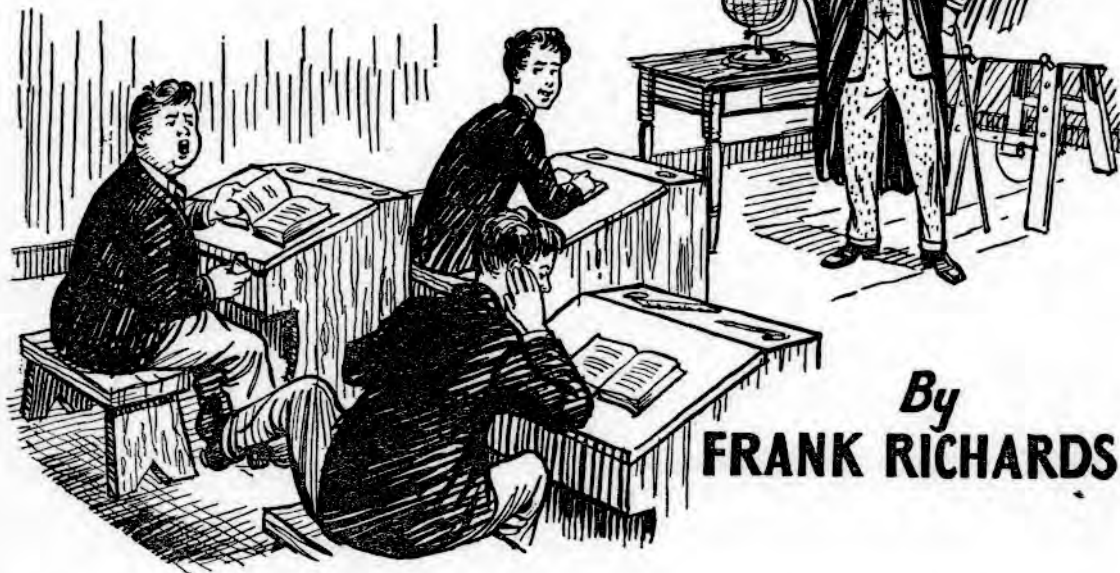


SKIP *on the* SPOT



By
FRANK RICHARDS

BULLINGER hacked Skip under the desk, not because Skip had done anything, but simply because he was in the worst temper ever; and Skip Ruggles, inoffensive as he was, was a member of Study Four. Bullinger's feelings towards Study Four at the time were inimical, not to say homicidal, much as he would have preferred to hack Tom King or Dick Warren—especially Tom King, the junior football captain. But they were not near enough in form; moreover, they were not fellows to be hacked with impunity. So he hacked poor Skip.

Bullinger had been shirty, not to say savage, ever since Tom King had taken his name out of the list of men for the St. Jude's match which was to be played

on the Felgate ground that afternoon. Tom had taken it out for good reasons: for had not Bullinger in a practice game deliberately kicked a man, having lost his temper, as he not infrequently did? Tom was not going to risk that sort of thing happening in a school match—and Bullinger, good right-half as he was, was dropped like a hot potato. The mere idea of hanging about with his hands in his pockets while other fellows played soccer was infuriating to Bullinger, and the fact that he had asked for it was no comfort to him. It was a little comfort perhaps to hack Skip's fat leg under the desk in form in third school.

It was no comfort to Skip. It took him quite by surprise, and it hurt. The

howl that Skip uttered as he received the hack woke all the echoes of the Fourth Form room, caused fellows to stare round, and caused Charne, the form-master, to fix his pin-point eyes on Skip with quite a deadly glare. Charne did not like the lesson being interrupted by a wild howl like that of a startled jackal in the jungle.

It was all the more dismaying because Skip at that moment did not want Charne's attention directed to him. Charne had his eye on Reece, who was handing out quite a good "con". With Charne's eye fixed on Reece, Skip had ventured to take a packet of toffee from his pocket and to help himself to a chunk therefrom. Toffee in class was very strictly forbidden, and Skip masticated the same almost in fear and trembling, lest Charne's eye should fall upon him. Now it fell.

"Ruggles!" rapped Charne.

"Ow! Wow!" was Skip's agonised reply. Bullinger was a heavy-handed fellow. He was also heavy-footed. That hack had been an emphatic one.

