

TRUANTS' LUCK!



By **FRANK RICHARDS**

WE'RE going!" said Tom King.
"We jolly well are!" said Dick Warren.

They spoke with equal determination.

All the same, they looked—as they felt—dubious.

Skip Ruggles, sitting in the window-seat in Study Four, shook a fat head.

"You'll get into a frightful row with Charne, if you do!" he said.

"Bother Charne!" said Tom.

"Blow Charne!" said Warren.

"But you can't blow Charne, as he's our beak," argued Skip. "He would be as mad as a hatter. Send you up to the Head, most likely. After all, it's only a paper-chase. Better chuck it."

It was sage advice. Skip handed it out with the best intentions. He did not want to see his chums landed in a frightful row with Mr. Charne, the master of the Felgate Fourth, and perhaps sent

up to Dr. Leicester. But his chums appeared to have no use for sage advice. Tom King gave him a glare. Warren, more emphatically, picked up a cushion and hurled it. Skip received the cushion on a fat little nose, and collapsed in the window-seat, spluttering.

It was all Skip's fault, really. When things went wrong in Study Four at Felgate, it was generally Skip's fault. They had been tearing up paper for scent in the paper-chase scheduled for Wednesday afternoon. Quantities of paper were wanted: and old newspapers, dog-eared books, and disused exercises, were in great demand. Skip—inadvertently, of course—had torn up three Latin proses that were due to be handed in to Mr. Charne. Not till they looked for those Latin proses, at the last minute, failing to find them, did it dawn upon the chums of Study Four what Skip had done. Then it was too late. Three Latin proses, torn to frag-

ments and mingled in a bag with other fragments, couldn't be handed in to Mr. Charne.

The result was automatic. A fellow who did not hand in his Latin prose, at the appointed time, was booked for Extra School. Charne did not want explanations and excuses: he wanted Latin proses. It was Extra for all three that afternoon: French in Monsieur Pin's class-room, instead of a healthy, happy paper-chase by Fell Wood, the bank of the Fenny, and Hodden Heath.

It did not come so hard on Skip. Skip would have run with the pack, the first to tail off. But it was awfully hard on Tom King and Dick Warren, who were the selected hares. They talked it over in Study Four with glum faces. It was a bright, clear, cold afternoon—ideal for the run. The open spaces called them. Never had French verbs, regular or irregular, appealed to them less. And they felt the injustice of it. It wasn't their fault that Skip Ruggles was the biggest idiot at Felgate or anywhere else. How could they help Skip grabbing up the wrong papers and disintegrating them for scent? And so they came to that somewhat desperate resolution. Charne or no Charne, they were going to run in the Fourth Form paper-chase. Sage advice from Skip, the cause of the whole trouble, was superfluous.

"Urrrgh!" spluttered Skip, sitting up again. "Look here——."

"Shut up!" roared Tom King.

"But I say——!" persisted Skip.

Dick Warren looked round for another missile.

"You just can't cut!" urged Skip. "Why, Charne will see the start, from his study window. Think he will stand for it? You'll have old Charne chasing

after you and calling you back. Look here, take my advice, and—yaroooooh!" A Latin dictionary, catching Skip under his fat chin, cut short his remarks. He wound up with a roar.

His remarks, all the same, carried weight. It was all very well for King and Warren to make up their minds to pass Charne by like the idle wind which they respected not. But was it possible to elude Charne's keen eye? That pinpoint eye was well known to observe everything that went on at Felgate School. If it fell on them, going off against orders——!

"We're going!" said Tom. But he spoke a little haltingly.

"We are!" said Warren: but his voice, too seemed to drag a little.

A "row" afterwards they were prepared to face—even to risk being sent up to the Head. But to be "copped" before they fairly got going—to get the row without the paper-chase—that was a disastrous prospect. And that was only too awfully, fearfully, dismally probable.

There was a step in the passage, and Bullinger looked into Study Four. He grinned at two clouded faces, and at Skip, rubbing his chin.

"What about Reece and Preece for hares?" he asked, "as you fellows will be in Extra——."

"We're not so sure of that!" grunted Warren.

"Eh? I heard Charne——."

"Blow Charne."

