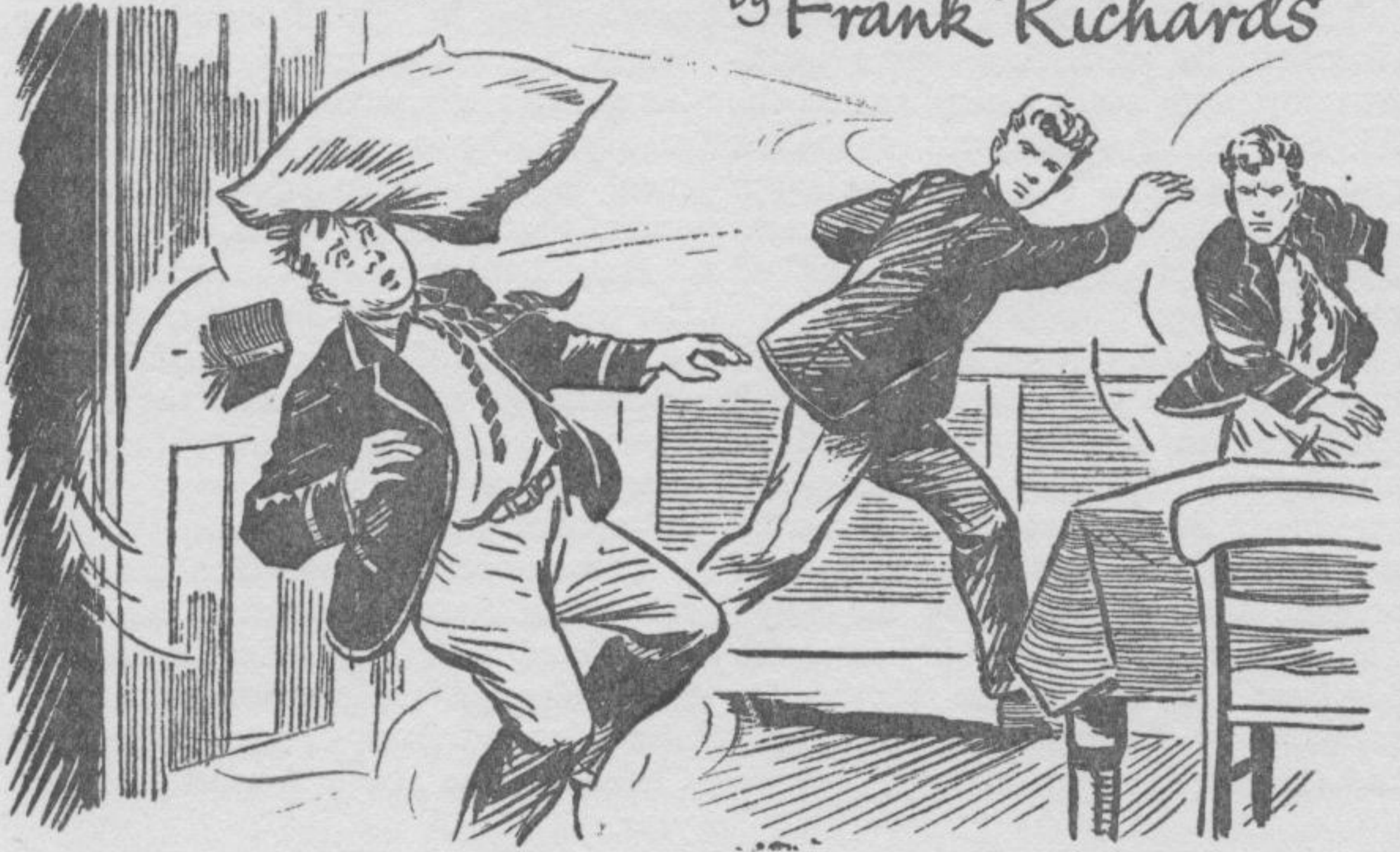


SKIP SOLVES THE PROBLEM

by Frank Richards



“THIRTY bob!” said Tom King.
“Might as well be thirty quids!” said Dick Warren.
“Just as well!” sighed Tom.
It was a knotty problem.

They had other matters to discuss in Study Four. There was the Fourth-form cross-country run, which was rather an event, and in which King and Warren were determined that swanking asses like Bullinger and Reece and Preece were going to be left tailing off far in the rear. But that matter of the thirty pieces of silver was urgent.