"Ruggles! Stand out before the class!"

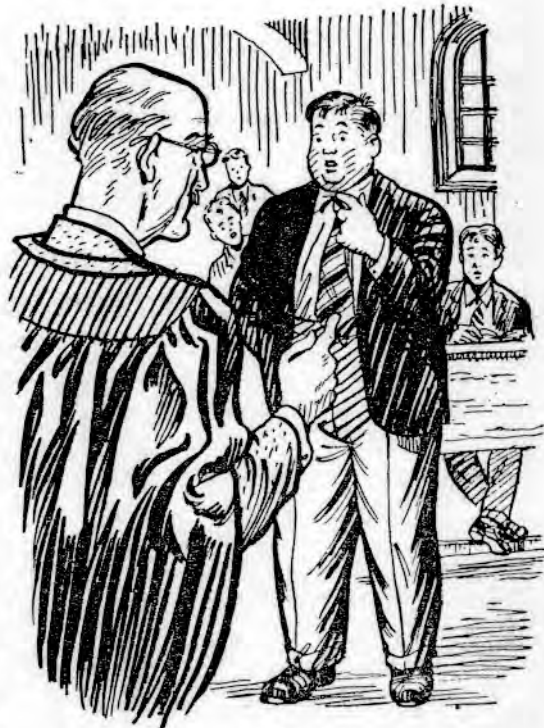
"Oh, crikey!" moaned Skip.

The anguish in his plump leg occupied Skip's whole attention. He hardly realised that the packet of toffee was still in his fat hand as he limped out before the form. But Charne noticed it at once. Little escaped those pin-point eyes in the Fourth Form room at Felgate.

"You have interrupted the lesson, Ruggles——"

"Ow! I—I couldn't help it, sir—somebody kicked me under the desk."

"What is that in your hand?"



He put a fat hand behind him, considerably too late.

"Oh! Nothing, sir!" gasped Skip. He put a fat hand behind him, considerably too late. "I—I—I mean—oh—nothing, sir."

"Hold up your hand, Ruggles."

There was no help for it. With Charne's eyes and the eyes of all the Fourth on him, Skip held up a fat hand, clutching the toffee packet. Charne's eyes glittered at it.

"Toffee!" he said. Toffee might have been a dangerous poison by the way Charne spoke. Charne, of course, was long past the age of toffee. He almost snorted: "Place it on my desk, Ruggles."

Slowly and sadly Skip placed the packet on his form-master's desk. His eyes lingered on it mournfully. Dido's

sad gaze could hardly have lingered so mournfully on Aeneas' departing sails as Skip's did on that packet of toffee.

"Take fifty lines, Ruggles, for bringing toffee into the form-room."

"I—I——"

"Go back to your place."

With one last long lingering look at the toffee, Skip went back to his place. Bullinger grinned at him as he sat down. Charne did not seem to care who had hacked Skip and caused that sudden howl, or whether anybody had. Skip's dire offence in bringing toffee into the form-room was enough for Charne.

"Go on, Reece," said Charne.

"Oh, you smudge!" hissed Skip to Bullinger as he sat down.

Charne's eyes swivelled round.

"Are you talking in class, Ruggles?"

"Oh, lor! No, sir—yes, sir—I—I mean——" burred poor Skip.

"Take a hundred lines."

After that Skip refrained from telling Bullinger what he thought of him. He waited dolorously till third school was over, hoping against hope that the toffee might then come back to its owner. When the Fourth were dismissed he ventured a word.

"Please, sir——"

"Well?" The monosyllable came like a bullet.

"M-m-may I take my toffee, sir?"

"You may not!"

Skip rolled out of the form-room after the rest with an almost tragic face. Other fellows might be thinking of football—in fact most of them were!—but Skip wasn't playing in the St. Jude match, and toffee was toffee! And it was a large packet—lots and lots of chunks in it. Skip had hardly started

on it, when it was gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream!

He did not go out into the quad with Tom King and Dick Warren as usual. He lingered in the corridor, with an eye on the form-room door. Charne would be out in a few minutes, and there might, Skip thought, be a chance of nipping into the form-room when he was gone and retrieving that toffee.

But alas for Skip!