Tom King rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

"I—I—I wonder if it would be any good trying to explain to Charne?" he muttered. "If he would listen——."

"Catch him!" grunted Warren.

"Too late, anyway," said Bullinger.

"Charne's gone out. Look here, Reece and Preece for hares——."

"Gone out?" exclaimed Tom King. His face brightened. Dick Warren's followed suit. It was like the sun coming out of the clouds.

"Yes—one of his half-holiday grinds," said Bullinger. "What difference does that make?"

"Lots!" chuckled Tom King.

The chums of Study Four exchanged blissful glances. They knew Charne's "grinds". If Charne had gone out on a grind, his portly person was not likely to be on view at Felgate again for hours. The paper-chase would be well on its way long before that pin-point eye glinted about Felgate again. It might even be over, and hare and hounds back at the school.

The coast was clear! A row afterwards could be dismissed from mind, to be considered later, when it accrued. Why, it was even possible that Mossoo might omit to report absence from Extra: he did sometimes. Anyhow, Charne had gone on a country walk, and two rather thoughtless juniors of his form were free to do as they jolly well chose!

Tom King jumped up.

"Come on," he said.

"Tain't time for Extra yet," said Bullinger, staring.

Tom laughed.

"Never mind Extra! We're running in the chase——come on, Dick. Time we got changed."

"I say——!" bleated Skip.

Skip, no doubt, had some more sage advice to hand out. But his chums did not stay to listen to it. Charne had gone out: and that was all that mattered. They cut out of the study, leaving Bullinger to stare, and Skip to waste his bleating on the desert air.

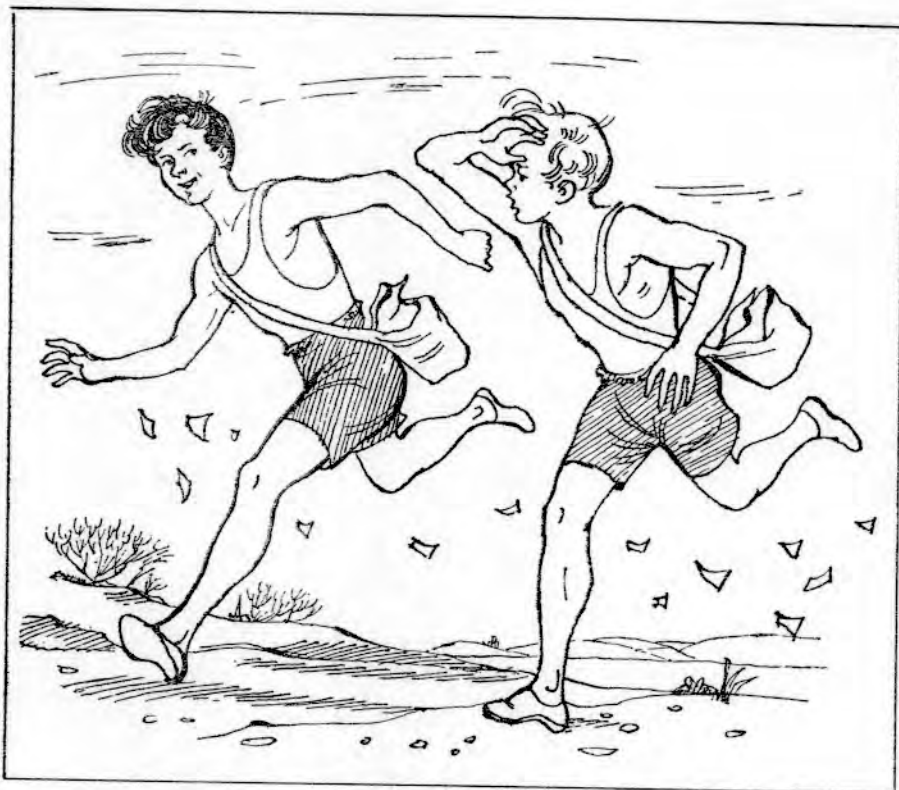
Tom King glanced back, from the slopes of High Fell, and smiled. Dick Warren mopped a spot of perspiration from his brow. It was a cold day but a warm run. Faintly from afar came the note of a bugle. The pack were streaming out of Fell Wood, and the hares had been sighted—but far in the distance—their shirts just two spots of blue on the hillside. There were some good running men in the pack—Bullinger, and Reece, and Preece, and Carton and Valence—but King and Warren were undoubtedly the best men in the Fourth at that game. The hares had had ten minutes' start: but they had very considerably improved on it: and half-way out, many of the pack had tailed off and given it up. By winding ways the trail of torn paper led those who were made of sterner stuff, and were still sticking it out: but now the hares were in view, and Bullinger called on the bugle. But both Tom King and Dick Warren smiled as they glanced back at the distant toiling pack.

