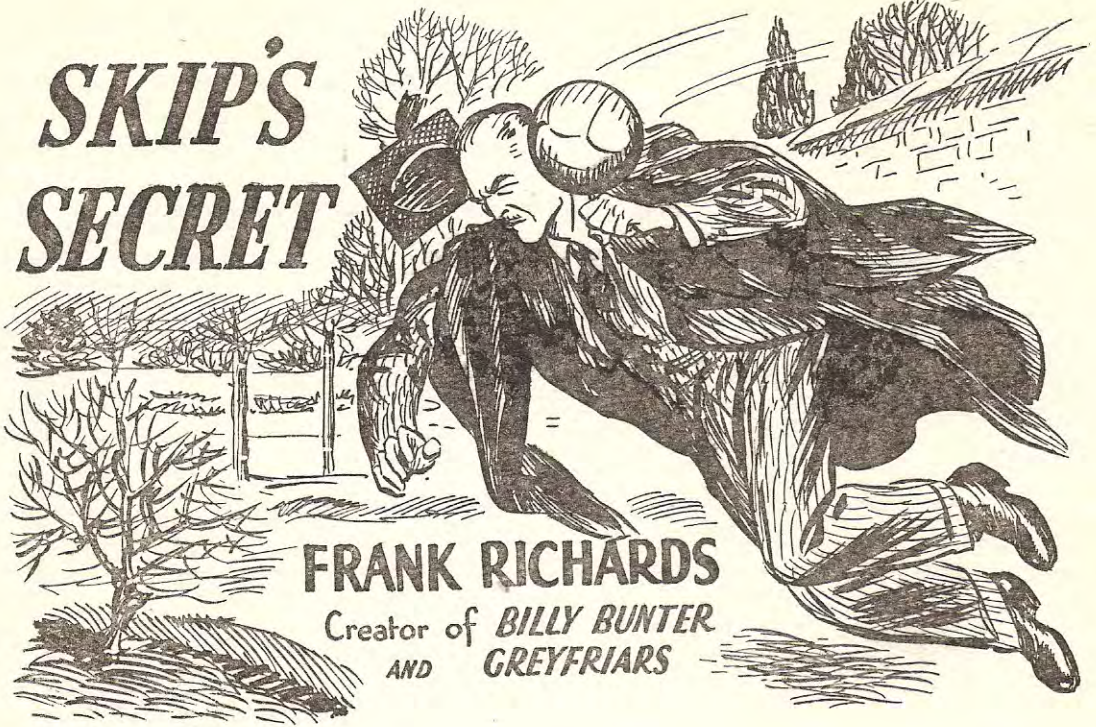


SKIP'S SECRET



FRANK RICHARDS
Creator of *BILLY BUNTER*
AND *GREYFRIARS*

I

SKIP was the guilty man.
But nobody suspected Skip Ruggles.

It was practically impossible to suspect Skip, for that shot with a Soccer ball, which caught Mr. Charne on the left ear, knocked off his mortar-board, and sent him wildly tumbling, required tremendous skill.

