



CHANCING IT WITH CHARNE

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HE bagged my dough-nut—.”
“Oh, dry up!”
“Give us a rest!”

“That swob Sleake, you know—!”
went on Skip Ruggles unheeding, “it was a topping dough-nut, and he—.”

“Will you dry up, Skip?” roared Tom King and Dick Warren together, in great exasperation.

It was no time, in the opinion of two members of Study Four at Felgate, to worry about a dough-nut.

Tom King and Dick Warren, generally as bright and cheery as any fellows in the Lower School, looked as if all the troubles in the universe, and a few over, had descended in a solid chunk on their young shoulders.

They were under detention that afternoon. Charne, master of the Fourth, had said it; and what Charne had said, he had said! The laws of the Medes and Persians were not more irrevocable than Mr. Charne's edicts.

But it was not merely detention, unpleasant as it was, that made Tom King and Dick Warren look as if they had collected all the troubles known to mankind. The Carfield match was due that afternoon. And what sort of a game the Felgate junior team were

going to put up, without Tom King at centre-forward and Dick Warren in goal, was a pessimistic problem.

King and Warren wished that they hadn't slid down the banisters, which was strictly and awfully against the rules. They wished still more that Charne hadn't caught them in the very act. They wished that he had whopped them, ever so hard, instead of handing out detention. They wished anything and everything, except to be left out of the footer that afternoon. But that was their disastrous fate!

Kick-off was at three. And King and Warren had to walk their books into the form-room, and sit there absorbing utterly unwanted and unappreciated Latin, while a depleted team did what it could to keep down the margin of Carfield goals.

In such circumstances, they were not likely to waste much thought or sympathy on Skip for the loss of his dough-nut. Sleake of the Fourth might have bagged all the dough-nuts at Felgate, and they couldn't have cared less.

Skip, on the other hand, cared a good deal; and he was indignant. As Skip had no more chance of playing in a football match than the man in

the moon, he was perhaps less perturbed by the Carfield problem than his chums. Dough-nuts, however, were dough-nuts; Skip was fond of anything in the edible line, and particularly of dough-nuts. And that swob, that tick, that smoky sweep, Sleake, had bagged his dough-nut—the only one he had! Skip expected his friends to sympathise; to share his burning indignation. And they didn't, in the very least—they only told him to dry up!

"Well," said Skip, with a deep breath, "I like that! Call yourselves pals!"

"The question is, what are we going to do?" said Tom King, dismally, thinking of the Carfield match.

"No need for you to do anything," said Skip,—thinking of Sleake and the dough-nut, "I've got it all cut and dried. You know how that smoky swob Sleake sneaks up to the top box-room on a half-holiday to smoke his silly cigarettes? Well, I've bagged the key of that box-room." Skip, in triumph, held up a rusty key. "I'm going to keep an eye on Sleake this afternoon, and as soon as I know he's in the box-room, I'm going to tiptoe up and lock him in! When he's finished his filthy cigarettes, he won't be able to get out! How's that?"

Skip chuckled. His fat face was wreathed in smiles. His plump form shook with merriment. Evidently Skip was greatly pleased by his masterly scheme of retaliation on that swob Sleake.

His friends did not chuckle. They did not smile. Skip and his schemes were nothing, less than nothing, to



A plump form went spinning into the fourth form passage.

fellows faced with the disastrous prospect of standing out of a Soccer match in which they were badly wanted.

King and Warren resumed their dismal discussion of what couldn't be helped, in the faint, faint hope of finding some way round it. They even mooted cutting detention, and chancing it with Charne. But they shook their heads at that idea. Charne's eye was keen and ubiquitous—nothing escaped it! That was a chicken that would not fight. But what else was to be done? Nothing in maths quite came up to that dismal problem—it was a question without an answer.



Charne was not pleased.

II

MR. CHARNE, master of the Felgate Fourth, stood at his study window, looking out into the quadrangle, bright with wintry sunshine. There was a frown upon his brow.

Charne was not pleased. His eyes rested on a group of fellows who seemed to be discussing some sad and sorrowful topic, to judge by their looks. King and Warren had joined that Group: and these two juniors of Charne's form were talking to Carton, Valence, Reece, Preece, and several others. Charne did not need telling what was the topic—he could guess that one. And he frowned. Charne was not a hard man, by any means; discipline came first with Charne—Fourth-form men who did not toe

the line had to take the consequences of leaving it untoed, as it were. Fellows would whizz down those massive old polished oak banisters at the risk of their limbs. Two hours detention was really a light punishment for an infraction of a necessary rule. If it happened to knock out a football match, that was unfortunate; but doubtless would cause the delinquents to remember that rules were not made to be broken.