"They've seen us!" said Tom.

"Let 'em!" said Warren. "Give 'em a good look—they won't see us again before Felgate!"

And just to tantalise the distant pack, the hares stood where they were, looking back, and waving their hands. The pack came streaming up the hillside, Reece and Preece pulling ahead. Reece and Preece were very anxious to make a capture, and score over Study Four, if they could. The opinion of Tom King and Dick Warren was that they couldn't. For a long minute they stood there, in full view: and when they moved again, it was at a deliberately leisurely stroll.

That leisurely stroll, however, was



"They've seen us!" said Tom.

only to tantalise Reece and Preece. As they plunged out of sight among the thickets on High Fell, they put on speed again. It was amusing to rag the pack: but they were not risking being caught, all the same. Scattering scent as they ran on, by winding paths, or plunging through thickets, they worked their way round the lower slopes of High Fell, and then downward to the bank of the Fenny. Their course lay along the river for half a mile, and then by Hodden Heath home. And neither of them expected to see the pack again, or to be seen by them, nearer than home.

It was easy going on the path by the glistening Fenny. They trotted on cheerily. That they were supposed by their form-master to be sitting in Extra,

swotting at French under Monsieur Pin, they had quite forgotten, in the cheery excitement of the chase. There was plenty of time to think of that when the trouble came, later—if it came. Just at present they were enjoying the keen air, the vigorous exercise, and the pleasure of beating the pack. Charne and his edicts had quite disappeared from their minds.

They were suddenly, and unexpectedly, reminded of both.

"King! Warren! Stop!"

They jumped, in their surprise, almost clear of the earth.

It was a familiar voice.

It was, in fact, the voice of Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth Form at Felgate. They came to a startled and dismayed stop. They stared round.

banks. Tom King and Dick Warren were on one bank. A portly form was visible on the other. Across the stream, two pin-point eyes glistened at two dismayed schoolboys.

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Tom.

"Oh, gum!" moaned Warren.

They gazed across the Fenny at Mr. Charne. It had all seemed so safe, so secure, when they knew that Charne had gone on a grind—one of his long country walks. It had not occurred to them that, in the course of a cross-country run, they might possibly fall in with a beak who was on a country walk! They had never thought of that. They thought of it now—too late!

III

Mr. Charne could hardly believe his eyes: keen as they were. There was a spot of the autocrat in Charne. He was accustomed, in his form, to speak as one having authority, saying "Do this!" and he doeth it. Never could it have occurred to Charne that juniors whom he had assigned to Extra School could ever be spotted miles from Felgate, engaged in a paper-chase. But there they were—King and Warren, who should have been sitting in Extra with Ruggles—there they were, under his astonished and wrathful eyes, on the other bank of the Fenny. The wrath in Charne's face was terrific. Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, had simply nothing on it. He came to the edge of the bank—rather precariously on a rather crumbling edge of a steep drop—and stared across—or rather, glared across. Had King and Warren been on the same bank, Charne might have boxed their ears, at that moment. Luckily for their ears, the Fenny ran between.



"Stop this instant."

Charne was not to be seen. He was nowhere at hand. Really, it seemed for one amazed moment that the two truants were haunted by a disembodied voice.

"What——?" gasped Tom King.

"Where——?" panted Warren.

Then the voice came again.

"Stop this instant!"

This time it guided their eyes in the right direction. The voice came across the Fenny. At that point the Fenny, though deep and rapid, was not wide. It flowed swiftly between two high steep

"King! Warren! What are you doing here?" thundered Charne.

