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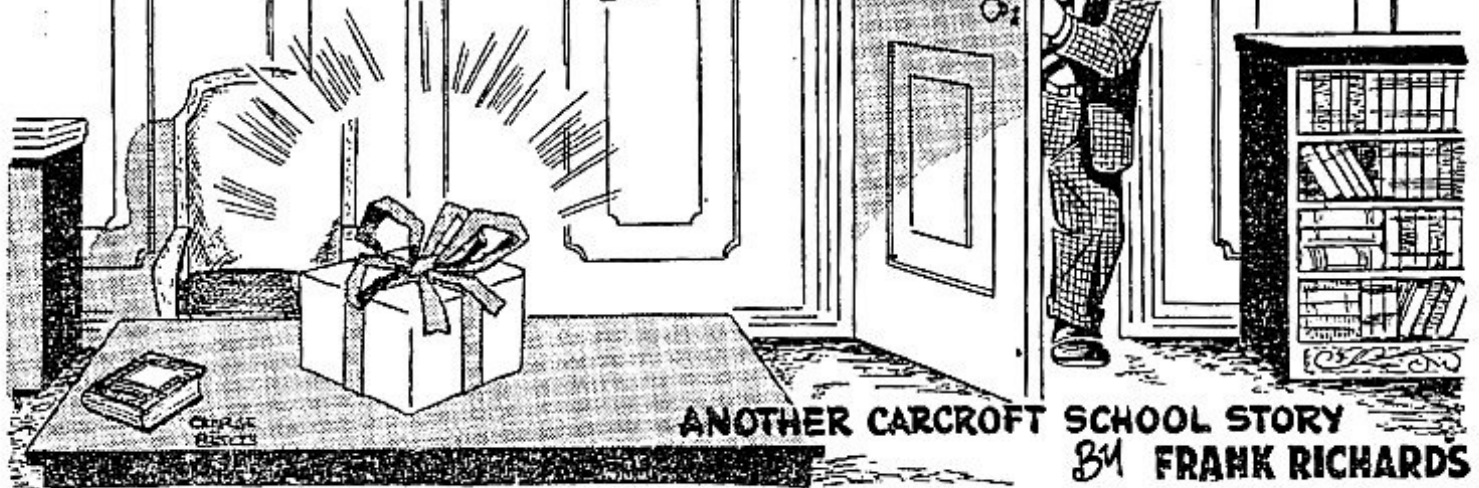


**CHRISTMAS PRESENT
FOR ROGER!**

A SCHOOL STORY *By* FRANK RICHARDS.

THIS IS AUSTRALIA'S FAMOUS MAGAZINE FOR BOYS!

Christmas Present for Roger!



ANOTHER CARCROFT SCHOOL STORY
BY FRANK RICHARDS

"A CHRISTMAS present?"

"Yes," said Bob Drake.

"For Roger?"

"Yes," said Bob, again.

"Rot!" said Dudley Vane-Carter.

The other fellows in the junior day-room at Carcroft did not say "Rot." But they looked dubious.

Roger Ducas, master of the Fourth Form at Carcroft School, was, in the eyes of his form, rather a fearsome personage. He was deeply respected, and considerably dreaded. Turkey Tuck would tremble at his frown. Even Vane-Carter, who prided himself upon being a hard nut to crack, was wont to wilt under Roger's eagle eye. The idea of making Roger a Christmas present, just as if he were a human being and not a beak at all, was quite startling to Bob's friends in the Fourth. But Bob, it seemed, was quite taken with that big idea.

"After all, he's not a bad old bean," he said. "He makes us work, I know—but, dash it all, isn't that what he's here for? And he's a sportsman, though he's a beak. There are times when you'd hardly think he's a schoolmaster at all, he's so jolly decent."

"That's so," agreed Harry Compton, "but—"

"A Christmas present from the form!" said Bob, firmly. "That's the idea. Show him that we really like him in spite of everything—"

"But we don't like him," said Vane-Carter.

"Well, we do, more or less," said Bob. "He's the best beak at Car-

croft. That mayn't be saying much, perhaps—still, there it is! And Christmas is the time for goodwill, and kind hearts, and friendship, and forgiveness, and—and so on. We get him a jolly good Christmas present, and hand it to him in the form-room, last day of term—with a bit of a speech—a few well-chosen words, you know. It's bound to please him—and it might make him a bit better-tempered next term, too. You never know."

"It might!" said Dick Lee, doubtfully.

"And what sort of a present?" asked Vane-Carter. "A new set of canes? He's rather worn the old lot out on us this term."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"A Christmas pudding!" said Bob.