Charne watched that discontented group with a grim eye, till it dispersed. Then the frown on his face melted into something like a smile, as a fat figure rolled into his view. It was that of Stanley St. Leger Ruggles—oftener called Skip. Skip was rather a trial to Mr. Charne in the form-room: but he



Skip's fat face suddenly darkened.

liked the fat good-natured junior, as nearly everybody did. Skip was rolling off in the direction of the school shop—almost the only fellow in the Fourth who was not all hot and bothered about the Carfield game that afternoon. There was consolation, for Skip at least, in the tuckshop.

Skip's fat face suddenly darkened, as he passed another fellow in the quad. That fellow was Sleake of the Fourth—loafing with his hands in his pockets as he usually did in leisure time. Skip gave Sleake's pasty face an inimical glare, and rolled on. He was going to keep an eye on Sleake that afternoon, and, if he could catch him at his old game of smoking cigarettes in the top box-room, lock him in, as he had told his friends, in Study Four.

But at the moment, Skip had a "bob" in his pocket, and schemes of vengeance had to stand over until that sum had been expended in light refreshment.

Mr. Charne's frown revived, and intensified, as he looked at Sleake. He had more than a suspicion of that weedy, pasty youth's manners and customs. He was not in the football: he was a dodger of game-practice: he wouldn't be watching the match—more likely smoking in some obscure corner: and Mr. Charne had a suspicion, too, of Sleake's favourite corner. More than once he looked into that remote box-room and detected a lingering scent of tobacco there—but Sleake was wary, and he had never yet caught him. And as Sleake loafed away and disappeared into the House, Charne's grim brow grew grimmer.

He had his duty to do to all his boys: even an unpleasant specimen like Sleake. Grim duty had compelled him to wash out football for two of his best boys that day. With much more satisfaction would he have done his duty by Sleake—if only he could make a catch! And after thinking the matter over for a little while, Mr. Charne left his study, and went upstairs. If Sleake were smoking in the top box-room again, he would not escape this time!

It was one of the black sheep's narrowest escapes. For Sleake, in his study, was searching for a stray cigarette, without finding one. Had Sleake had any smokes that afternoon, he would certainly have gone up to his favourite haunt to smoke them. Fortunately for Sleake, he hadn't.

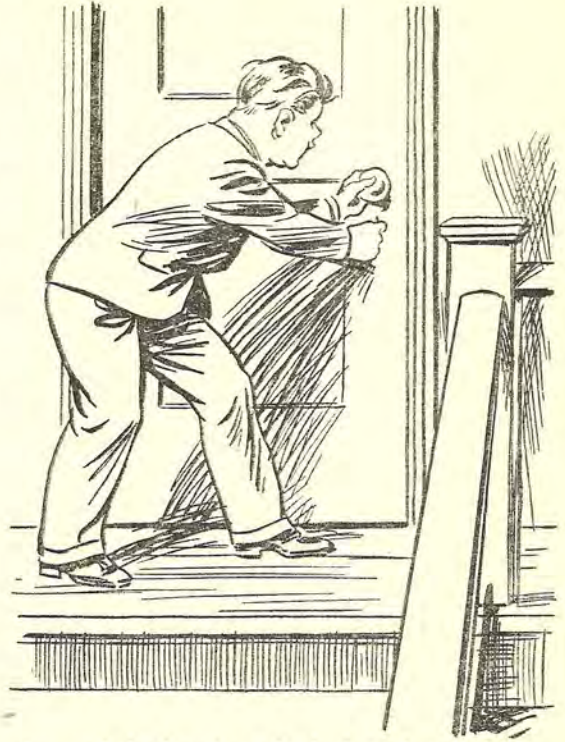
Skip Ruggles, in the tuck-shop, expended his shilling, and emerged in a rather sticky state. He looked for Sleake again, and did not see him in the quad. Whereupon Skip's fat face expanded into a grin: and he felt in his pocket, to make sure that the box-room key was safe there. He rolled up to King and Warren, who were waiting dismally for a quarter to three to chime the time for detention.

"I say, that smoky swob's gone up, I believe," said Skip. "I say, he bagged my dough-nut, and—"

"Kick him!" said Warren.

Skip dodged hastily and departed into the house. On the box-room stair, Skip was very cautious. He did not want Sleake, if Sleake was there, to hear him coming. On tiptoe, Skip ascended that stair, to the little landing outside the box-room door. The door was ajar: looking as if somebody had gone in. And Skip, listening, heard a sound of a movement in the room.

That was enough for Skip! The bird was in the net, so to speak. With one fat hand, Skip grasped the doorhandle and snapped the door shut—with the other, he jammed the key into the lock, and turned it. The next moment, Skip was scuttling down the stair, chortling. He did not even hear the startled exclamation from the interior of the box-room: and though he heard, he did not heed, an angry thumping on the door. Skip departed in gleeful satisfaction. That smoky swob could stick there till calling-over—and serve him right! It might make him think twice before he bagged another dough-nut from Skip Ruggles!



