

THE HAT TRICK



THE FELGATE Fourth laughed over Dick Warren's limerick about Charne. They thought it highly amusing. Some of them still laughed, still amused, when the slip of paper on which it was written unfortunately blew away and was lost somewhere around Felgate School. But at that point Dick Warren, and his chums Tom King and Skip Ruggles, ceased to be amused, and did not laugh any more. For from that point, the outlook was stormy.

Warren, really, ought to have been thinking about cricket, not about limericks. The Greyfriars match was due that day: and Warren, the champion junior bowler of Felgate, was wanted for hat tricks. He should have been awfully, fearfully careful not to run the slightest risk of trouble with Charne. But he did not know that there was any risk – until that wretched slip of paper blew away in a high wind, in the quad, and vanished.

Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth, was a somewhat severe gentleman; indeed, at times grim. Skewing in con had an effect on Charne like that of a red rag on a bull. He had a favourite saying in his form-room: "You are at Felgate to learn!" Some of the Fourth did not see eye to eye with Charne in that

matter. But they did learn, under Charne, whether they liked it or not – often not. That morning, in early school, Warren had skewed – in point of fact he had been thinking more about cricket than prep the evening before. Charne's tongue had had a very keen edge on it. He was not pleased with Warren. What he would have said – and done – had he seen the limerick hardly bore thinking of. And it might meet any eyes – Charne's among the rest – blowing about Felgate. The juniors thought it funny. Charne, it was absolutely certain, wouldn't.

Warren was showing it to some fellows in the quad, in break, when the catastrophe occurred. The limerick, which the juniors thought funny, and which was certain to seem utterly unfunny to Charne if he saw it, ran:

There's a footling old geezer named Charne,
Who opens a mouth like a barn,
And rasps at a chap,
From that cavernous gap,
"Don't you know you're at Felgate to l'arn!"

The juniors laughed. Skip chuckled a fat chuckle. He stretched out a fat hand for the paper.

"Let's look at it, old chap," said Skip.

Warren handed it to him. It was, of course, exactly like Skip Ruggles to

drop it as his fat fingers received it. That would not have mattered in the very least had there not been a high wind in Herts that morning. But there was a high wind, and it caught the light, fluttering slip of paper, and blew it away. Tom King and Dick Warren plunged after it in haste. Unluckily, Skip plunged too, and plunged into both of them, quite knocking on the head any prospect of recapturing the paper. It fluttered away high on the wind. Bullinger saw the last of it, vanishing by the old oaks. Whether it blew into a tree, or over the wall, or anywhere else, nobody knew. They hunted for it till the bell rang for third school – but they hunted in vain.

2

“Brace up, old chap!”

Tom King spoke as comfortingly as he could. It worried him to see his chum worried. And he had to think of the cricket. Stumps were to be pitched early: Greyfriars were expected before long. Tom, no doubt, relied a lot on his own batting in the coming game: but as much, or more, he relied on Warren’s bowling. And if ever a fellow looked as if he was too fearfully worried and worn to put up a good game, Dick Warren did.

Warren couldn’t help it. That slip of paper, blowing somewhere around Felgate, haunted him. If Charne saw it—

Charne, if he saw it, would know Warren’s “fist” at once. He would know who had scribbled that disastrous limerick. He would see himself described as a “footling old geezer” – whatever a geezer might be! – and a mock made of his favourite and perpetual remark in the form-room.

Charne, it was certain, would in that event go right off the deep end. He might march Warren and his limerick off to the Head – he might do anything. Certainly he would send for Warren on the instant, if he saw that paper – not caring a boiled bean whether a game was going on or not. How was a fellow going to put his heart and soul into cricket, with such a weight on his mind?

“That ass Skip!” moaned Warren.

“All his fault!” agreed Tom, “but brace up, old man. It’s ten to one that that rotten paper will never turn up.”

“It’s somewhere about!” muttered Warren, “and Charne’s just the man to spot it, too, taking his eternal trots round the place. Why can’t he stick in his study like old Kye? Tom, old man, a chap might be sacked for calling his beak a ‘footling old geezer’.”

“Oh, rot!” said Tom, uneasily.

“It would mean a frightful row, anyway. Why, the rotten thing might blow in at his study window!” said Warren, desperately, “might blow anywhere; might catch the Head in the eye, walking in his garden!” Warren, evidently, was looking on the darkest side. “Tom, it’s no good – I don’t feel like cricket with this on my mind. You’d better chuck me.”

Tom stared at him.

“Chuck you? Don’t be a bleating goat! I’d as soon chuck myself, and sooner. Look here, Dick, you’ve got to push this right out of your mind, see, while the game’s on, at any rate. You’ve got to take Greyfriars wickets.”

