

THE UPPER HAND

Frank Richards



"FUNNY, ain't it?" grinned Skip.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom King and Dick Warren laughed.

They had found Skip Ruggles busy in Study Four. Skip was seated at the study table, with a sheet of impot paper before him, and a pen in his hand. Skip had lines to do for Mr. Charne, his form-master: but he was not getting busy on lines. There was a drawing on that sheet of paper—or, at all events, what Skip, who was no artist, intended for a drawing.

It represented a figure in cap and gown, brandishing a cane, and another figure bending over a desk. King and Warren could guess that the brandisher

of the cane was intended for Charne, though Skip had hardly caught a likeness. But like the painter in the old story who wrote "This is an ox" under his picture in order that there should be no mistake about it, Skip had added an inscription: OLD DONKEY CHARNE IN A WACKS... in large capital letters.

Whether that picture was funny or not, the word "wacks" certainly was. Skip was not strong on spelling. Charne had certainly been "in a wax" that morning in form, and two members of the Fourth had had the benefit of it... Reece and Ruggles.

Reece, who had manners and customs not in accordance with the rules at

Felgate, had inadvertently dropped a cigarette while taking something else from his pocket. Charne's pin-point eyes had spotted it before he could recover it. Result: six of the best for Reece, which left him wriggling most uncomfortably. But that was not all. Charne, in his grimmest mood, had made every fellow in the Fourth stand up and turn out his pockets. Luckily, there were no more offenders in the same line. But Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was for it, all the same. A large chunk of toffee, at which he had been nibbling whenever Charne's back was turned, came to light. It was not the first time that Skip had smuggled "stickers" into the form-room: and Charne, already in a "wax", had rewarded him with one swipe, and a hundred lines.

Reece was quite furious about it: all the more because Tom King, who had no use for smokers in a Soccer team, had promptly taken his name out of the list for the Dolcot match that afternoon, and put in Bullinger's. Skip also was incensed: but his reaction had taken the milder form at which Tom King and Dick Warren were now grinning in Study Four.

"Funny, what?" chuckled Skip. "I say, would Charne be wild if he saw it? Ha, ha! Of course, I wouldn't let him know I did it."

"You unmitigated ass!" said Dick Warren. "Think Charne wouldn't know your spelling? He's had enough of it in form."

"Eh?" Skip stared. "What's wrong with the spelling?"

"Wax is generally spelt w-a-x!" said Tom King, laughing.

"Is it?" said Skip, doubtfully.

"It is, fathead!"

"Oh, all right," said Skip. He did not feel at all sure: but he was willing to take Tom's word for it. He loaded his pen with ink, blotted out "wacks", and replaced it with "wax". "Okay now, what?"

"You blithering bletherer," said Warren. "If Charne saw it, he wouldn't be just in a wax - he would be as mad as a hatter——"

"Well, he's not going to see it," said Skip, "I'm going to show it to all the fellows, and make them laugh, that's all."

"Better shove it in the fire."

"I'll watch it."

"Chuck it in the fire, and come out for a trot before tiffin," said Tom.

"Rats!" said Skip. "I haven't finished it yet. I can jolly well tell you, the fellows will laugh when I show them this in the Pound."

"Look here, you fat ass——"

"Oh, pack it up," said Skip.

And as Skip was not to be argued with, his chums went down for that trot before tiffin, and left him to carry on. Which Skip did, to his own satisfaction, till the dinner-bell rang, when he rolled out of Study Four, leaving his artistic representation of a scene in the form-room to dry on the study table. It was still there when Edgar Reece, after dinner, looked into the study.

II

"Hold on a minute, King! I want a word with you."

Tom King held on reluctantly. He did not want a word with Reece, if Reece wanted a word with him. He did not like Edgar Reece, who had many ways that no fellow like the captain of the Felgate Fourth could like. And it was probable that Reece would cut up

rusty about his sudden drop from the junior Soccer team. He did not want a row with Reece, just before a football match. However, he held on, as requested, and rapped out:

"Well?"