"A whatter?" ejaculated a dozen fellows at once.

"Oh, haddock!" exclaimed Turkey Tuck. "That would please him, if anything would. I know it would please me."

"But—you ass, Bob," exclaimed Compton. "What do you think Roger cares about Christmas puddings?"

"More than you might think," answered Bob. "Nobody gets too much grub these days—or enough if you come to that. Think Roger likes chewing Boo-bread any more than we do? Of course he'd like a Christmas pudding! Who wouldn't?"

"I know I would!" sighed Turkey.

"They've got lovely Christmas puddings at the Ridgate Stores," went on Bob. "I've seen them—I'd

have got one for the study, only they're fifteen bob each. But it will run to fifteen bob for a Christmas present for Roger—a whip round the whole form, see? Bobs and tanners all round—every fellow's bound to play up."

"Hem!"

"I'll jolly well take the collection now," added Bob. "No time like the present. Here, you men—Vane-Carter, Drummond, Levett, Carr, Scott, Talboys, Lane—Here, I say, where are you fellows going?"

There had been quite a crowd of the Carcroft Fourth round Bob when he propounded his bright idea. But at the mention of a collection, they mostly seemed to have sudden business elsewhere. Bob Drake stared as the crowd of juniors, grinning, faded out of the Burrow. He was left with his two pals, Compton and Lee, who were exchanging a wink.

"Look here," hooted Bob. "I mean this, see? Don't you fellows think it's a jolly good idea?"

"Rotten," said Compton.

"Putrid!" said Lee.

"Oh!" snorted Bob. "so that's what you think, is it? A fellow tells you a jolly good wheeze, and you let him down!" And Bob Drake, with another snort, stalked away to the door of the Burrow.

"Hold on, Bob," called out Compton.

"Rats!" retorted Bob, over his shoulder.

"We're backing you up, old chap."

"All along the line, old bean."

"Oh!" said Bob. And he came back.

THE following afternoon, which was the last half-holiday of the term, three fellows pushed out of the gates of Carcroft against the December wind, with their coat collars pulled up and their caps pulled down, and tramped away through snow towards the town of Ridgate. They were Compton, Lee, and Drake, and they were bound for the Ridgate Stores.

Bob's pals were backing him up. So the other fellows had come round: for where the corner study led, the Carcroft Fourth were wont to follow. There had been a whip-round and the fifteen shillings had been duly raised. So there they were, off to Ridgate to secure the attractive Christmas pudding which was to be presented to Mr. Ducas, on the last day of the term, with the seasonable wishes of his dutiful and affectionate form.

Harry Compton and Co. tramped cheerily through falling flakes to Ridgate, turned in at the Stores, and duly negotiated the purchase of the magnificent pudding.

And it was magnificent. It was really quite large, it was studded with plums and things, and had a delightful aroma: it was rich and refreshing merely to look at; and all the Co. agreed that it was scrumptious. An extra shilling, over and above, was expended upon a very nice box to pack it in, with a lid tied down by a really handsome purple ribbon. Bob put the box under his arm, and they tramped home to Carcroft feeling quite satisfied.

The box was opened in the Burrow, where all the Fourth were permitted to feast their eyes upon the scrumptious pudding. Turkey Tuck was barely restrained from digging a fat thumb into it to take a sample. Luckily Bob spotted him, and the largest foot in the Carcroft Fourth disconnected Turkey from the pudding, just in time. Afterwards, the box was conveyed to the corner study: where, after tea, Bob spent a considerable time in decorating the lid with the legend, "A MERRY CHRISTMAS" in highly artistic lettering.

"Will Roger be pleased!" said Bob, surveying his handiwork with just pride. "Look here, I'll cut up to the study and get it, just before we go into form tomorrow morning, and we'll take it in with us. Then I'll step out before Roger begins to jaw, and the whole form will chirp 'Merry Christmas, sir!' when I hand it over. How's that?"

"It will use up part of first hour, anyway," remarked Lee, thoughtfully.

"There's that, too!" agreed Bob.

And the chums of the Fourth went down to the Burrow, leaving Roger's Christmas present on the study table all ready for the morrow.

TURKEY TUCK pushed open the door of the corner study, tiptoed in, and shut the door after him very quietly.

Turkey knew that the study was vacant, for he had been loafing on the landing for the last half-hour, waiting and watching for Compton and Co. to go down. He gave a hurried squint round the room, and rolled across to the box standing on the study table.