Skip Ruggles rolled up. He blinked seriously at Warren with his round, gooseberry eyes.

“You’re not looking jolly fit!” he said.

“Idiot!” was Warren’s terse reply.

"If you're worrying about that limerick, it's lost——"

"Fathead!"

"Well, if you're not feeling up to the mark, you'd better stand out this afternoon," said Skip.

"I've just told Tom so!" snapped Warren.

Skip blinked at Tom King.

"Better leave a man out, if he's not up to the mark," he said. "What about me, Tom?"

"You!" hissed Tom.

"I'll play if you like! I'll——"

Skip got no further than that. This was the Thing-too-much! Skip's fancy that he could play cricket was generally tolerated, by his chums, with good humour. But this was no moment for Skip to air his footling fancies – Skip, whose cack-handed clumsiness was the cause of the trouble. Tom King and Dick Warren did not reply in words. They went into action. They kicked Skip together; and as Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, with a surprised and indignant roar, dodged, they followed him up, and kicked him again, and yet again, and yet once more; till Skip fled for his fat life. After which, they felt better; though it was doubtful if Skip did.

"You're playing, Dick!" said Tom King's final verdict. "Just chuck it out of your mind, and forget all about Charne."

"Easier said than done," said Warren, "but I'll try."

He succeeded, for a time. When the Greyfriars men came he was looking more like his accustomed self: and when Tom King, having won the toss, elected to take first knock, he went fairly cheerfully to his wicket. It was rather unlucky that Mr. Charne, who sometimes took a kindly interest in the

sporting activities of his form, came down to see the beginning of the game. Tom King had scored six: and Warren had the bowling from Hurree Jamset Ram Sing of Greyfriars. Then he sighted a tall head over the other spectators. Had Charne seen that limerick, and was he coming down for him? He wasn't, but the ball was: and Warren woke up, as it were, to find his wicket spread-eagled.

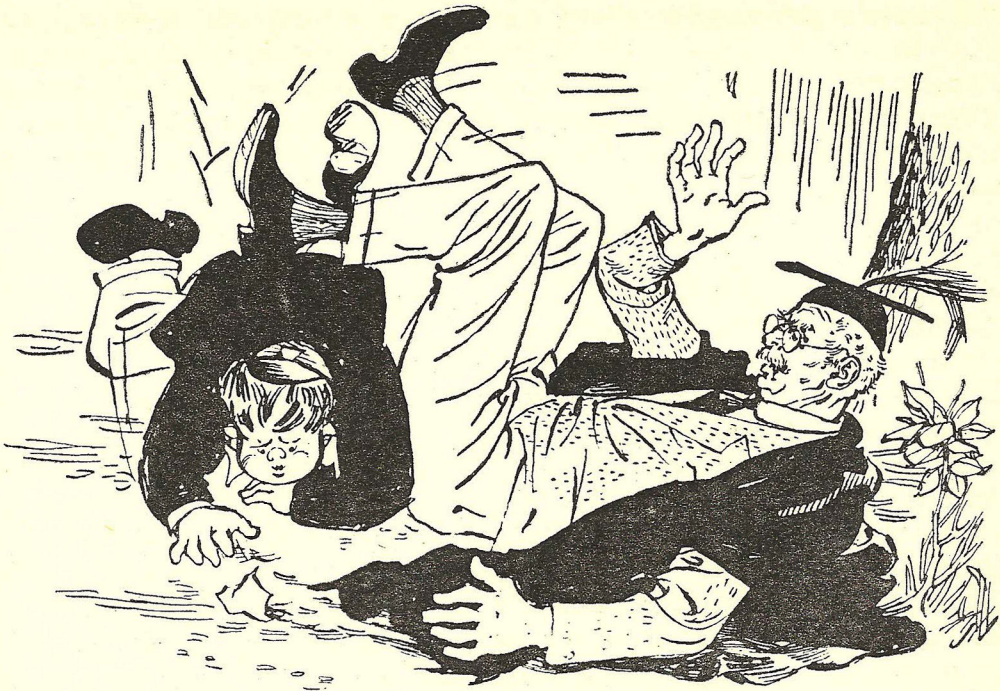
Tom King sighed. But the Felgate junior eleven had, after all, other good men with the willow: it was really for bowling that Warren was wanted. Tom hoped for better things when Dick handled the round red ball. That innings gave Felgate thirty. When they went into the field, Warren took the ball for the first over, and it was just one of those things, that Mr. Charne gave the game another look-in when Greyfriars started to bat. A glimpse of a severe face under a mortar-board was enough – more than enough. Harry Wharton, at the wicket, was looking out: but he need not have been – the ball went anywhere.