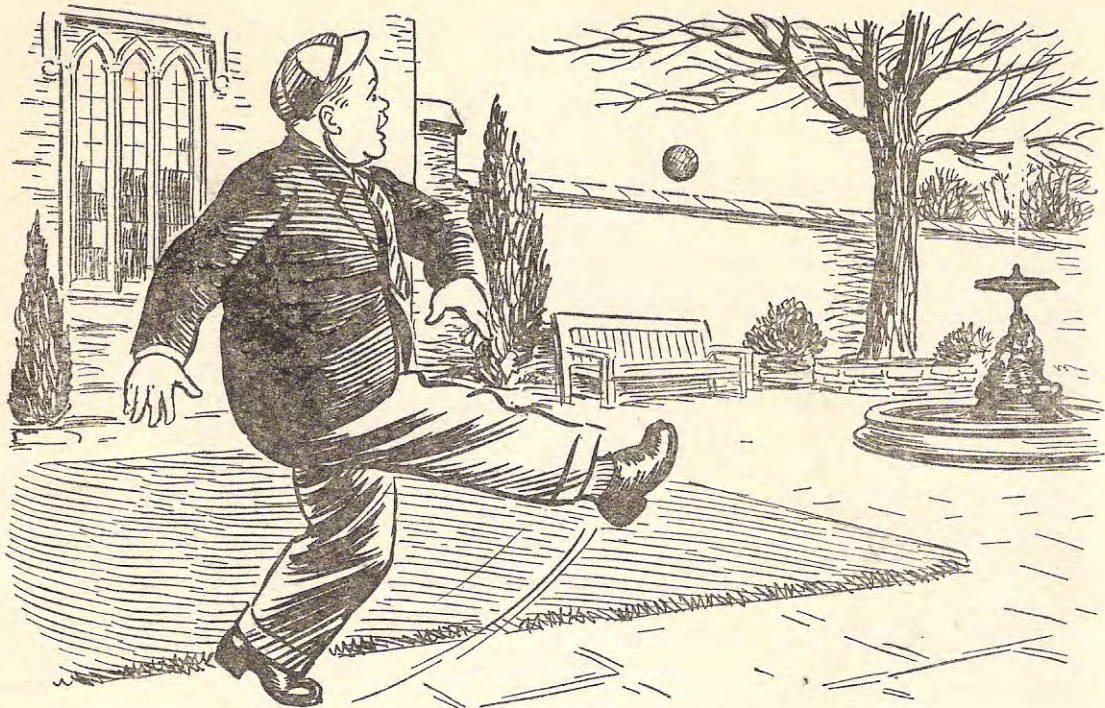
Felgate men, while horrified at what had happened, and dismayed by the dire consequences, could not help admiring the shot.

It was a long shot, in a gusty wind. The shooter couldn't have had more than the merest glimpse of Charne's head, over the wall of the head-master's garden. Yet the ball arrived from the

quad with absolute precision, banging almost like a cannon-shot on Charne's ear.

Few fellows at Felgate could boast such skill and precision. Langdale, the captain of Felgate, who could do almost anything with a Soccer ball, might have brought it off. Perkinson of the Fifth could possibly have done it. Of course they hadn't—senior men did not play such mad tricks. But who else?

Tom King, the captain of the Fourth Form, the best junior shot at goal in the school, admitted sadly that he couldn't have put in that remarkable shot. Dick Warren couldn't have dreamed of it. Reece and Preece, Parrott and Bullinger, all admitted that it was far beyond their powers.



He put all his beef into the kick.

Somebody born in shooting boots must have done it. But who?

So Skip Ruggles was quite safe from suspicion. For Skip was the most preposterous footballer known at Felgate or any other school. It was not believed that Skip could hit the wall of the gym with a Soccer ball, if he tried ever so hard. His affectionate chums, King and Warren, declared that Skip couldn't score a goal, if he stood in front of it only a yard away, with the goalkeeper sitting down with his hands in his pockets. So nobody was likely to guess that it was Skip who had brought off the most remarkable shot in Soccer history at Felgate. Indeed, had Skip claimed that shot, nobody could have believed him. His claim would have been greeted, like

Vulcan's performance as head-waiter on Olympus, with inextinguishable laughter!

It came about, of course, by the wildest, sheerest accident.

Fourth Form men had been punting that footer in break. When the bell called them to third school, they rushed off, and left it there. So it happened that Skip, wandering in the quad after third school, thinking how rotten it was that his own pal, Tom King, wouldn't dream of giving him a chance in the Lutterford match, came across it, and tried his hand—or rather his foot—on it. When Skip kicked a ball, nobody could guess what direction it was likely to take: Skip, probably, least of all. But Skip had a hopeful nature, and always hoped for the best. He was

going to whiz the ball across the quad, and drop it in the fountain—a long shot and a good one, if he could do it. He put all his beef into the kick: and there was quite a lot of beef in Skip's plump person. Why the ball, instead of heading for the fountain, headed in quite a different direction for the Head's garden, Skip did not know. It was the sort of thing that happened to Skip. He did not know that his form-master, Charne, was walking in the Head's garden: he was not interested in Charne. He did not even know where the ball went, till a fiendish yell floating over the garden wall announced that he had captured a totally unexpected goal.