James Smyth Tuck had been disconnected from that pudding by the heaviest foot in the Fourth. Since then he had been looking for a chance to re-establish connection. Now the coast was clear, and Turkey was going to sample the Christmas pudding. A slice or two, Turkey thought, would surely not be missed. Bob was not likely to open the box again, now that it was completely prepared for handing over to Roger. Turkey, with a hurried, fat hand, untied the purple ribbon, and opened the lid—and his little round eyes gloated, and his little fat nose expanded at the delightful smell. He gazed at it as if fascinated—but at the same time, his extensive ears were on the alert for a step in the passage. A fellow might run up to his study for anything at any time, and only too well Turkey knew what would happen to him, if he were discovered with his fat paws on the pudding. He had no time to lose.

Turkey, to do him justice, had intended only to have a "go" at the pudding, perhaps followed by one or two more "goes. But now that he had it at his mercy, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream. That pudding was altogether too irresistible—to James Smyth Tuck. It was borne in upon Turkey's fat mind what a sin and a shame it would be to let it go to a beak. One long ecstatic squint at the pudding, and Turkey's fat mind was made up. He was going to have that pudding! Staying only to hook out a chunk of it, to cram into his capacious mouth to go on with, Turkey lifted it out of the box, and rolled it in an old newspaper for conveyance to a safer spot.

The box was empty, but Turkey realised, of course, that it would not do to leave it empty. The dif-

ference in the weight would be noticed at once, the first moment that it was moved. The pudding would be missed and the hunt would be up. Very likely they would look for Turkey first of all, for fellows somehow always did seem to think of Turkey first if tuck was missed from the studies.

Turkey had to cover up his tracks. That was an easy one. It was only necessary to put something in the box to make it weigh the same as before. Turkey squinted round for that something. That also was an easy one. In the bottom of the study cupboard reposed an old football boot, far beyond repair, which Turkey promptly transferred to the box. It did not seem to weigh quite so much as the pudding, but a shoveful of cinders and ashes from the grate, poured into the old boot, did the trick. Then Turkey closed the lid, and re-tied the purple ribbon. All was safe now. And Turkey, after a cautious squint into the passage, rolled away from the corner study with the Christmas pudding under his arm.

MIDNIGHT chimed from the clock-tower at Carcroft. The school slept. But in the Fourth-form dormitory, strange sounds moaned and echoed through the December gloom. For some time those mysterious sounds went on unheeded. But some of the juniors woke at last. Bob Drake sat up in bed.

"What's that row?" he yawned.

"Ooooh!" came from the darkness. "Mooch! Ooooh!"

"Is that you, Turkey, you fat chump?" asked Harry Compton.

"Oooooooh!" moaned Turkey. "Ooooh—my tummy! I've got a pain! Ooooh!"

"What on earth's the matter with the fat frog?" exclaimed Vane-Carter.

Bob Drake chuckled.

"Must have overdone it at supper," he said. "Feel bad, Turkey? What have you been stuffing, old fat man?"

"Ooooh! Nothing. I—I haven't had a—oogh!—pudding or—or anything. Ooogh! I don't feel well!" moaned Turkey.

"Ooooooooh!" moaned Turkey.

"Well, shut up," said Vane-Carter. "A fellow wants to sleep. I've got a boot here if you don't can it."

"Oooooooh! Wooh! Yaroooh!" roared Turkey, as a boot sailed through the dark, and landed on a fat head. "Oh, haddocks! Ow!"

"Now shut up!"

"Ooooooooh!"

"Do you want the other boot?" hissed V.C.

Turkey did not want the other boot. Somehow he contrived to suppress the sounds of woe.

"MIND," said Bob Drake, at the door of the Fourth-form room in the morning, "you all stand up and chirp 'Merry Christmas' when I hand it to Roger."

All the Fourth were there on time. One member of the form was looking pale and sickly. That one was James Smyth Tuck, who looked as if he had had a wild night. There were still lingering pains inside Turkey's extensive circumference.

But nobody noticed Turkey. All the fellows were thinking of Roger and Roger's Christmas present.

"Here he comes!" murmured Lee.

Mr. Ducas came rustling up the passage. Bob contrived to keep the box out of sight while Roger unlocked the door and let in his form. Mr. Ducas was not to see it till the great moment came. A snapped inquiry as to why it was brought to the form-room would have spoiled the effect in advance.

Roger, at his high desk, scanned his form, as they took their places, with a sharp eye. Little escaped that eagle eye: and Roger noted at once that something was "on" in his form. Perhaps he expected an end-of-the-term "rag"; for a glitter came into the eagle eye: and his look was grim, when Bob Drake stepped out before the form—the box, at last, displayed to view.