Tom King, in the field, could have groaned. If this was the effect of the worry on his chum's mind, and if this was how Warren was going to bowl, he might as well have played Ruggles.

And so it went on. Tom, with deep feelings, had to realise that there was little hope from his champion bowler. Reece and Carton shared most of the bowling in that innings. It gave the visitors fifty.

"Sorry, old man!" mumbled Warren, miserably, "I know I'm right off my form. I – I wonder if that dashed paper has turned up yet!"

Tom breathed rather hard. But he was patient.



But as he sprawled, a fat hand clutched a slip of paper

“Try to forget it,” he said, “and for goodness sake, keep your eyes open at the wicket, Dick. That Indian chap from Greyfriars wants watching.”

That Indian chap from Greyfriars did indeed want watching. But poor Dick’s watchfulness was rather wandering to a wretched paper blowing about somewhere, which might at any moment blow right under Charne’s nose! A duck’s egg was his reward. He went back to the pavilion wondering whether life was worth living, even at Felgate! A pair of spectacles made it seem not.

3

Skip caught his breath.

His eyes bulged at Mr. Charne.

Skip Ruggles was rather disconsolate that afternoon. He had watched the progress of the cricket match on Little Side with little satisfaction. What Skip

did not know about cricket would have filled the stoutest Sports Annual from cover to cover, and overflowed. But even Skip knew that things were not going well for Felgate. The visitors had been twenty up on their first innings. Good batting had helped Felgate since then. Warren’s were the only duck’s eggs. Tom King had done almost wonders with the willow. The second knock had given the home side sixty-five. But Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars were piling up runs in their second knock. Warren, obviously utterly off his form, had not touched a stick. Runs came fast to Greyfriars: wickets fell slowly. Thirty-five to their tally, with three wickets yet to come, was how matters stood, when Skip walked away and left them to it. They wanted ten to tie, eleven to win, with three wickets in hand, and it was all over bar shouting. Skip couldn’t help feeling a bit sore.

He could have done as well as Warren, at any rate. Still, he realised that it was that wretched limerick weighing on Dick Warren's mind that put him off his form, and he was sympathetic as well as sore. And then he saw Charne! Skip was loafing under the old Felgate oaks, when Charne came along the path. Skip blinked at him, wondering what Charne would think if he knew anything about that limerick. Then he noticed that Mr. Charne had paused, and was staring at the ground. Skip's stare followed Charne's; and he saw a slip of paper lying on the earth.

It was enough to make Skip catch his breath.

That wretched paper, after fluttering about for hours, had come to rest, at last, right under Charne's nose – as Warren had dreaded that it might. Charne, glancing down at it, certainly couldn't read what was written on it. But if he picked it up——!

In utter horror, Skip saw him stoop.

Seldom, if ever, did Stanley St. Leger's brain work rapidly. Often, in his chums' opinion, it did not work at all. But the awfulness of the situation spurred even Skip's fat brain to unaccustomed activity. If he had stopped to think, he might never have charged Charne – it was a fairly serious undertaking for a Felgate junior to charge his beak over. Skip did not stop to think – he rushed.

Crash!

He cannoned headlong into Charne.

Charne, taken quite by surprise, tottered over, collapsing, in billowing gown. Skip sprawled. But as he sprawled, a fat hand clutched a slip of paper. That slip of paper vanished into his pocket as he scrambled up. Charne was slower to get on his feet. When he

did so the expression on his face was very expressive.

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Charne. "You stupid boy – you utterly stupid boy – how dare you rush about like that, without looking where you are going? O – oh!"

Charne did not even suspect that that charge was intentional. So wild an idea could not enter his mind. It was that stupid, clumsy young blockhead Ruggles all over! Charne looked at him as if he would bite him.

"Oh! Sorry, sir!" gasped Skip, "I –"

"You foolish, unthinking, clumsy, stupid boy! Take a hundred lines!" rasped Mr. Charne. Skip, glad to escape so cheaply, backed away. Charne gasped for breath. Then remembering the paper he had been stooping to pick up, he glanced round for it. But it seemed to have disappeared; and Mr. Charne walked on, still gasping a little from the shock.

Skip rolled away to Little Side. His fat face beamed as he rolled. Skip's chums had booted him – Tom King had turned down his valuable services as a cricketer – but did that diminish Skip's satisfaction or his desire to relieve Warren's mind about that disastrous limerick? It did not. It was a beaming Skip that rolled on Little Side with a sticky hand clutching a crumpled paper in a sticky pocket.

4

"Roll off, you potty barrel!"

"Get out!"

"Hook it!"