"I looked into your study after tiffin, to speak to you about the Soccer," said Reece. "You weren't there——"

"You've nothing to say to me about that."

"Only that you've taken my name out of the list for Dolcot this afternoon, and put Bullinger's in."

"You know why."

"If you mean about that silly cigarette in the form-room——"

"Oh, cut it out!" snapped Tom. "You conked out in the Form match

last Saturday, winded to the wide. I know why - now! Think I want a man to conk out when we're playing Dolcot? If you can't keep off smokes, you'll have to keep off Soccer - in School matches, anyway. I shouldn't wonder if you've got a packet of fags in your study this very minute."

"That one in the form-room was the last I had——. It happened to be left in my pocket - I'd forgotten it——. Look here, King, I'm as fit as a fiddle, and you can't chuck a man at the last minute like this, making him look a fool to every fellow in the form——"

"Not such a fool as I should look, if I played a passenger in the team against a hard nut to crack like Dolcot. That's all, Reece." Tom turned away.

"Not quite!" said Reece. "You'd better hear the rest, King. When I looked into your study, you weren't there: but something else was. Like Charne to see your picture of him?"

Tom King, who was about to walk away, stopped. He had forgotten all about the picture of Skip's. Skip, probably, had forgotten it too, being blessed with a memory rather resembling a sieve. Skip had gone out on his bike for the afternoon, as he was going to be left on his own while both his chums were playing football.

"What do you mean, Reece?" asked Tom, very quietly. "If you've seen that rot of Skip's——"

"Oh! Ruggles's, was it?" smiled Reece. "Your study anyhow. I wonder what Charne would say - and do! - if he found that Study Four had been caricaturing him, and describing him as an old donkey. Between ourselves, he is an old ass - but beaks don't like home-truths like that, do they?"

"Charne won't see it——"



"Better put me in the team, King, or I shall show that caricature to Charne."

"He will, unless you put my name back in the Dolcot list, before Dolcot get here," said Reece, coolly and deliberately. "He will find it lying on his study table while you're playing Dolcot." He laughed, as Tom King made a step towards the House. "Too late, if you're thinking of getting rid of it. Much too late, my dear fellow. That picture isn't in your study now. It's parked in a safe place."

"Oh!" gasped Tom.

He stood looking at Reece. Reece smiled—a cat-like smile. There had never been any love lost between him and the captain of the Fourth: but he had never had the upper hand before. He had it now. And the fact that he was acting like an unscrupulous young rascal did not worry Reece over-much. He was not going to be "chucked" out of the Felgate junior eleven at the last minute, if he could help it. And in the peculiar circumstances, he thought that he could. That was enough for Reece.

"You rat!" breathed Tom.

"Thanks!" smiled Reece. "Do I play this afternoon?"

"You mean that if you don't, you'll shove that silly picture where Charne will see it—"

"Exactly."

Tom King clenched his hands, hard. But he unclenched them again. Punching Reece was no remedy. He tried to think it out. Would Charne know, if he saw that picture, where it came from? He remembered that Skip had blotted out "wacks": there was no clue in the spelling. And the inscription, which Charne would take as an awful insult, was in capital letters, and gave no clue to the writer. Anybody might have done it.

But—! He shook his head in



"If I don't go into the field with the team, you know what to expect."

answer to his own thoughts. Charne would not know who was the culprit: but he would find out. He would be, as Warren had said, as mad as a hatter—madder, in fact. His wrath would be absolutely deadly. He would never rest till he had found out who had drawn that ridiculous caricature of him, and described him as an old donkey in a wax. He would root over the Felgate Fourth with a small comb, as it were, till he had combed out the culprit. Charne, a massive pillar of dignity, was the very last man on Dr. Leicester's staff to be guyed with impunity. He would be like a bloodhound on the trail. Sooner or later—probably rather sooner than later—he would track out

the offender, that fathead Skip. And when he did, Stanley St. Leger Ruggles was booked for the time of his life.