Charne's voice, on its top note, paralysed Skip for a moment. But only for a moment. Then he flew.

Skip was not bright. But he was bright enough to realise that when a fellow had knocked over a beak with a Soccer ball, it behoved that fellow to cover the greatest possible distance in the shortest possible time. Skip had more weight to carry than most Fourth Form fellows: but he carried it at about 70 m.p.h., and vanished from the scene like a ghost at cock-crow.

It was barely a minute later that Charne, with a singing ear, a bare head, a mud-splashed face, and an expression like a gorgon, glared over the wall. But he saw nobody. Who had kicked that ball at his left ear remained a mystery to Charne.

Skip, safe in Study Four, palpitated there. Charne hadn't seen him, he was sure of that. Nobody, fortunately, had been on hand to see him. He had

only to keep his secret. True, he hadn't intended to get Charne. He had never thought of Charne, and never dreamed of getting him. That did not alter the awful fact that he had got him! A Head's flogging—the sack even—Skip felt quite dizzy as he thought of the possible outcome. He had heard only one yell from Charne, before he evaporated. But that yell had told him what Charne was feeling like. Charne would be on the trail of that goal-getter like a Red Indian: fiercer than a Red Indian, in fact! Skip resolved to hug his secret close: he doubted whether he had better tell even his bosom pals King and Warren. Such an awful secret couldn't be buried too deep.

He was still palpitating when Tom and Dick Warren came into the study. They were grinning. Skip eyed them, not in the least himself disposed to grin.

"Heard?" they asked him together.

"What?" inquired Skip, faintly.

"Charne!" said Tom King. "Some stout lad got him with a Soccer ball, in the Head's garden. Knocked him spinning."

"Oh!" gasped Skip.

"He's mad as a hatter," said Dick Warren.

"Is—is—is he?" moaned Skip.

"Got him on the ear," said Tom. "It's red as a rose! Must have been a bang! Mud all over his chivvy when he came in."

"But what a nerve!" said Warren, with a whistle. "It's the sack for the man who did it! I wonder who it was!"

"Some mad ass!" said Tom. "But dash it all, the fellow ought to be bunked—you can't knock beaks over and nothing said. Charne's a bit of a



"Mud all over his chivvy when he came in."

Tartar: but he's not bad as beaks go. It's altogether too thick, knocking the man over with a Soccer ball."

"Suppose it was an accident?" faltered Skip.

King and Warren laughed.

"Not much accident about that shot," said Tom. "The chap who got Charne over that garden wall was some marksman. I couldn't have done it."

"Blessed if I know who could," said Warren. "Must have been a Fourth Form man, I suppose—nobody else would want to get Charne. But I never knew we had a shot like that in the Fourth."

"A dark horse," said Tom. "And he'd better keep dark, for there's not the slightest doubt that they'll sack him if they get him."

"Sure thing," agreed Warren.

Stanley St. Leger Ruggles felt a deep sinking at the heart. And he decided on the spot not to confide his awful deed to his chums. A single incautious word and the fat would be in the fire. A fellow with the dread sentence of the "sack" looming over his fat head could not be too careful. Skip said nothing.

II

MR. CHARNE smiled.