Charne came out, with papers in his hand. But there was something else as well as papers. It was a large packet of toffee. Skip's feelings were unutterable as he realised that Charne was taking it to his study with him.

"Ruggles!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" moaned Skip.

"Why are you here? You should not loaf about the corridors. Go away!"

Skip went away with feelings inexpressible in words.

In the quad a few minutes later Tom King and Dick Warren were listening to his tale of woe. They grinned—they were sympathetic, but Skip's disaster seemed to them to have a comic side. However, they condoled with Skip, and were condoling, when Bullinger came up with a scowling brow and his jaw jutting aggressively.

"Look here, King——!" growled Bullinger.

"Looking!" said Tom politely.

"If you mean it about chucking me this afternoon——"

"Quite!"

"You'll be sorry for it," said Bullinger darkly.

"I'll chance that! But never mind soccer now," said Tom. "There's

something else. You hacked Skip in form and landed him in a row with Charne. Bag him and duck his head, Dick."

"What-ho!" said Dick Warren.

They were standing by the fountain in the quad. Two pairs of hands collared Bullinger and his head was promptly ducked in the granite basin. It came out streaming with water, its owner spluttering like a grampus.

"Urrrrgh!" spluttered Bullinger. "I—I'll—gurrgh! Ooooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Skip.

He was almost consoled for the loss of his toffee, as Bullinger, streaming, dripping and spluttering, started for House in search of a towel. But it was only for a few moments. His chums had avenged his wrongs, so far as they could. But the toffee was still in

Charne's study—and Skip, like Rachel of old, mourned for that which was lost, and could not be comforted.

Charne, when he left his study to go along to the common-room before dinner, certainly never dreamed that any boy in his form had burglarious designs on that study. Such an idea could never have occurred to Charne. And indeed few fellows in the Fourth Form at Felgate would have made the venture. They would almost as soon have ventured into a lion's den; and in ordinary circumstances, the last fellow in the Fourth to think of following the example of Daniel of old was Skip Ruggles. But it was Skip who dared to be a Daniel.

It was, of course, the toffee. Skip might be a fat ass, as even his best chums admitted. He might be a rabbit at games and a dunce in form. But when it came down to brass-tacks Skip had plenty of pluck. And he needed it all to tiptoe surreptitiously into Charne's study and bag that toffee. Greatly daring, Skip had an eye on Charne's study from a corner of the corridor when Charne went along to the common-room and disappeared into that apartment. Skip did it. He could hardly believe his own nerve, but he did. Hardly a minute after Charne was out of the study Skip Ruggles was in it—the door closed, staring round eagerly in search of a packet of toffee.

His fat heart was beating fast. If Charne happened to come back for something and catch him there. . . ! Six of the very best would be his reward—and Skip felt all his fat cringe at the bare thought. But after all, it



was safe enough if he did not linger. Charne was not likely to come back, and Skip did not expect to be more than a minute or two in the study.

That was the idea, but it did not work out. Charne, Skip supposed, would have left that packet on his table. But he hadn't! There were books and papers on the table, but no packet of toffee. There was a small table by the window where the telephone stood, and Skip gave it the once-over. But the packet was not there. It was not on the mantelpiece. It was not to be seen at all. Skip breathed hard and deep. It was not a matter, as he had hopefully supposed, of snatching that packet and fading swiftly out of the picture. He had to search for it. Where had that unutterable smudge, Charne, put it?

Minutes were passing—and every minute was fraught with peril, with the awful possibility of Charne coming back.

Skip came back to the table. There were many drawers in Charne's writing-table, and it seemed probable that Charne had dropped the confiscated toffee into one of them. Where else? The drawers were in two columns, on either side of the space where Charne extended his legs when he sat there. Skip tried the top drawers. They opened to his touch, revealing papers and other utterly uninteresting material, and he closed them again silently. He tried the next lower down, with the same result. Then he stooped down to try the lowest drawers—and as he did so the door handle turned.

Skip's heart failed to register a beat.

The door was opening. Somebody was coming in. Who but Charne?

Only the circumstance that Skip was stooping below the level of the table-top saved him from immediate discovery.

Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was not as a rule quick on the uptake. But sheer terror sharpened his fat wits for once. He made a single movement—into the space under the table usually occupied by his form-master's legs. He did not stop to think—he just did it! It was not a large space to contain Skip's rotund form, but he got into it. There he crouched, palpitating. If only he could keep out of sight until Charne went. . . .

Charne couldn't be coming back to work at his table. It was too close on dinner for that. Skip hoped, at least, that he had just popped into his study for something or other and would pop out again. And this hopeful view was confirmed, when the door closed and footsteps crossed the study, not towards the writing-table under which Skip crouched like a frightened rabbit, but towards the small table by the window where the telephone stood. Skip comprehended—Charne had come back to telephone to somebody. He would go when he had phoned.

Crouched under the table, Skip could see nothing. But he could hear. Somebody was fumbling with the telephone, no doubt dialling. Realising that whoever was standing by the telephone by the window must have his back to the writing-table, Skip ventured to project a fat head and peep out. Then he almost betrayed himself by a squeak of surprise, suppressed just in time.

It was not Charne at the telephone.

It was a Fourth Form man; Skip could not see his face, but he knew who it was. It was Bullinger.

“That smudge!” breathed Skip.

It was not quite unknown for a fellow to borrow a beak’s phone when the beak was out. It was awfully risky to do so when the beak was no farther off than the common-room. Skip wondered at Bullinger’s nerve. A muttering voice reached him.

“The rotter! Chucking a man! I’ll show him!”

It was Bullinger’s muttering voice, full of venom. His temper, seldom good, and very bad indeed since he had been dropped from the eleven, had probably not been improved by ducking his head in the fountain. Obviously Bullinger at the moment was feeling very savage, though what his words implied Skip could not guess. Skip judiciously remained where he was. He did not want another hack from Bullinger, and anything like a row in Charne’s study would have drawn very unwelcome attention. Sagely, Skip decided to keep doggo and wait for Bullinger’s departure, as he would have waited had it been Mr. Charne.

“That St. Jude’s?”

Skip jumped, under the table. Bullinger was phoning St. Jude’s, whose team were coming over that afternoon to play Felgate. That was surprising enough. Still more surprising was the fact that Bullinger was not speaking in his natural voice. He was making his voice very deep and throaty, apparently to give the impression that it was an older person speaking. Why Bullinger was phoning St. Jude’s in a disguised voice was a deep mystery to Skip;



Why Bullinger was phoning St. Jude’s in a disguised voice was a deep mystery to Skip.

indeed, he almost wondered whether he was dreaming this.

He was still more disposed to wonder whether he was dreaming when Bullinger, still in that deep throaty voice, went on :

“Mr. Charne speaking from Felgate.”

Skip squatted, dazed.

“I regret to say that the football match arranged for this afternoon must be cancelled. A sudden outbreak of measles in the school. . . .”

Skip gasped.

What came from the other end Skip could not hear. But he heard Bullinger going on in that throaty voice:

“Quite, quite; but we knew nothing till this morning. It would be scarcely safe for your boys to come here in the circumstances. The school doctor takes a serious view. . . .”

“Oh, crikey!” breathed Skip.

In a state of almost dithering amazement, Skip squatted under Charne’s table, his mouth open like that of a fish out of water. He was not dreaming this, but he could scarcely believe his fat ears. Dizzily, he listened to the throaty voice as it added a few details. Then Bullinger rang off and tiptoed across the study to the door, opened it silently, and went out. He left the astonished Skip, under Charne’s table, almost gibbering.

“Tom——!”

“Come on, ass!”

“But I say——!” spluttered Skip.

“The bell’s stopped!” said Dick Warren. “Come on.”

“But I say—I’ve got to tell you—I—I went to Charne’s study after my toffee, you know——”

“Oh, my hat! Did Charne catch you?” exclaimed Tom King.

“No! No! It ain’t that! But—never got the toffee, but——”

“Come on, ass! Charne might detain a fellow for being late for tiffin! Come on, and pack it up till after dinner.”

“But I—I say—I—I——”

“Come on!” roared Tom King and Dick Warren together; and taking Skip by either arm, they rushed him into the House.