Reece watched Tom's troubled face, with a mocking grin. He could follow Tom's thoughts in his varying expressions, and read the conclusion to which he came. And that conclusion was, that Skip was booked for dire penalties if Reece carried out his threat. There was no clue to him in the picture itself: but Charne would nose him out, clue or no clue. He might march him off to the Head for a flogging. At the very least, he would administer such a whopping as had never been handed out before in the Felgate Fourth. Poor old Skip!

"Oh, you rat!" breathed Tom, at last.

"Do I play?" drawled Reece.

"Where's that silly picture?"

"Where you won't find it."

"You're asking to have your face knocked through the back of your head, Reece!" muttered Tom.

"Get on with it - if you want that picture to go to Charne."

"You rotter——"

"Do I play?"

Tom King opened his lips - and closed them again. He couldn't answer "Yes", and let Reece get away with this. But he couldn't answer "No", and had that absurd, fathead, brainless clown Skip over to Charne's deadly wrath. He was in a dilemma from which there seemed to be no exit.

"Well?" said Reece. "Dolcot will be here in less than an hour. Are you going to take that long to make up your mind?"

"You rotter——"

"We've had that! Yes or no?"

"I - I - I'll let you know," muttered Tom, at last. "Now leave me alone."

Reece shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll turn up in the changing-room," he said. "Keep it up till the last minute, if you like. It won't make any difference. If I don't go into the field with the team, you know what to expect. Cheerio!"

Reece strolled away, humming a tune. Tom was left just not knowing what he was going to do. And when he sought out his chum, Dick Warren, and consulted him, Warren expended quite a lot of breath in stating what he thought of Reece, but had to confess that he did not know either. But Reece knew, or at least was assured that he knew: and it was a maliciously cheery Reece who turned up later in the changing-room.

III

"Dolcot will be here soon."

"I know."

"Well, what?" asked Warren.

They were in the changing-room. Some fellows were changing already. Other fellows were there, as well as the footballers: Reece among them. His eyes were on the captain of the Fourth with a very unpleasant glint in them.

So far, Tom King had said nothing to him: but time was getting close now. He had to make up his mind before the Dolcot team arrived: but he had not yet, apparently, made it up. Reece was getting impatient.

There was a cheery buzz of voices in the changing-room. Everybody was looking forward to a good game, in good weather, with a good team, win or lose: with the odds, of course, on a win. But Tom King was not, as usual, cheerily anticipative. He was in worried doubt. As junior football captain, his cue was to kick Reece out of the changing-room. As Skip's chum - the

protective chum that such an unmitigated ass needed – it was up to him to save that fat and fatuous clown from Charne. The decision was still in the balance: and minutes were ticking away.

Reece came over to them, at last, as they stood a little apart, by the window. Warren gave him a look somewhat like a bulldog.

"You worm!" he murmured.

Reece did not seem to hear that. His eyes glinted at Tom King.

"Do I change?" he asked.

Tom's reply was slow to come. He longed, in fact yearned, to reply with a smack full in the malicious face. But he had to think of Skip, suffering under Charne's tremendous wrath. He nodded.

"Okay," smiled Reece.

He lost no time in getting on with it. Reece was keen on Soccer, and a good man at the game when he was fit. Tom hoped, and believed as hard as he could, that he was fit now. Anyhow, he was going to play, and Tom King could like it or lump it.

"I can't let old Skip down," muttered Tom, as he caught Warren's glance. "I can't! Charne would skin him alive! After all, Reece looks all right." He glanced round, and called to Bullinger. "Sorry, Bully, old man – you needn't change – Reece is playing after all."

Bullinger gave him a glare.

"I like that!" he hooted. "What sort of silly ass do you call yourself, telling a man he's wanted and then telling him he's not? Don't you know your own mind one minute to another? Rats!"

Tom coloured, but did not answer.



"Reece!"

"Yes, Sir" faltered Reece.