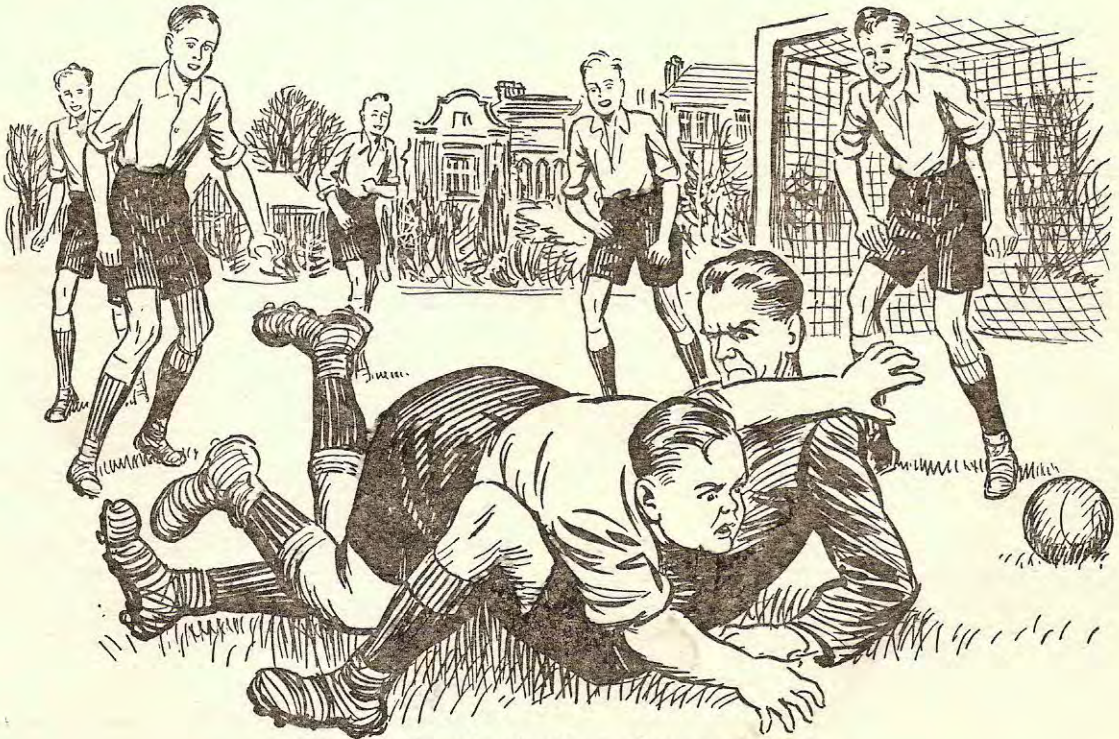
Charne had not been seen to smile since the episode in the Head's garden, a couple of days ago. Indeed he seemed to have taken a leaf out of the book of that ancient who never smiled again! His face, in form and in hall, was invariably grim. His pin-point eyes constantly

pin-pointed members of his form with a searching gaze. It was only too plain that Charne had taken that episode to heart: that he couldn't forget it, forgive it, or get it out of his head. Nevertheless, Charne momentarily smiled, looking at the Fourth Form men at games practice after class. Stanley St. Leger Ruggles had the ball, which accounted for that brief relaxation of Charne's grimness. Skip with a football was in truth enough to make a stone image smile.

Kent, the games-master, was taking some trouble with Skip. Kent, a dutiful man, did not pass Skip over as a hopeless case. He might even have entertained a hope of some day turning Skip into a footballer: a feat which would have proved him a marvel among games-masters. Skip was willing. He

was keen. But he was undoubtedly the clumsiest ass that ever fumbled with a footer. Skip, under Mr. Kent's patient instruction, kicked the ball: and how and why he landed it in Mr. Kent's eye was one of those things that no fellow could understand. Charne smiled—he could not help it—as Kent sat down, with a startled howl and a hand to his eye: and his smile broadened as Skip, full of remorse, rushed to give the games-master a hand up, stumbled over his legs, and fell on him. It said much for Kent's patience and good-temper that he did not, when he got on his feet, slay Stanley St. Leger Ruggles on the spot.

Charne smiled, involuntarily. But his face grew grim again, as he watched the other fellows.



Skip rushed to give the Games Master a hand up.