There had been a punt-about in the quad. King, Warren, and Skip Ruggles had been urging the flying ball, not wisely but too well. Skip, delivering a tremendous kick, naturally in the wrong direction, had landed the ball in the middle of the form-room window: with

a crash of breaking glass that was heard all over Felgate. The bill for damages came to thirty shillings: and it came home to Study Four: all three of whom had been punting the ball, though only the ineffable Skip was responsible for the accident.

That sum had to be found somewhere: rather a problem, as the combined resources of the study amounted to a little under half-a-crown. Writing home for it, or having their pocket-money impounded as fast as it came along, were two resources equally unwelcome. King and Warren, as a committee of ways and means, were discussing the problem, when Skip came bursting into the study, his fat face aglow.

“I say!” gasped Skip.

They gave him almost deadly looks.

It was Skip who had done the damage, and landed them with that bill. And they had manfully refrained from slaying him. But to see him bursting in like this, merry and bright, like a fellow without a care in the world, was a little too much, when they were at their wits' end to solve an insoluble problem. Tom King reached for a cushion – Dick Warren for a Latin dictionary.

“It’s in the paper!” Skip trilled on, unaware of danger. “I’ve just seen it, in the local rag, you know – the Hodden Gazette. I say – Whooooooop!”

Skip roared, as the cushion impinged upon his fat features, and the Latin dictionary caught him under the chin. Quite a cloud of dust rose from the old carpet in Study Four, as Skip sat suddenly down. He sat and roared.

“Ow! wow! Gone mad? Wow!”

“You priceless, piffling chump!” said Tom King. “You’ve landed this study with a bill we can’t pay, and now you come yowling in about something in the local rag. Who cares a hoot what’s in the local rag?”

“But I say——!” gasped Skip.

“Shut up!” roared Dick Warren.

“Look here – I say – I’ve got it——!” gasped Skip.

King and Warren jumped, simultaneously.

“You’ve got it!” they yelled together. “The thirty bob?”

Skip clambered to his feet.

“Oh! Not exactly!” he gurgled. “I mean, I’ve got the way out – I know where to get it, see?”

“And where, ass?”

“It’s in the local paper. Two Pounds Reward! You remember that smash-and-grab-raid at Hodden last week – at the jeweller’s – the man got away, and they caught him near Fell, and he had

chucked all the stuff away, on the run across Hodden Heath, and they found it all afterwards except a silver pot, which hasn’t been found——” Skip gasped for breath.

“We know all that!” hooted Warren. “What about it?”

“It’s in the paper——”