He had to take that. Reece smiled, and changed for footer: Bullinger hung about with knitted brows, not unnaturally very much annoyed. Tom, looking at Reece's smiling face, almost decided to change his mind once more, at any risk to Skip. But the thought of that fatuous youth coming in from his spin, to face Charne's deadly wrath, was too much for him. He had to bite on the bullet.

And then——!

"Is Reece here?"

It was a sharp voice in the doorway. Every fellow in the changing-room looked round, startled. Why Mr. Charne, master of the Fourth, had come there, they had no idea — still less, why his expressive countenance was like a thundercloud.

"Here, sir!" said Reece.

Mr. Charne strode into the changing-room, with a crumpled paper in his left hand, a cane in his right, and on his brows a frown compared with which the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner might have seemed almost a smile.

IV

"Reece!"

"Yes, sir!" faltered Reece. What was the matter with Charne he could not guess: but clearly he was the object of Charne's wrath. And seldom, or never, had Charne been seen to look so wrathful. His pin-point eyes fairly glittered at Reece. Something, whatever it was, had evidently stirred his deepest ire. The whole crowd gazed on in uneasy silence.

"How dare you, Reece?" It came like thunder.

"What — what have I done, sir?" gasped the bewildered Reece.

"What have you done?" repeated Charne. "You have dared to caricature your form-master — you have dared to add an impertinent, an insulting, inscription to your impudent caricature — you have done this!"

He held up the crumpled paper in his left hand. Most of the juniors wondered what it was. But Tom King and Dick Warren needed only a glimpse to tell them. It was Skip's picture.

"This morning, Reece——" the thunder rolled on. "This morning I caned you for having cigarettes in your possession. This afternoon, I decided to examine your study, Reece, and ascertain whether more were to be found there——"

"None at all, sir"! gasped Reece, "I — I assure you, sir——"

"Silence! I searched your study, Reece. I did not find cigarettes, as I fully expected to do. But I found — this!" Charne brandished the crumpled sheet, and Reece goggled at it. He had hidden that work of art with sedulous care, lest Skip's chums should look for it. He had folded it, wrapped it in a handkerchief, stuffed it into the pocket of an old blazer, and crammed the blazer into a drawer of his desk, under a heap of papers. Charne, searching for cigarettes, had evidently been very thorough in his search. Charne was the man to leave no stone unturned. He had found no smokes. But he had found a disrespectful caricature of himself, with the happy inscription "OLD DONKEY CHARNE IN A WAX". It was no wonder that he was going off at the deep end.

"Oh!" gasped Reece. "That — that's not mine, sir——"

"What?" Charne fairly roared. "How dare you, Reece? This was in your desk

- it was wrapped in a handkerchief bearing your initials - in the pocket of a blazer with your name on it! Not another word! Bend over and touch your toes, Reece."

"But, sir, I - I - I - I -" Reece babbled. "I - I - it wasn't - I never -"

"Bend over this instant."

"But - but - but I -"

"BEND OVER!"

Reece wished that he had not been in such a hurry to change. Football shorts were a poor defence against a swiping cane. Tom King and Dick Warren exchanged a look, as that cane rose and fell. The other fellows stared on. Whop! whop! whop! whop! whop! whop!

Six, as a rule, was the limit. But Charne was too deeply incensed, too intensely exasperated, to think about limits. The cane still rose and fell.

Whop! whop! whop! whop! whop, whop!

Luckily for Reece, Charne stopped when he had made it a dozen. He

looked like going on. However, he stopped.

"Let that be a warning to you, Reece!" he thundered. And, crumpling that work of art in his hand, and putting the cane under his arm, Charne strode out of the changing-room.

V

Reece did not play in the Dolcot match. Probably he did not feel much like Soccer, after Charne was done with him. Anyhow the power was gone from his hands: Skip Ruggles was no longer in danger of a record whopping for guying Charne - Reece had had that whopping, and that was that. When Dolcot came, Bullinger went into the field with the team, and Reece was left wriggling, and squirming, and mumbling, and gasping, and wishing from the bottom of his heart that he had not been quite so clever, and quite so unscrupulous, in gaining, and using, the upper hand.

