Ta-ra-ra-ra-ra!

"Come on, Skip, you clown!" roared Tom.

"I'm kik-kik-coming!"

Skip came on. Tom King grabbed him by a fat arm, and rushed him onward. They dashed into a sunken

path amid the rugged slopes of High Fell, disappearing once more from the sight of the pack. Tom gave his fat chum a shake before releasing the fat arm.

"Urrrrgh!" gurgled Skip.

"You fat chump!" roared Tom.

"You've asked for it, haven't you?"

"Wurrrrghh!"

"You've asked for it, and got it! Run, you ass, run! If you don't keep up I'll boot you all the way to Felgate, and then all round the school."

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Skip. "Just a sec——"

"I'll help you," added Tom.

"Yaroooh!" yelled Skip, as a heavy foot thudded on his shorts. He bounded on, anxious to elude further help.

They ran on, scattering scent. The blue shirts had vanished, but the pack were coming on. Some of the weaker brethren were trailing home, giving up the chase: but Warren, Parrott, Bullinger, Carton, Reece, and Preece, and four or five others, were still fresh and going strong.

Ta-ra-ra-ra-r! rang the bugle again, as the hares came out of the sunken path on to higher ground. Once more they were sighted. Tom looked back and counted eight blue shirts at a glance.

"I—I—I say," panted Skip. "What about a minute's rest?"

Thud!

"Whoooooop!"

Skip bounded on without even a second's rest. They dashed through a straggle of bushes and the pack lost them again, and were reduced to picking up the paper trail. On from the bushes, Fell Water was in sight: a swift stream flowing along the bottom

of a deep stony channel in the hillside. The hares had to follow the stream a quarter of a mile, down to the stepping-stones: the only means of crossing Fell Water. They panted along the high bank, the pack drawing closer and closer behind.

"Buckup, Skip!" breathed Tom.

"Urrrrghh!" gurgled Skip.

"If they get us, I'm going to scalp you."

"Wurrrrghh!"

Skip was game. He was fat, he was breathless, he was streaming with perspiration, but he was game. He wasn't going to let his comrade down: and he was going to show the Felgate Fourth that he could run. But he wondered dizzily how much longer he would be able to put one fat leg before



"We've done it!" gasped Skip.

the other. On he ran, puffing and blowing: slipped on a loose stone on the high bank, tumbled, and rolled. Ta-ra-ra-ra-ra! came the bugle-call.

Splash!

Tom King, with six or seven of the pack in easy view and running hard, came to an infuriated halt. Behind, clear and not very distant, rang the ta-ra-ra-ra of the bugle. Warren, Parrott, Reece and Preece, Bullinger, Carton—on they came. And that ass, that chump, that fathead, that unspeakable idiot Skip, had rolled down the steep bank, and was splashing in the water: and Tom King had to stop and drag him out, and the game was up!

III

TOM KING, up to his neck in almost freezing water, grasped Skip Ruggles, and kept his fat head over the surface. Skip floundered wildly. Skip was a swimmer—of sorts. His swimming was about as good as his cricket and his football. He struggled and splashed, and set up almost a water-spout in Fell Water. Tom had his hands full, as they splashed in the middle of the stream: and it was chiefly because the opposite bank was lower, and it was easier to drag Skip out on that side, that he headed across. But it wasn't easy, with a struggling, wriggling, wallowing Skip, apparently trying his hardest to get both of them drowned. But Tom gained the further shore, struggled out, and dragged Stanley St. Leger Ruggles after him: and then stood shaking off water, while Skip wallowed on the ground in a pool.

It hadn't taken long, really, but

minutes were precious. The pack were streaming down to the bank they had left: and Tom looked back across the stream, and then at the wallowing Skip, and somehow refrained from booting his fat chum. Skip sat up and spluttered.

"Ooooooooooogh!"

"Oh, you fat ass!" hissed Tom.

"Ooooooooooogh!"

Bullinger was in the lead now. His burly figure loomed on the opposite high bank. He stared across at two drenched hares, and then ran on down the stream, heading for the distant stepping stones. After him came Warren, Carton, Parrott, Reece and Preece. Reece, for a moment, stopped, as if calculating whether to take the plunge: then he too ran on downstream after the rest. And Tom King grinned as he gave Skip a hand up.

"Skip, you ass——"

"Oooooogh!" Skip staggered up.

"Skip, you chump——"

"Woooooogh!" spluttered Skip.

"Come on, you fathead! We've done them," chuckled Tom. "Better trot if you don't want to catch your death of cold. Get going."

"I say." Skip blinked round. "I can't see any of them—where are they? I—I thought——"

Tom chuckled.

"Gone along to the stepping-stones, a quarter of a mile down. We're all right, fathead, owing to you taking that tumble. They jibbed at Fell Water."

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Skip.

They re-started. Skip laboured on like a ship in distress, and Tom King accommodated his pace to Skip's. They came out on Hodden Heath at an easy trot.

It was no wonder that the pack

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SKIP'S RUN! (Continued from page 52)

"jibbed" at Fell Water. Skip had taken the plunge quite involuntarily: Tom, assuredly, would never have taken it for any purpose but to drag Skip out. But, as the matter stood, they had taken it, and they had placed Fell Water between them and the pack—and the pack had gone round by the stepping-stones downstream, losing almost half a mile. Skip Ruggles could always be relied upon, in all circumstances, to do something absolutely idiotic—and his tumble into Fell Water was one of the most idiotic of all his many idiotic performances. But it had saved the situation. Looking back from Hodden Heath, Tom King was unable to see anything of the pack. There was not a ghost of a blue shirt anywhere on view.

They trotted cheerily on.

From Hodden Heath they reached the Hodden road, which ran past the gates of Felgate School. A crowd of fellows spotted them, and waited for them at the gates. Some of the pack who had given up the chase and gone home by easier ways were there: astonished to see the hares coming in at an easy trot, with no sign of the pack on the horizon. How they had done it, with a hare like Skip, was quite a mystery. But evidently they had!

"We've done it!" gasped Skip, as he tottered into the ancient gateway of Felgate. "Home!"

"Home!" agreed Tom.

"Didn't I tell you I could run?" grinned Skip.

"You didn't tell me you could fall head first into Fell Water! That's what did it!"

"Yah!" said Skip. "We're home, and that's that!"

And he rolled in victorious. It was a good five minutes before the leaders of the pack were seen on the road. Warren, Parrott, Bullinger and Co. arrived to learn that the hares were already home, and gone in to change. "AYTISHOO!" said Skip, in Study Four that evening, "Ooosh! Atchoooh!"

Tom King was as fresh as paint after the run. Skip had caught a cold from his ducking. If there was anything about to catch, Skip Ruggles was the man to catch it.

His eyes watered. His nose streamed. He blew his nose, he dabbed his eyes, he sneezed. He had borrowed all the handkerchiefs in the study and he needed them all, and some more. But he sneezed on a cheery note. He was feeling quite good, in spite of the cold. A cold would pass in the fullness of time: but the fact that the hares, one of whom was Skip, had won the paper-chase, would remain!

"Who—groogh—said I couldn't—atchooh—run?" grinned Skip.

"I did," said Dick Warren.

"Did we—atchooh!—beat you, or—aytishoo—didn't we?" demanded Skip.

"Fathead!"

"Look here, Tom! Aytishoooh! I say, got another hanky? Ooooooh! Look here, Tom, now you know what I can do, you'll jolly well have to—aytishoooh—groogh! oooch! You'll jolly well have to give me a show in the football, see?"

To which Tom King replied tersely: "Ass!"

And, considerably to his indignation, a show in the football was not the reward of victory in Skip's run.