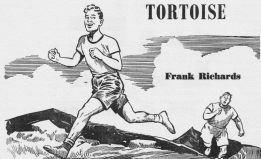


THE HARE AND THE TORTOISE



Frank Richards

"Me!" said Skip.
"Eh?"
"What?"

"Me!" repeated Stanley St. Leger Ruggles, quite calmly.

Tom King and Dick Warren gazed at him, as if he had taken their breath away.

They were not feeling on top of the world in Study Four at Felgate. Generally it was a very cheery study. Generally it kept its end up, and a little over, in games and sports of all kinds. But the cross-country run that day had reflected no glory on that study. King and Warren could run: none better in the Felgate Fourth; they could stick it out, better than most; howsoever tough the going, they could take it. Nevertheless, it was a fact that Bullinger had

beaten them to it. They, with others, had tailed in after Bullinger, who had - according to his own account at least - just strolled in at his ease.

Bullinger was not a shy or modest fellow. He was given to throwing his weight about. Swank was his long suit. To hear him talk in the Pound, Felgate fellows might have supposed that he had out-Chattawayed Chattaway. Five miles of fairly hard going was, it seemed, simply nothing to him: he could have done it twice, if not thrice: and still strolled in as fresh as paint, while chaps like Tom King and Dick Warren were crawling painfully homewards on their hands and knees!

Which was not at all pleasant for Study Four. They could not, of course, expect to come out on top every time.

If a fellow could beat them, they were prepared, like good sportsmen, to wish him joy of it. But Bully's loud voice and aggressive superiority did irk them. King and Warren were discussing that cross-country run over a rather late tea in Study Four, when their fat chum, Skip Raggles, proceeded to astonish them.

Skip had not taken part in the run. Skip had been put into Extra by his form-master, Charne, for chewing toffee in class, so Skip had been left out. Not that that made any difference, of course. Study Four would have been in sad case, had it depended on Skip to uphold its reputation for athletic prowess. Skip fancied that he could run, just as he fancied that he could box, and that he could play Soccer. But he had these fancies wholly to himself. Skip was valiant, and he would have done his best. But his best would have been many, many a length behind any other fellow's worst.

King and Warren were irked by Bullinger's boasting, and by some sneers from Reece: but they had not expected criticism from Skip. Not only, however, did they unexpectedly receive it, but it was very severe.

"You've let this study down!" Skip told them, his fat face frowning. "You've let that big, clumsy, poitering fathead Bullinger beat you to it—"

"Bullinger's big and he's clumsy, but he can run," said Warren.

"He's jolly nearly half as good as he thinks he is," said Tom King.

Sniff, from Skip.

"If I hadn't been in Extra," he said, "I wouldn't have let the study down!"

"You!" said King and Warren together.

"Me!" said Skip, and he said it twice:

whereupon, as already related, his chums gazed at him, at a loss for words.

"Bully wouldn't have beaten this study if I'd been there!" Skip further elucidated. "If only I hadn't been stuck in Extra—"

"You!" gasped Tom King.

"You don't know much about a fellow's form, old chap," explained Skip. "Look how you leave me out of games! By gum, I wish I'd been on the run! Bullinger wouldn't be opening his big mouth so wide now, if I had been! If I couldn't leave him standing, I'd eat my hat, and Bully's after it."

Two faces, which had been a little glum, melted. Tom and Warren had not been feeling too good, in the circumstances. But Skip had supplied the necessary comic relief. They yelled:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skip stared at them, annoyed.

"What are you cackling at?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Think I couldn't run that swanking ass Bully off his legs?" hooted Skip.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows are going to cackle at a fellow every time a fellow opens his mouth—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!" snorted Skip, and he departed from Study Four, slamming the door after him, leaving his chums still yelling.

II

"Funk it?" sneered Skip.

It was not like Skip to sneer. Like most plump persons, he was good-tempered and good-natured, full of the milk of human kindness. But he sneered now - quite a tremendous sneer, which almost wrinkled up his fat little nose.

Bullinger glared at him. A dozen

fellows laughed: but Bully was irate. Bully, in the Pound, was still telling everyone who wanted to know, and everyone who didn't, with what ease he could do these things, when Skip Ruggles interrupted. Skip had come down from Study Four with something to say to Bullinger, and he said it: to the general merriment.

"You fat, fozzling ditherer!" said Bullinger, in measured tones. "You footling, floundering, doddering dummy——"

"You can call a fellow names!" said Skip, disdainfully. "But you jolly well funk taking it on, all the same."