Skip spluttered breathlessly and went. The school dinner was Charne’s lunch—and Charne was a whale on

punctuality. The slightest chance of a detention that afternoon was enough to make any member of the Felgate junior eleven feel quite faint. King and Warren were not likely to risk it in order to listen to Skip’s spluttering. They rushed him spluttering into the House, and into Hall, where he plumped breathlessly into his seat at the Fourth Form table, under Charne’s disapproving pin-point eye.

Skip’s startling news had to be bottled up till after dinner.

Skip had remained under Charne’s study table only a few minutes after Bullinger had gone out—too dazed and dizzy after what he had heard to stir. But as it slowly but surely dawned on his fat mind what that peculiar talk on the telephone meant—what it could only mean!—he woke to action. Bullinger, chucked out of the eleven, had told the junior captain that he would be sorry for it—and this was his way of making him sorry. As Bullinger was not going to play soccer, nobody else was going to play soccer. Felgate would be expecting the St. Jude’s team—and the St. Jude’s team would not come. At St. Jude’s, they could only believe that a Felgate master had phoned to warn them of a sudden outbreak of measles in the school, and the match naturally was cancelled. It was an awful trick to play on the footballers—and Bullinger must have been as mad as a hatter to think of it. But there it was; and as Skip realised it, be it said to his credit that he forgot all about the toffee that had drawn him to Charne’s study—even the toffee! But when Skip got out of that study the dinner-bell was ringing, and he found King and

Warren in the quad only in time to be rushed in headlong to tiffin.

Dinner, as a rule, was a deeply interesting function to Skip. On this particular day there was steak-and-kidney pie, which Skip loved. But even steak-and-kidney pie failed to fill his thoughts—though he took his usual care that it should fill his extensive circumference. Steak-and-kidney pie, perhaps, came first; but Bullinger's awful treachery came a good second, and it worried Skip all through dinner. Charne did not allow talking at his table during meals, beyond requests for articles required. But in a pause before the pudding Skip ventured to whisper to Tom King.

"I say, Tom, I was in Charne's study——"

"Shut up, you ass!" breathed Tom. "Charne's got an eye on you."

"But I say, that awful rotter Bullinger—look at him now, grinning like a Cheshire cheese—I mean cat——"

"Shut up—here's the pudding."

"But I say, that beast Bullinger——"

"Ruggles!" It was the dread voice at the head of the table. "Ruggles! If you persist in chattering at the dinner-table——"

"Oh! No, sir! I mean, sir——"

"Silence!"

The amazing news had to continue bottled up. And after dinner there was another blow. Charne called to Ruggles, while the rest went out, to give him a few minutes' instruction on the subject of behaviour at the dinner-table, to which Skip listened in an agony of impatience.

When he escaped at last he rushed out into the quad in search of Tom

King. Bullinger was wheeling out his bike, grinning. He called out to Tom, who was in a group with Warren, Parrott, Reece and Preece and several other fellows talking of the coming game and oblivious of Bullinger. But they all looked round as he called.

"Have a good game, you men!" called Bullinger. "And don't forget to beat St. Jude's before I come in."

"Why not stay in and see us do it?" asked Dick Warren.

Bullinger chuckled.

"Fact is, I don't think there'll be much to watch!" he answered, and he put a leg over his machine, laughing, and disappeared.

Considering that the match was cancelled and that the Felgate men were waiting for the arrival of a team that



Bullinger was wheeling out his bike, grinning.

was booked not to arrive at all, it seemed rather funny to Bullinger. It would not have seemed funny had it been possible for the Felgate men to guess, when the facts came out, who had put through that telephone call to St. Jude's. But who was to guess that? Bullinger was quite unaware that a fat excited fellow, careering breathlessly out of the House, was full of the news of it. Skip came spluttering up to the group as Bullinger vanished on his bike.

"Tom, old chap—ooooh! I'm all out of breath. I say, Tom," panted Skip, "I say—wooooh!—listen to me—the St. Jude's match, you know—I say——"

"Oh, scissors!" said Tom. "Are you going to ask for a place in the team again, Skip? Wait till we play St. Jude's at marbles, old chap."

"Or hop-scotch!" suggested Dick Warren.

"Or kiss-in-the-ring!" said Reece.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Tain't that!" gurgled Skip. "I say, I was in Charne's study, and I thought he was coming in and dodged under the table, Charne's table, you know, and it wasn't Charne——"

"Charne's table wasn't Charne?" repeated Tom King blankly. "Wandering in your mind, old porpoise?"