There were good men in the Felgate Fourth: they were proud of their Soccer, and with reason. It really was a sight to see Tom King taking shots at goal, and Dick Warren putting paid to them. Charne's eyes lingered on the captain of his form. Was Tom King the man who had landed that amazing shot over the garden wall? He looked as if he could have done it. But King was no such mad ass—Charne shook his head. Parrott, Carton, Reece, Preece, Bullinger, were all good shots—he watched them all, with a questioning eye. Especially he watched Reece, who was well known to be as full of tricks as a monkey. Was it Reece? And he had a sharp eye on Sleake, whom he had lately whopped for smoking in the box-room. Sleake might have thought of repaying that whopping with a Soccer ball on the nut. But he shook his head again. Sleake, the slacker, dragged unwillingly down to games-practice, couldn't have done it—hardly any more than Skip Ruggles could have!

Charne turned away at last, and walked back to the House, admitting that if the delinquent was in his form, he couldn't pick him out. And the unknown goal-getter was, of course, in his form. No fellow in another form could have any imaginable motive for getting the Fourth Form beak with a football.

Some Fourth Form man had done it, no doubt in retaliation for a whopping or a detention. Not Sleake—he was capable of it, but he couldn't. Reece had been caned for gumming the form-room inkpots. Bullinger had had six of the best for bullying a kid in the

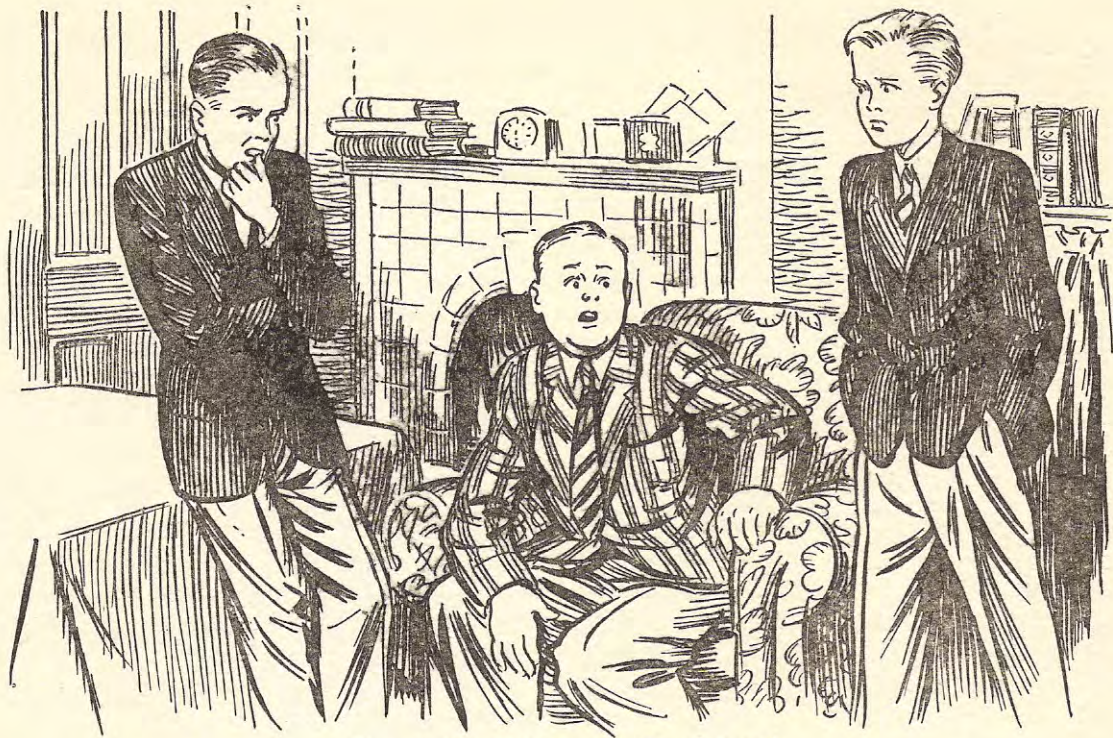
Second Form. Parrott had been put in Extra for a bad con. King, Warren, Preece, and Carton had all had recent detentions. There were other recent delinquents on whom the rod had not been spared: for Mr. Charne ruled his form with a very firm hand. Charne had, in fact, plenty to choose from—he was spoilt for choice!