"Think I'm going to trot five miles to amuse you, you ditherer?" hooted Bullinger.

"You'd rather use your tongue than your legs!" said Skip, derisively. "You're

all gas, Bully. You don't want to be taken down a peg. You want to tell the chaps what a wonderful fellow you are, and you couldn't if I left you standing half way home! Look here, be a sport——"

"You dithering——"

"Oh, cut that out!" said Skip. "I'm challenging you, and if you don't take it on, you're funking it. Same run - Felgate to Fell, over High Fell, Hodden Heath, and back by Hodden. Saturday afternoon - if you're game! And if I don't beat you, I'll eat my hat!"

There was chuckling all round Skip Ruggles. Skip was in deadly earnest. Tom King and Dick Warren had failed to uphold the sporting reputation of Study Four. So Skip was going to do it. Bullinger was not going to brag that he had licked that study, if Skip could help



"... and if I don't beat you I'll eat my hat!"

it. Skip fancied that he could. Nobody else fancied so. If Bully accepted that challenge, Skip, undoubtedly, was doomed to eat his hat, as he had undertaken to do. Bullinger's face melted into a grin.

"Same run - five miles?" he said.

"Yes."

"And you'll eat your hat if you don't beat me?"

"Yes: and yours after it."

"Done!" said Bullinger. "I'll take it on, you footling ass. And I'll jolly well make you eat your hat, and if you don't I'll cram it down your silly neck. Mind, I mean that."

"And I mean it," said Skip.

When Tom King and Dick Warren came down, a little later, they wondered why every fellow in the Pound was laughing. When they learned, they were dismayed. They immediately sought out Skip, whom they found in the tuck-shop, stuffing jam tarts: which was perhaps his idea of getting into form for a tough cross-country run! He gave them a jammy grin.

"Heard?" he asked.

"Yes, you ass——"

"Yes, you clown——"

"It's all right!" said Skip. "You two let the study down. If I hadn't been stuck in Extra——"

They argued with him. They reasoned with him. They pointed out that Bully could beat him to it hopping on one leg. They explained to him that, after the first few yards, he would never see even Bully's back. They added that Bully was just the fellow to make him keep his reckless word and eat his hat - or cram it down his silly neck! They begged him to wash it out while there was yet time. All of which rolled off Skip Ruggles like water off a duck.



Skip's idea of getting into form!

"You wait till Saturday!" he said, with a confidence that was really sublime. "You fancy I can't run any fellow in the Fourth off his legs? I fancy I can. Well, you just wait till Saturday, and we'll see."

"You fat chump——!"

"I like that!" said Skip, more in sorrow than in anger. "You let the study down! I'm standing up for it! And all you can do is to call a fellow names."

That was, it appeared, all that King and Warren could do. The names they called Skip were many and various: none of them complimentary. But it all left Stanley St. Leger Ruggles quite unmoved. He was going to uphold the reputation of Study Four, which they had failed to do: and that was that!

III

Why the Felgate Fourth took it as a joke, Skip didn't know. It was rather annoying, to Skip, that he couldn't show his plump face in the Pound without evoking merriment.

That cross-country run was tough going: but Skip felt himself equal to it. On that run, more than a score of fellows had started, but more than half of them had tailed off before the finish. Nevertheless, Skip was convinced that Study Four would have been in at the death, if only he hadn't been stuck in Extra. He was going to prove it by covering the same ground, with the victorious Bullinger as his opponent: and he had no apprehension whatever about having to eat his hat, as a result.

To everyone else it was a joke: not enjoyed by Tom King or Dick Warren,

who naturally did not like their study to be guyed. Bullinger, of course, did not take Skip seriously as a running rival. He told the fellows in the Pound that he would stroll over the course, with his hands in his pockets, just for the amusement of making one of the fellows in Study Four eat his hat - or have it crammed down his neck - when he came crawling in more dead than alive - if, indeed, he survived to crawl in at all! That programme, King and Warren had to admit, was perfectly easy for Bully to carry out. Over-confidence, on any other occasion, might have been the boastful Bully's undoing: but how could anything that went on two legs fail to beat Skip?

On Saturday they made a last effort to reason with Skip: there was yet time to call it off. But Skip was deaf to reasoning. He changed into his running kit with cheery confidence: undismayed by the circumstance that he looked like bursting out of it at all points. A crowd of fellows saw them off at the start: everyone grinning except King and Warren - and, of course, Skip, who saw nothing whatever at which to grin.