Jammed the key into the lock and turned it.

It was a triumphant Skip that rolled out of the House, prepared to watch the Carfield match, while his victim kicked his heels unheard and unheeded in a remote box-room.

III

"CHARNE'S out."

"What?"

"Gone out," said Reece.

He grinned into Study Four.

King and Warren had gone there dismally, to collect their books for detention. Yet again they had discussed the desperate expedient of "cutting", and chancing it. But what was the use? Charne could see the football ground from his study window if he looked out, and ten to one he

would. There was nothing doing—and the Chums of the Fourth had made up their minds to it—when Reece burst into the study with his startling news.

“Fact!” said Reece, as they stared at him, “I had lines for Charne, and when I took them to his study, he wasn’t there. Well, as I came away, Gudgers asked me if I knew where my form-master was, as he had a message from the Head, and couldn’t find him anywhere. What price that?”

“By gum!” said Tom King.

Dick Warren drew a deep breath.

“If he’s gone out, we’ll chance it,” he said.

Tom King nodded.

“But we’ll jolly well make sure first,” he said, “We should look priceless asses if Charne came down and walked us off the ground. But—if he’s really gone out of gates, what a spot of luck!”

They did not linger in the study. If Gudge, the house-porter, was looking everywhere for Mr. Charne, without finding him, it certainly looked as if the master of the Fourth must have gone out of gates. In which case, King and Warren, instead of walking their books into the form-room, were certainly going to walk their shorts and blue shirts on to the junior football ground. Charne, probably, would never know—but even if it came out, what did a whipping matter—after the match? Six on the bags would be a light price to pay for beating Carfield. But they had to make sure. And for the next ten minutes, King and Warren, Reece and Preece, and a dozen other fellows, were going to and fro, and up

and down and round about, making assurance doubly sure that Charne was out.

It was quite unlike Charne. It was, in fact, inexplicable. Charne was the strictest of disciplinarians, and he was as regular as clockwork. Never had he been known to forget a detention, or anything else. Detention was scheduled for 2.45 precisely; and at 2.45 to the minute, indeed to the second, Charne should have been prepared with a detention paper for the hapless victims, to which they should have sat down under his eagle eye. And if they had not turned up, Charne certainly would have looked for them or despatched a prefect so to do: “chancing it” was really a hopeless proposition, while Charne was around. But if Charne, unexpectedly, and inexplicably, was not around—!

It seemed too good to be true. But it was true. Charne was not around.

Two-forty-five had come, and two-forty-five had gone. And there was no Charne.

“Must have been called away suddenly,” said Tom King, “somebody got him on the phone, perhaps—”

“He’s gone, at any rate,” said Dick.

“Yes; he’s gone. That lets us out.”

“It jolly well does!”

“You’re all right,” said Reece. Reece was a bit of a lawyer. “If a man turns up for detention, and his beak ain’t there, he’s not bound to stay in.”

“Um!” said Tom King. He hoped that Reece had that right! Anyhow he was going to chance it, and so was Warren. “It’s queer Charne forgetting—still, if he was called away suddenly

—and he must have been—.”

“We’re chancing it,” said Warren.

“We jolly well are!”

There was no hesitation about that. Chancing it with Charne was usually a rather perilous game; but Soccer was Soccer. If Charne, having cleared off, expected two keen footballers to hang about while other fellows played football, Charne had another guess coming.

“Come on,” said Tom King, “Carfield may be here any minute. We’re playing and that’s jolly well that!”

King and Warren, who had looked, earlier that afternoon, as if they had made a complete collection of all human troubles and tribulations, looked merry and bright as they ambled cheerily into the changing-room. Nine other fellows looked sunny. Playing Carfield, with second-rate men in the place of their trusty captain and tried goalkeeper, was a very dubious proposition: but with King at centre-forward, and Warren between the posts, they were going to make hay of Carfield—at any rate, they were going to put up a game worthy of Felgate.

The Carfield men arrived to find the home team in great spirits. Perkinson of the Fifth, who was refereeing the match, had never seen a junior team looking so full of beans.

“I say.” Skip Ruggles grabbed Tom King’s arm, as the players came out of the changing-room, “I say, I got him all right.”

“Eh! What?” asked Tom.

“That swob Sleake, you know, who bagged my dough-nut—.”

“You fat ass,” said Tom laughing.

He could laugh now—and was not in the least disposed to boot Skip.

“Well, I got him all right,” said Skip, with a blissful grin, “I’ve jolly well locked him in the top box-room, see? I left him thumping on the door—he can thump all he jolly well likes, but nobody will hear him, up there. Think he’ll be sorry, by calling-over, that he bagged my dough-nut? What? Ha, ha.”