Really, it was a superfluous question. Running shorts and bags of scent were a sufficient indication of what King and Warren were doing there.

"We—we—we—it's a—a—a paper-chase, sir!" gasped Tom.

"We—we—we're the hares, sir!" stuttered Warren.

Thunder intensified in the brow of Charne.

"Did I, or did I not, give you Extra School for failing to hand in your Latin proses?" It was more like a roll of thunder than a voice.

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"Yet you are here!"

They could only blink at him, across the Fenny. They, undoubtedly, were there: there was no denying that. They wished, from the very bottom of their hearts, that they were anywhere else. But—there they were!

"I shall deal with you most severely for this!" The thunder rolled on. "In the meantime, return to the school at once, by the shortest route. Go back!"

"If—if you please, sir!" gasped Tom. "Mayn't we finish the run?"

"What? what? Certainly not! You will go back by the way you have come, this very instant!"

"Oh, suffering cats!" moaned Dick Warren. Tom could have groaned. They had to go back—to walk fairly into the hands of the pack!

Tom made one more desperate effort.

"If—if you please, sir, we'd be back almost as soon if we go on, sir——."

"Silence!" Mr. Charne stamped his foot. He stamped it hard, and most emphatically. "Another word, and—OH!"

Charne had stamped that foot, partly

as an expression of his towering wrath, and partly to lend emphasis to his words. But he had stamped it not wisely but too well. On the very edge of a steep bank, it was an unwise proceeding. How unwise it was, Charne realised the next moment, as a loose clod slipped under the stamping foot, and he lost his balance.

Splash!

It happened so suddenly that King and Warren were as taken by surprise as Charne. Their eyes popped at a portly form-master, slithering headlong down a steep bank, accompanied by earth and stones, and then plunging into splashing water. Charne disappeared from their sight.

He came up, in the middle of the stream. Two hands were flung helplessly up—with the natural consequence that Charne went under again. King and Warren hadn't known that Charne couldn't swim. They knew it now.

"Oh!" gasped Tom. "Quick!"

Bags of scent were flung anywhere. Tom King was the first to dive, but Warren was only a second behind him. Charne, struggling wildly, and adding to his danger by his blind clutches at the atmosphere, was swept along by the current. It was fortunate for Charne that those two members of his form were good men at ducker. They reached him and grasped him. They got his head up, and kept it up. Even then, it seemed a little doubtful whether Charne might not drown the whole party by his frantic flounderings.

But they edged him to the bank—their own bank. They dragged him out, and up that bank. He sat down there, streaming with water, his hat gone, his hair a wet mop—what there was of it!—gasping, panting, spluttering. King and



They dragged him out, and up that bank.

Warren, breathless, stood and panted for breath, dripping from head to foot. From the distance came a sound of ta-ra-ra! It was the bugle—the hares had been sighted again!

“Urrgh! Wurrgh!” Charne gurgled. “Urrgh! Upon my word! King—Warren—you—you—you—urrrrrgh!” He recovered a little. “Thank you, King! Thank you, Warren! You are two brave lads! Urrrgh! I am—urrgh!—much obliged to you! Urrrgh! Do not stand there dripping with water—you will catch cold! Run as fast as you can to the school—urrrgh!”

“May we go by way of Hodden Heath, sir?” asked Tom, meekly.

“What? what?” Charne glared, for a moment. But only for a moment. “Oh! Yes! Certainly! You may finish your run! Oh! Certainly.”

They waited for no more.

IV

Skip came out of Extra, to find his chums in a crowd of fellows in the Felgate quad. Rather to Skip’s surprise, they were looking merry and bright.

“Did you beat the pack?” asked Skip.

“Sort of! Miles ahead,” answered Warren.

“Yards, at least,” said Tom King.

“Well, that’s all right,” agreed Skip. “But you’re booked for an awful row with Charne. I say, he’s come in, and I saw Mossoo go to his study. So he will jolly well know you cut Extra.”

“He knows already!” chuckled Tom. “You see, we met him, along the Fenny, and he told us we could finish the run, if we liked. Quite nice about it.”

“Jolly nice!” grinned Warren.

Which quite mystified Skip—till he heard the whole story of the truants’ luck!