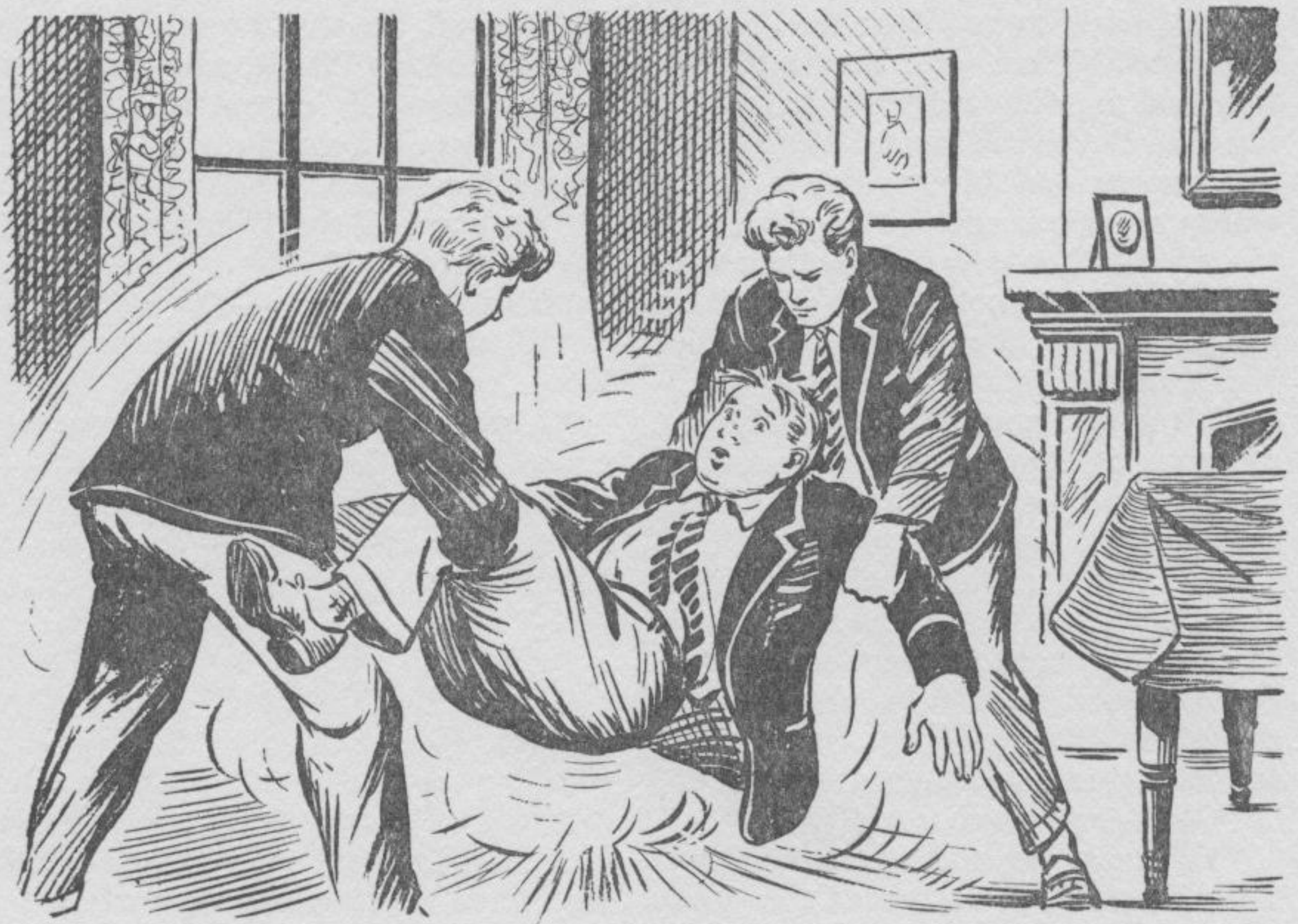
“What’s in the paper?” shrieked Tom King.

“About the reward! I tell you they never found that silver pot, and old Hickson, the jeweller, is offering a reward for it if found – Two Pounds Reward. Well, suppose we found it——”

“What?”

“That’s the big idea!” gasped Skip, his fat face aglow again, notwithstanding the impact of a cushion and a dictionary. “Suppose we root all over Hodden Heath till we jolly well find it, see? Then we claim the reward, and it will pay the thirty bob, and leave ten over for a spread in the study. What about that?”

Skip gazed inquiringly at his chums. They gazed back at him. They seemed rather at a loss for words. This was Skip’s big idea – this was what had brought him rushing up to the study as if with joyful tidings. It was a week since that smash-and-grab raid at Hodden. During that period, searching had failed to pick up the missing silver pot. Nobody could suppose that it ever would be found now, unless by the merest chance. There was more than a square mile of Hodden Heath, thick with bushes, spotted with old disused chalk-pits. Skip had a hopeful nature. He needed one, to fancy it possible that Study Four had the remotest chance of earning that reward by rooting over Hodden Heath.



"I - I say, oh crikey - don't you think it's a jolly good idea?" spluttered Skip.

"You ass!" said Tom King, at last.

"You clown!" said Dick Warren.

"Look here," protested Skip. "I say——"

King and Warren had been very patient with Skip. They made allowance for the fact that their fat chum was the biggest ass going, admitting that it wasn't his fault that he was at Felgate instead of at a home for idiots, which was his proper place. But this was too much. Hitherto they had refrained from slaying him. Now they rose in their wrath to do so.

"Scrag him!" said Tom.

"Scrag him bald-headed!" hissed Warren.

"I - I say - oh, crikey - I say - don't

you think it a jolly good idea——?" spluttered Skip, as they collared him.

They did not answer that question. They bumped Skip on the old carpet, raising more clouds of dust! they tapped his fat head on the table, raising frantic yells from Skip: then they bundled him, in a breathless heap, out of the study, and slammed the door after him. Then they resumed their labours as a committee of ways and means, uninterrupted further by Skip Ruggles and his bright ideas.

II

"Me too," said Skip.

King and Warren laughed.

It was Wednesday, a half-holiday at

Felgate: and the date of the junior cross-country run. That was what King and Warren were thinking of, chiefly, after class with Charne. Skip was thinking of it too. The problem of the bill for damages had not been solved. It still impended over Study Four like the sword of Damocles. But it had been shelved for the time. Just now Study Four were keen on the Form run, and other matters had to recede into the background.