There was no clue—not the ghost of a clue. The lapse of a couple of days had brought nothing at all to light. Whoever had done it, was keeping it fearfully dark: could not even have told his friends, or some whisper would have escaped by this time. But if the culprit hoped that the affair would blow over with the lapse of time, he did not know Charne. Charne had his teeth into this. If he had to make it his chief business for the rest of the term, he was going to unearth that culprit, and see him duly “bunked” from Felgate. Dr. Leicester only awaited the culprit's name, to pronounce sentence. Charne was going to hand him that name, somehow, sooner or later; he was going to see the gates of Felgate close behind the young rascal who had floored him with a footer. That, with Charne, was as fixed and irrevocable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

He went into the House with a grim, thoughtful brow. He met Langdale, captain of Felgate and head-prefect, as he went in, and stopped to speak.

But Langdale had nothing to report.

Langdale, Denver, Chard, Paynter, Pook, and the rest of the Sixth-Form prefects, had been very busy. They were very properly shocked at what amounted to an assault upon a member of Dr. Leicester's staff. They were



It meant scratching matches all round.

quite keen to lay hands on the offender. But really that offender seemed to have got into a hole and pulled it in after him. No hands, at all events, had been laid on him so far.

"You have made no discovery, Langdale?" asked Mr. Charne.

"I am sorry, no, sir! All we know is that the footer certainly belonged to the Fourth. It's an old footer they used for punts-about. Actually it belongs to King: but King denies any knowledge of the matter. He says that the ball was left in the quad after a punt-about."

Mr. Charne nodded, and passed on to his study. No clue to the culprit: and the young rascal, doubtless, thinking by this time, that he was going to get away with it: flooring his form-

master with impunity. Charne's jaw squared at the thought. The prefects could do nothing: the Head could only wait to be apprised of the name of the fellow he was to expel. Charne had to handle this: and he was the man to handle it with a drastic hand. That evening, after roll, it was announced that the Felgate Fourth would go into Extra School every half-holiday till the culprit was discovered.

III

"EXTRA!" said Tom King, in quite a faint voice, in Study Four.

"Every half!" groaned Dick Warren.

"And what about the matches?"

"Oh, gum!"

"Has Charne gone crackers?"

"The Lutterford match on Saturday—"

"Charne's batchy!"

"Batchy or not, he means it."

The captain of the Fourth, and the Fourth Form goal-keeper, gazed at one another in horror. Skip Ruggles gazed at both of them with his mouth open like a fish. Extra on all half-holidays meant the utter, complete, total washing out of all Soccer for the Fourth. It meant scratching matches all round. It was disastrous, overwhelming: practically the crack of doom.

Skip, certainly, had nothing to lose, personally. His role, when Lutterford came over, was to stand round and cheer other fellows' goals; and reflect sorely that even Tom, his own familiar friend, wouldn't ever give him a chance

in the Soccer. But he felt deeply for his pals, all the same.

If the impending sentence had been anything short of the sack, Skip Ruggles would have walked out of Study Four, there and then, and astonished Mr. Charne with a confession.

But a fellow couldn't be sacked. Swipes from Charne's cane: even the Head's birch, Skip could have endured somehow. But he couldn't be sacked. He couldn't catch that morning train home in the middle of the term. He just couldn't! He felt remorseful, distressed, miserable, quite down and out: but he couldn't do that. Soccer was Soccer, and his pals were his pals: but a fellow couldn't be turfed out of Felgate, if he could help it.

"The rotter!" said Tom King.

"The worm!" said Dick Warren.

"I—I—I say, who are you talking about?" asked Skip, too agitated to think of grammar.