"What is that, Drake?" rapped Roger.

"If you please, sir——!" began Bob. He had a little speech all ready. But it was not easy to get going. Roger interrupted.

"Explain at once, Drake, why you have brought that box here."

"It's a Christmas present, sir," gasped Bob, in haste.

"A what?" ejaculated Mr. Ducas.

"A token of esteem and respect from the form, sir," said Bob, getting it going. "As we shan't see you at Christmas, sir, we're making the present now, last day of term, sir. The whole form are in it, sir! We—we hope that you will enjoy eating it, sir——"

"Eating it!" repeated Mr. Ducas, blankly.

"Yes, sir! We—we think it's rather nice." Bob hurried on. "We hope, sir, that you will accept this present from your form, sir, as an

esteem of our token—I—I mean a respect of our esteem—I—I mean——" Bob was getting a little confused under the eagle eye.

Mr. Ducas's grim brow relaxed.

He had no great use for Christmas presents, especially in the edible line. But he was not insensible to this sign of a human feeling towards him in his form. They did not, it appeared, regard him merely as a master to be obeyed, a beak to be dreaded. They thought of him, at least at Christmas-tide, as a man—indeed, a friend. That was pleasantly clear, as the whole form were in this. He cared nothing for a present: but, like the man who was given a pound of cherries preserved in brandy, he liked the spirit in which it was given! His face not only relaxed. He smiled.

"You may place the box on my desk, Drake," he said, quite graciously.

Then the whole form played up, as per programme.

"Merry Christmas, sir!" chorussed the Carcroft Fourth.

"Thank you, my boys," said Mr. Ducas, genially.

"Oh, haddocks!" breathed Turkey Tuck. Turkey felt quite faint. Inward pangs had banished, from Turkey's fat mind, all other considerations. But now, knowing what Roger was going to find in that box, Turkey trembled. Still, Turkey was all right—nobody knew that he had done it—he drew comfort from that. But he goggled at Roger with horrified eyes, as the master of the Fourth untied the purple ribbon and lifted the lid of the box.

Up to that moment, Mr. Ducas's look had been genial, pleased, in fact Christmassy. But as he glanced into the box, that look changed. It was quite a startling change. It startled Bob, who, unable to see into the box on the high desk, wondered what was the matter. That something was the matter was only too plain. All the Fourth could see that.

For a long, long moment, Roger Ducas was silent, gazing into the box, thunder gathering on his brow. Seldom, or never, had the master of the Fourth been seen in so Olympian a state of towering wrath. It was, after all—or so it seemed to Roger—a "rag"—one of those end-of-the-term rags. He gazed at a mouldy old football boot, filled with ashes and cinders, which Bob Drake had told him he hoped he would enjoy eating! His expressive countenance grew more and

more expressive. But he woke at last to speech—and action.

"Drake!" He grabbed up a cane from his desk, "bend over and touch your toes."

"Bub-bub-bub-but, sir——!" he babbled.

"BEND OVER!" Roger's voice was almost a roar.

When Roger spoke like that, it was not a time for hesitating. Bob, utterly bewildered, bent over and touched his toes. The six swipes that followed left hardly a speck of dust on his trousers. They rang through the form-room like pistol-shots.

"Now go to your place." Bob tottered to his place. "I understand——," Roger's glittering eye flashed over a dismayed form, "I understand that the whole form was concerned in this. The whole form will be detained for two hours after class."

"But, sir——!" gasped Harry Compton.

"Silence!"

Lessons began in the Fourth-form room in an atmosphere charged with electricity.

It was not till the Fourth were dismissed after the hour that they understood. Then, as they went out, some of the fellows glimpsed the box and its contents, which Roger had pitched into the wastepaper basket by his desk. When they knew, they could hardly wonder that their beak had gone off at the deep end. It was impossible to explain—Roger's grim face and fierce eye did not invite explanations. The only thing left was to discover who had done it, and slay him. And they were not long in making the discovery—remembering Turkey Tuck's nocturnal sufferings.

Roger, it was quite certain, was not likely to begin the next term in a better temper than usual. He was winding up the old term in the worst temper ever. But there was solace in taking it out of Turkey. It was taken out of Turkey in generous measure. Every fellow in the Fourth kicked Turkey, and kicked him again, and yet again—and when Turkey sought safety in remote corners, far from the madding crowd, fellows sought him out to kick him yet once more.

It was really fortunate for Turkey that the school was breaking up the next day—for if Carcroft had not broken up, it seemed quite probable that Turkey would have broken up.

THE END.