"You'd better sit it out, old chap," said Tom.

"Wait for us in the tuck-shop, till we come in!" suggested Warren.

Skip gave them an indignant glare. As a matter of absolute fact, Skip would rather have sat in the tuck-shop, than carried his considerable weight round Fell, and High Fell, and home by Hodden Heath. But Skip was no slacker. All the Fourth were in the run, and was Skip going to be left out? He was not. Moreover, Skip was quite unaware that he hadn't an earthly of coming in under an hour or so later than the end of the tail. Skip rather fancied himself as a running man. He was a fanciful fellow in many ways.

"We want this study to beat Bullinger and Reece and that lot!" he said. "One of us has got to pull it off."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared King and Warren.

"You can cackle!" said Skip.

"Thanks - we will!" chuckled Tom.

And they cackled. Certainly, they were resolved that one of them should pull it off. But the idea of Skip Ruggles being that one, was, in the opinion of his chums, enough to make a stone image cackle.

"You'll see!" hooted the indignant Skip.

And they did see!

Skip rolled up for the run, looking dangerously like bursting out of his shorts. He kept on the trot as far as the village of Fell. When they turned off at Fell, wind began to fail, and his chums slowed down and kindly lent him first-aid, with a grasp on either fat arm, as far as the lower slopes of High Fell. There they had to leave him to his fate, with Bullinger and Reece and everybody else ahead of them.

What became of Skip afterwards, they did not know. Neither did Skip know what became of them. They vanished from Skip's vision, and the tail of the pack vanished soon after,



His chums slowed down and kindly lent him first-aid.

and Skip was left to the solitude in the face of which sages have seen charms, but which had no charms for Skip. He struggled manfully on, however, and was still alive when he reached Hodden Heath — by which time everyone else was back at Felgate. Hodden Heath stretched, a wild and lonely waste, before Skip, as he pounded on. How far behind the tailmost of the pack he would have been in reaching the school gates, never transpired: for in taking a short cut through the bushes on the heath, he tipped over the edge of one of the old chalk-pits: and before he knew what was happening, tumbled headlong in. And as that old chalk-pit was too deep for climbing out again, there he had to remain.

III

“Where’s Skip?”

“Where’s that ass Ruggles?”

“Where’s that clown?”

“Where’s that goat?”

Tom King and Dick Warren were getting anxious. They did not of course, expect to see Skip anywhere near Felgate till long after everyone else was home. But they did expect him to roll in an hour or so later. He did not roll in.

So far as the run went, Study Four had come out tops. King and Warren had come in neck and neck, well ahead. That was satisfactory: and they rested pleasantly in the study after the run, and had tea, and then strolled down to the Pound: and finally out to the gates, to greet old Skip when, at length, he should appear. But he did not appear.

So they asked one another where he was: neither being able to furnish an answer. Really, he might have been almost anywhere. Reece had suggested,

in the Pound, that Ruggles had probably perished half-way, and would be brought in later on a gate! King and Warren certainly did not think it likely to be so bad as that. But where was he? He might have conked out at any point, no doubt: but really, wherever he had conked out, he had had time since to crawl home to Felgate on his plump hands and knees. So where was he?

“The goat!” said Tom.

“The dithering clown!” said Warren.

“Where the dickens is he? What does he fancy he’s up to?”

“Goodness knows.”

“Bother him!”

“Blow him!”

They only bothered and blowed Skip because they were getting anxious. He couldn’t have met with an accident — though it was true that if any accident was to be met, Skip was the fellow to meet it. But how could he? It was Dick Warren who suddenly thought of the old chalk-pits on Hodden Heath. He remembered that Perkinson of the Fifth had once fallen into one.

“Tom! Those old pits——!”

“Rot!” said Tom. “They’re well off the path over the heath——”

“You remember Perkinson once——”

“Perkinson is a silly ass.”

“Well, isn’t Skip?”

Tom nodded slowly. He had to admit that Skip was. And as no fat figure appeared on the road from Hodden, and it was getting towards lock-ups, the two juniors decided to walk as far as the heath, and look round for Ruggles. Having started, they trotted: and soon arrived on Hodden Heath. Not a soul was to be seen on that wide expanse reddening in the setting sun. No fat head bobbed in the distance.