"The ass!" murmured Tom.

"The clown!" agreed Warren.

Then they went down to Soccer, and dismissed Skip and his antics from mind. Skip lost sight of Bullinger in Fell Lane. But he was quite unaware that, had Bully kept on the trot, he would never have seen him again before Felgate. As a matter of fact, he did see him again - at Fell! A football match was going on, on the village green, and Bully had stopped to watch it. He did not see Skip - but Skip glimpsed his broad shoulders in the crowd on the green as he went plugging on his way. After that, as he came on the slopes of



Bully had stopped to watch a football match. He did not see Skip.

High Fell, Skip forgot everything else in concentrating on the task of carrying his considerable weight over those rugged slopes - which he found unexpectedly difficult. But Skip, if he was not swift, was stubborn. He plugged resolutely on.

IV

Bullinger jumped. In fact, he bounded.

He was more than surprised.

He was on the last lap of that run, coming up the hill from Hodden to Felgate at a very easy pace. Every now and then he grinned, as he thought of Ruggles, toiling somewhere far behind him. He had seen nothing of him, but had no doubt that he was panting and puffing and blowing miles behind. So it was quite startling suddenly to spot, in the distance ahead of him up the hill, a well-known fat figure. He had only a back view of it: but the circumference was unmistakable. It was Skip Ruggles.

"Oh!" gasped Bullinger.

Bully was, perhaps, acquainted with the old fable of the hare and the tortoise: and how the hare, disdaining his rival, had gone to sleep, and allowed that rival to pass him and beat him. Bully, certainly, hadn't gone to sleep: but it came to much the same thing. In his utter disdain for Skip, who, he had no doubt, was toiling far behind him, winded to the wide, Bully had loitered on the way. He had watched the football match at Fell for quite a time. He had strolled carelessly over the slopes of High Fell. On Hodden Heath he had been interested in a fair that was going on. At Hodden he had met a fellow he knew, and stopped for a chat. Now, on Hodden Hill, Felgate was in sight: and suddenly, unexpectedly, so was a back view of Skip Ruggles.

"Good old Skip!"
"Good old football!"



Bully stared at that fat back, far in the distance ahead. Then his leisurely manners dropped from him like a cloak, and he burst into speed. Bully could cover the ground at the rate of about a yard to Skip's inch. But Skip was very near home: and Bully was a long way astern. His sinewy legs fairly flashed as they flew. But the hare had cut too much time to waste in that contest with the tortoise.

V

"Skip!"

"Ruggles!"

"Oh, suffering cats!"

"Where's Bully?"

"Skip! That clown! Oh, my hat!"

Tom King and Dick Warren were on the watch at the gates. They were rather surprised that Bullinger had not yet come in. He had had ample time. Evidently he had taken it easy - very easy! But they were thinking chiefly of Skip, and wondering what had betided him. And when they saw him, their astonished exclamations drew other fellows to the spot, and quite a crowd watched the fastest figure at Felgate crawling up the hill.

Skip looked a hard case. His fat face



was a sea of perspiration. He puffed, and he blew. He gasped, and he grunted. He crawled - or almost crawled. He really looked as if he might roll over at every step. But he did not roll over. He plugged manfully on. Skip was a sticker, and he stuck! If ever a fellow looked right at the end of his tether, Skip did. But he plugged on.

"Skip!" said Dick Warren. "Skip! Where's Bullinger? Has old Skip beaten Bullinger to it, or are we dreaming this?"

"He's let Skip walk away from him!" said Tom King, blankly. "Where's Bullinger? Oh, there he is - look!"

Bullinger came in sight! Evidently he was not letting Skip "walk away" from him. He was putting in every ounce. Amazed, astounded, but delighted, Tom and Warren yelled encouragement to their fat chum.

"Come on, Skip!"

"Spurt, old man - you've got him beaten!"

There was no spurt in Skip. He was almost all-in: every moment he half-expected his fat little legs to curl up under him. But he plugged on: and reeled into the gateway, to be caught by Tom King and Dick Warren before he rolled over.

"Good old Skip! Good old fathead! You win, Skip!"

Skip had just one gasp left in him:

"Didn't I tell you so?"

They helped him, tottering, to the House. A couple of minutes later Bullinger came in - and his feelings, when he came, were inexpressible in words. Over-confidence had, after all, been his undoing: unexpectedly, amazingly, incredibly, but to the glory of Study Four, the tortoise had beaten the hare!