"That toad who got Charne with the footer!" hissed Tom King. "Why doesn't he own up, now it's come to this?"

"Any decent man would!" said Warren.

"Own up?" faltered Skip. "But I—I—I say, he's going to be bunked if they get him."

"What does that matter, fathead?" snapped Tom.

"Oh! The—the chap himself might think that it mattered, you know," mumbled Skip. "It—it—it's no joke to be bunked from Felgate."

"The rat!"

"The worm!"

King and Warren were thinking of washed-out Soccer matches, not of the



"It-it-it's no joke to be bunked from Felgate."

fate of the unknown goal-getter if they got him! Skip's thoughts naturally ran on rather different lines, as he was the fellow who was going to be bunked if it all came out. He blinked dismally at his chums. They were calling him awful names without knowing it. Skip did not feel that he deserved those names. Could a fellow be expected to ask for the sack?

Hitherto the Fourth, though no doubt shocked by what had happened to Charne, had smiled considerably, as if they saw an element of the comic in it. But if there had been anything comic in a Soccer ball landing on Charne's left ear and flooring him, it ceased to amuse them now. The affair had suddenly become tragic.

"By gum, if we could spot the rotter!" breathed Tom King.

"We'd run him to Charne's study by his neck, and make him own up!" said Warren.

"I—I say." Skip felt bound to come to his own defence, "I say, you can't expect a man to go up and be sacked—"

His chums glared at him.

"Are you standing up for that rotter, whoever he is?" roared Tom King.

"That worm who's letting down the whole form?" howled Dick Warren.

"Well, look here, you can't expect—"

Skip got no further than that. The merest whisper in favour of the unknown tick who had landed the whole form in this awful disaster, was enough to make any Felgate man go off at the deep end. King and Warren collared their plump chum, dragged him head-long out of the armchair, and bumped him on the floor of the study. Once

twice, thrice, they bumped him, amid breathless howls and gurgles from Skip.

"There!" panted Tom King, "Got anything more to say for that rotter, whoever he is?"

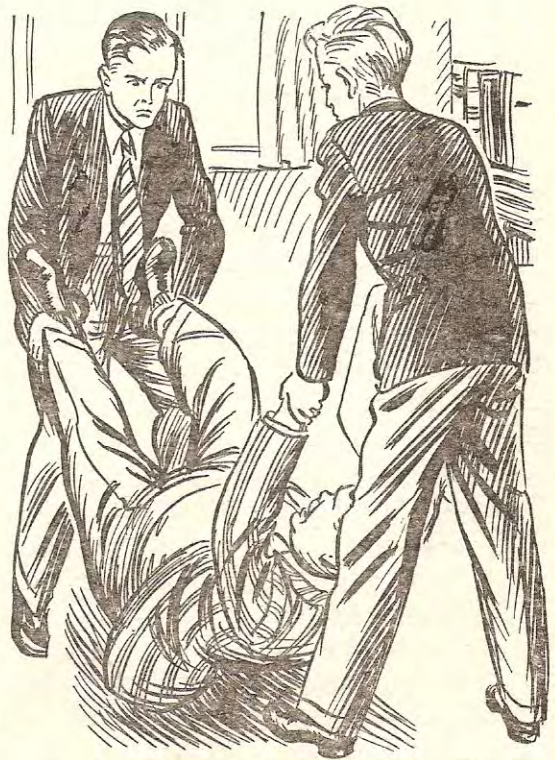
"Urrrrrrggh!" was all Skip had to say.

"Just another word for that rat, and we'll burst you all over the study," hooted Warren.

"Woooooooooogh!"

Skip did not say anything further in favour of the unpopular unknown. Indeed, it was some time before he could say anything at all. For quite a long time he was battling for his second wind.

The junior day-room, after prep that evening, presented the aspect of an indignation meeting. Every man in the Fourth—excepting Skip Ruggles—was



"Got anything more to say for that rotter?"