"I mean it wasn't Charne—it was Bullinger. Fullinger came in to bone—I mean Bullinger came in to phone, and I heard him," gasped Skip, "and he rang up St. Jude's and told them there was skeasles in the mule—I mean measles in the school, and the match has been cancelled, and——"

"What!"

Every fellow present ejaculated. They all stared at the spluttering, excited Skip. He spluttered on.

"I tell you, they think we've got measles here, and they ain't sending over the team—they think a pheak boned—I mean a beak phoned—to tell them, and the catch is mancelled—I mean the match is cancelled—they ain't coming!" spluttered Skip. "I say, if you don't do something, St. Jude's ain't coming at all, and there ain't much time now, an——"

"Gone crackers?" asked Dick Warren.

"It's impossible!" said Tom.

"I tell you I heard Fullinger at the bone——" howled Skip. "He's done it because he was chucked. Didn't you see him grinning at tiffin? I say——"

Tom King's face set. He grasped Skip by a fat shoulder.

"Stop spluttering and tell us exactly what you heard Bullinger say on Charne's phone!"

Skip couldn't stop spluttering. He was too breathless and excited for that. But he got his story out. The Felgate fellows listened, amazed, but with faces growing grim. Twice over Skip had to tell his story, with all details, before it could be quite credited. Then, at last, Tom King went into the House to ring up St. Jude's and set the matter right.

"Goal!"

It was quite a roar on the junior football ground. It woke most of the echoes in and around the ancient buildings of Felgate. Probably it would not have pleased Bullinger had he heard it. But Bullinger, far away on his bike, did not hear it. The match that had

been cancelled was going strong. Skip's warning had come in good time—the matter had been set right.

They knew at St. Jude's that the measles message was nothing but a mischievous practical joke, and the St. Jude's team had come over on time after all. A crowd of fellows watched the game, Skip among them with a beaming fat face.

Skip would have been glad to be playing for Felgate, as he thought that on his form he was entitled to do—being the only fellow at Felgate who thought so! But he enjoyed that match almost as much as if he had been playing in it and scoring for his school. Tom King might score goals, Dick Warren might put paid to shots that whizzed at the Felgate citadel, while Skip only stood around and looked on. But it was Skip who had saved that fixture; but for Skip it would not have been played. It was a joyous Skip that watched Felgate beat St. Jude's, and his fat voice was heard on its top note when Tom King kicked the winning goal.

“Goal!”

Skip did not even remember the toffee, still parked somewhere in Charne's study. Even toffee mattered little to him now. He waved his cap and hurled it, careless where it came down or whether it came down at all.

The game was over and the St. Jude's men gone, when Bullinger came in on his bike. He found quite a number of fellows waiting for him, and noticed that they were looking grim, but had no idea why.

“Here he is!” called out Dick Warren.

Bullinger was rather puzzled. He had not expected a reception when he came in. But his cue was to affect ignorance, and he asked:

“Had a good game?”

“Fine!” answered Tom King.

“Beat St. Jude's three to two!” chuckled Skip.

Bullinger could not help jumping.

“St. Jude's came over?” he stuttered.

It was an injudicious question, but it popped out in his amazement.

“Why shouldn't they?” asked Tom.

“Oh! I—I—so—so—oh——!” stammered Bullinger. “I—I mean—so—so you beat St. Jude's——”

“No thanks to you!” said Tom King. “You see, you were seen and heard at Charne's phone this morning—and I rang them up and put it right.”

“Oh!” gasped Bullinger.

“Collar him!”

“Boot him!”

“Boot him all round the quad and back again,” said Tom King.

How many kicks he captured before he finally escaped, Bullinger could not have computed without going into very high figures. That evening a sad and sorry Bullinger kept to his study. But in Study Four, along the passage, there was a face that was the brightest as well as the fattest at Felgate.

Skip's packet of toffee was still in Charne's study, unless Charne had disposed of it elsewhere, as he probably had. But Skip, at last, ceased to sigh for it, for Tom King and Dick Warren had clubbed together to purchase the biggest packet of toffee that was to be had for love or money, and duly presented the same to their fat chum.