Everybody on the junior ground, but Skip, was thinking wholly of Soccer—and soon even Skip forgot Sleake and the dough-nut and the locked box-room, and was shouting and cheering with the rest. For it was a great game, and Felgate juniors were at their best; as if the rebound from dismal pessimism had inspired them with a double dose of vigour. They looked a winning team from the start. Carfield were good men at Soccer, and they played a good game: but Tom King and Co. had the upper hand from the whistle.

The blue shirts were all round the visitors’ goal, and in the first five minutes the ball went in from King’s foot, and ten minutes later Reece put it in again. After that, Carfield made great efforts, and their pink shirts were seen over the half-way line: but Warren, in goal, had nothing to do but to stamp his feet to keep them warm, and the backs lounged with their hands in the pockets of their shorts, while the blue shirts surged forward again, and the pink shirts had to pack the Carfield goal once more. And just on half-time a third shot went unerringly home.

In the second half, Carfield put all



The ball went in from King's foot.

their beef into it, and at length the pink shirts predominated in the home half. But Dick Warren, in goal, was a tower of strength; and with coolness and precision he saved shot after shot: till at last, with a kick like a mule, he cleared to midfield, and the game swayed away again over the line. Twice and thrice again Carfield came through but every time they found the Felgate goalkeeper equal to the test: it seemed easier for a camel to pass through a needle's eye than for the leather to get past Richard Warren. Never once did the ball find the net: and at length Carfield were driven home, and stayed there—packing their goal to keep down the margin. And they did not quite keep it down: for a final burst from Felgate broke up the defence, and once

more the ball went in—followed by the whistle. Four to nil was a tremendous victory, and the Felgate crowd shouted and roared and stamped, and Skip, utterly forgetful even of doughnuts, hurled his cap into the air, careless where it came down, or whether it ever came down at all.

IV

“CHARNE!”

Tom King almost fell down.

He gazed at Charne, as if the red and angry man in the top box-room was the ghost of a form-master. Really, he could hardly believe his eyes.

The great game was over. Carfield had gone bootless home. The Felgate footballers were on top of the world. And Skip Ruggles had sagely asked

Tom to go up and let out the prisoner of the box-room. Sleake, he pointed out, would be fearfully enraged, and Tom King could handle him as easily as anything, while the plump Skip was not quite so sure that he could. And so it came about that it was Tom King who made his way up the stair to the remote box-room—grinning as he heard an angry thumping on the door above. The key was in the outside of the lock—Tom had only to turn it back. He threw open the door, expecting to see an exasperated Sleake—and doubted the evidence of his eyes as he beheld an infuriated form-master!

Sleake was not in the box-room. Charne was!

Charne had not caught Sleake there. Charne had been caught himself, locked in by the strategic Skip in the happy belief that he was locking Sleake in! Charne's mysterious disappearance that afternoon was now explained. Charne had not gone out on some sudden call, as the Fourth-form men had naturally supposed. Charne had been locked-in that box-room all the afternoon! And, judging by his look, the effect on his temper was deplorable.

"Cha—cha—Charne!" stuttered Tom King. His eyes popped. That idiot, Skip!

Charne fixed him with a glare.

"Did you lock that door on me, King?" he thundered.

"Oh! No, sir!" gasped Tom, "I've only just come up—I—I found the key on the outside of the door, sir—I—I didn't know you were here, sir—I—I hadn't the faintest idea—."

Mr. Charne did not wait for more.

He swept past Tom with billowing gown like a thunderstorm. No doubt he had had enough of the box-room. And Charne's chief desire, at that moment, was to find Sleake. He could hardly doubt that it was Sleake who had locked him in—who else?

Tom King almost tottered back to Study Four. Dick Warren stared at him. Skip grinned.

"Was he waxy?" chuckled Skip.

"You benighted born idiot," said Tom, "You unmitigated, footling foozling fathead! It wasn't Sleake in the box-room."

"Eh! Who was it, then?"

"Charne."

"Charne."

"Charne!" said Skip, faintly. "Oh, scissors!"

He said no more. Words failed him. For the next hour or two, Skip Ruggles' life was one of awful suspense and anxiety, in dread of being called to Charne's study. But no such call came. Charne never thought, or even dreamed, of Skip. His suspicions were on Sleake: but there was no jot or tittle of evidence, so he had, reluctantly give it up.

It was a mystery to Mr. Charne. He might have been enlightened, had he looked into Study Four that evening, just before prep., where Tom King and Dick Warren, with laughing faces, were presenting a bag of dough-nuts to Skip Ruggles, as a reward for having performed the most fatheaded mistake of his fatheaded career, and so, unexpectedly and inadvertently, helped them to beat Carfield at Soccer.

THE END