Fellows stared at Skip, rolling on the field of play. What he fancied he was up to they did not know.

The game had progressed since Skip

had last blinked at it. Greyfriars were seven down for forty in their second innings. Now they wanted five to tie, six to win; with still three bats to come. A man had gone out to a catch by Tom King in the field, the last ball of an over, bowled by Reece. In the pause, the fattest figure at Felgate rolled on the field, heading for the spot where Dick Warren stood. Felgate men all round the field yelled to him. Skip did not heed. He panted up to the staring Warren. Warren spoke first, before Skip could.

"You potty, piffling, pie-faced porker, what are you barging here for? Get off the field, you fat, footling, fozzling, fatheaded freak."

"I've got it!" gasped Skip.

Tom King rushed up.

"Get out, you fat ass! What the dickens do you mean? Scram."

"I've got it!" yelled Skip.

"I don't know what you've got, but I know what you'll be getting, if you don't travel, fathead!" roared the captain of the Fourth.

Skip held up a slip of paper. He held it up just in time to save himself from massacre. King and Warren stared at it blankly: and then they knew! Warren grabbed at it. He grabbed it and stared.

"Oh!" he gasped.

"The limerick!" stuttered Tom.

Warren's eyes danced.

"The dashed limerick! You found it, Skip!"

"Charne found it——"

"Wh-a-a-t - ?"

"All right - he hasn't read it," said Skip, hastily. "He was just stooping to pick it up when I charged him over——"

"Charged Charne over!" gasped Tom King.

"And got it!" said Skip. "He hasn't



Skip held up a slip of paper

seen it - I mean, hasn't seen it to read. He don't know a thing! He gave me a hundred lines for running into him! I don't care! I thought you'd like to have it, Dick——"

Warren laughed. He could laugh, now! That perilous slip of paper was safe in his hand - and Charne hadn't seen it - not to read it - though the escape had been fearfully narrow. But a miss was as good as a mile. Dick Warren tore that slip of paper into unnumbered fragments, which scattered on the summer breeze. That was that!

"Get off the field, you fat chump!" came a roar from twenty voices.

The fat chump got off the field. Dick Warren drew a deep, deep, deep breath. A ton weight was off his mind. Black Care, which had sat behind the cricketer as behind the horseman in Horace, vanished. Warren's face was bright: his eyes gleaming: his step elastic. He felt on top of the world. He felt fine! He felt equal to beating



— and the Greyfriars man stood staring at a wicket from which the middle stump was missing

Australian Test teams. He grasped Tom King by the arm.

“Me the next over!” he said.

Tom eyed him doubtfully. Warren had played so absolutely rotten a game, both with the willow and the leather, that his skipper and chum couldn’t help feeling dubious. And if there was to be the ghost of a chance of yet pulling that practically lost game out of the fire, no wild chances could be taken. Warren almost shook him.

“Me!” he repeated.

“Oh, all right!” said Tom. After all, the game was a goner, unless something in the nature of a miracle saved it. Tom nourished a faint hope of Warren, at the last moment, as a miracle worker!

Warren certainly looked good as he went on to bowl. He was quite a different Warren. Even Skip, blinking from the pavilion, could see it. And everybody could see it when the ball went down, and the Greyfriars man

stood staring at a wicket from which the middle stump was missing, giving it a toothless look. Evidently the Felgate champion bowler’s quality had come back with a jump.

“Man in!”

The man came in – not to remain. The ball came down like a bullet, and the Greyfriars man probably did not see it at all. But if his eyes did not note it, his ears did: he heard almost a bang. And he trailed back to the pavilion and told last man to look out, and mind his eye. Last man did look out, and mind his eye: but it booted not. There was a buzz round the cricket field – a breathless buzz – eyes were glued on the game: seldom had there been such a spot of excitement. Tom King hardly breathed. Greyfriars still wanted five to tie, six to win: and their last bat was facing a bowler who had never been so deadly. Was it going to be the hat trick?

It was!

There was a roar when that wicket went down. Dick Warren, hardly daring to believe in his own good luck, felt like putting up a dance on the bowling crease. Tom rushed up to him and smacked him on the back. Felgate men shouted, and threw their caps into the air: Skip added a fat squeak. Cricket is an uncertain game: and that game had assuredly looked like a goner. But a game is never lost till it is won – and Felgate, after all, had won that game.

“Good old Skip!” said Tom King and Dick Warren together, when they came into the pavilion. And they thumped Stanley St. Leger Ruggles on his fat back till he gasped and gurgled for breath. Skip couldn’t play cricket: but there was no doubt that it was Skip, really, who was the “onlie begetter” of that Hat Trick!