It was easy to follow the path across the heath: the path by which Skip should have come. It would be like Skip to take short cuts, forgetful of pitfalls. And that he had done so, they were apprised, when they had followed the path for about a quarter of a mile. From somewhere among the tangled bushes on the heath came a sound, which caused them to stop and listen.

"What's that?" exclaimed Warren.

"Sounded like a howl," said Tom.

They listened intently. The sound like a howl was repeated. But this time it took the shape of a word, now that they listened carefully. And that word was "Help!"

"The ass!" said Tom.

"The goat!" said Warren.

They left the path, picking their way cautiously through thickets. They knew now what had happened to Skip. Another howl guided them, and they arrived on the verge of an old chalk-pit, half-buried in bushes, and looked down. A fat and lugubrious face looked up.

"Skip, you silly ass——!"

"Skip, you clumsy chump——"

"What are you doing down there, you goat?"

"Oh, I say!" gasped Skip. "I - I fell in - I - I didn't see this beastly pit till I pitched in."

"You wouldn't!" agreed Warren.

"I've been here for hours and hours and hours, yelling for help!" said



"What are you doing down there, you goat?" asked Warren.

Skip, pathetically. "Did you come looking for me?"

"Oh, no," answered Tom, sarcastically. "Just taking a stroll round, when we heard something like a hyena howling. But if you're tired of the spot you've chosen to take a rest, shall we help you out?"

"I say, I couldn't climb out!" moaned Skip. "I've tried and tried and tried, but I slipped back every time. The beastly edge is just out of my reach. If you fellows reach down——"

"Fathead!"

"Goat!"

There was no reason so far as King and Warren could see, why they should not tell Ruggles what they thought of him. So they told him. But they stretched on the crumbling edge of the pit and reached down. Skip did not seem to have been damaged by his tumble. There was a thick mass of mouldy old leaves at the bottom of the pit, and it had cushioned his fall. His feet sank in it as he stood and reached up to his chums. To their surprise, they noted that his shirt was bulging with something packed inside it.

"What the dickens have you got there?" asked Tom, as he grasped a fat right hand, Warren grasping a fat left.

"It's something I found——"

"You howling ass, have you been amusing yourself collecting rubbish?"

"Tain't rubbish! It's a pot – I banged my knee on it, and found it in those old leaves, and——"

"Oh, suffering cats!" exclaimed Warren. "You had to pick up an old pot that somebody's chucked away! Think we want some rusty old pot in the study, or what?"

"Tain't a rusty old pot! You see——"

"Oh, shut up, and come out of that,

pot and all, if you've got a fancy for picking up rusty old pots."

They dragged at fat hands. They dragged Skip up and out. He sat in the grass and gasped for breath.

"Ooooooooooh!" gasped Skip.

"Sitting it out?" asked Warren. "Or think we'd better be getting back to Felgate for lock-ups. Or perhaps you'd like lines from Charne?" He helped Skip to his feet.

"I say——!" gasped Skip.

"Oh, come on," said Tom. "We've none too much time now, and you look as if you want a wash before you show up in hall. Get a move on."



Skip disinterred the article from inside his shirt.

"I say, that pot——"

"Bother that pot!" roared Warren.

"Chuck it away, and come on."

"It's silver——"

"Eh?"

"What?"

Skip disinterred the article from inside his shirt. King and Warren gazed at it. It was a chased silver pot, glimmering in the sinking sun. They stared.

"Don't you see?" gasped Skip. "That's why they never found it – it dropped into that old pit, among those old leaves, and I'd never have found it if I hadn't banged my knee on it. Don't you see? It's a silver pot – that that smash-and-grab man chucked away with the rest, and – and——"

"Oh, crumbs!" said Tom King.

"Oh, scissors!" said Dick Warren.

They did not call Skip any more names, on the way back to the school. They seemed to have forgotten that he

was a goat, a clown, a duffer, a dithering fathead, and a priceless chump. In fact, they looked as if they loved him like a brother, when after roll they walked with him to Mr. Charne's study, to hand over that silver pot into their form-master's charge.

* * *

Skip, as a running man, certainly did not shine. But as a solver of problems he certainly did. The munificent reward of Two Pounds for the recovery of that silver pot having been duly paid, the bill for damage to the form-room window was duly paid in its turn: and there remained over the useful sum of ten shillings to be expended on a study spread. The problem was solved, and while it was true that Skip had solved it only because he was a priceless goat capable of tumbling into chalk-pits, nevertheless it was Skip who had solved that knotty problem.