"It-it-it was me, sir!"

applying the most awful names to the unknown rotter, worm, tick, rat, smudge and smear who was letting the Form down because he hadn't the decency to own up. The fact that the hapless tick would be sacked as soon as he made himself known cut no ice. The sooner such a tick was sacked, the better, in the general opinion. Indeed if the Fourth discovered him, they were ready to boot him without mercy till he went to Charne. They were indeed keener to discover him than the Sixth Form pre's. They were as keen as Charne himself. It was up to a man to own up when he landed the whole Form in the soup. If he didn't want to be bunked, he shouldn't floor a beak with a footer. Skip listened to it all with a dismal fat

countenance, and at last crept away to the solitude of Study Four, the miserablest fellow at Felgate: wondering whether even the sack was worse than this.

IV

SKIP stood it till Friday evening. Lutterford were coming on Saturday, and if the Felgate eleven were going to be in Extra, they had to be told. The match had to be scratched: and when Skip heard Tom King and Dick Warren discussing it, he could stand no more. They did not even notice him leave the study, when he crept away with his heart in his boots, every inch of his fat person cringing with apprehension, but his mind made up. When he was gone from Felgate, they would acknowledge that he wasn't a tick, a rat, a smudge, and a smear, anyhow. But that was cold comfort for a fellow booked for the long jump. Never had Felgate School seemed so attractive a spot to poor Skip, as it did when he dragged himself, slowly and reluctantly but resolutely to Charne's study; to ask for the sack!

"Well?" rapped Mr. Charne.

He had not the remotest idea of what was coming. But he eyed Skip's distressed fat face curiously.

"It—it—it——!" gasped Skip. He found it hard to get out.

"What?"

"It—it—it was me, sir!" moaned Skip, as usual regardless of grammar.

Even then Charne did not understand.

"What was you, Ruggles? What do you mean?"

"I—I—I—I—I kik—kik—kicked——"

"What?"

"I—I—I—I—I kik—kicked that footer, sir!"

It was out!

Charne sat and gazed at him. He gave a little jump, and then sat and gazed. Skip tried to pull himself together.

"I—I know I'm going to be bib—bub—bunked, sir! I'm ready to go to the Head. It—it—it was me, sir."

Still Charne sat and gazed at him. The silence was long, and awful for Skip. But Charne spoke at last.

"And how did such an accident happen, Ruggles?"

Skip blinked at him. He had not had the remotest hope that Charne would believe that it was an accident. Yet Charne seemed to have thought of it for himself, without any prompting from Skip.

"Oh, sir," gasped Skip, "it was really an accident, sir——"

"I know that!"

Skip wondered how he knew!

"I—I was kicking the ball at the fountain, sir, and—and somehow it went the wrong way, and—and—and—" Skip broke off, in sheer amazement, as Charne's grim visage melted for a moment. Was it possible that Charne was smiling?

"You utterly foolish boy," said Mr. Charne. "If I had known that it was you, I should have known that it was a pure accident, and should not have reported the matter to Dr. Leicester at all. You will take five hundred lines."

Skip almost fell down.

"Ain't—ain't—ain't I going to be bib—bub—bunked, sir?" he gasped. "I—I—I thought——"

"I am glad to hear it Ruggles. I should not have suspected you of thinking," said Mr. Charne. "Now leave my study."

Skip left it, almost dancing.



Skip cheered when Tom King kicked the winning goal.

V

THEY did not scratch the Lutterford match after all. Extra School for the Fourth was washed out, when the facts were known. The facts made all Felgate howl with laughter. Nobody had thought of Skip, or dreamed of him: but everybody, of course, knew that that wonderful shot must have been a sheer accident, if Skip had kicked the ball. Luckily Charne knew that as well as the rest of Felgate. On Saturday afternoon Skip, so far from being sacked, stood around and cheered when Tom King kicked the winning goal against Lutterford—a good shot, though not, in Skip's opinion, better than he could have put up, if only his obstinate chum would have given him a chance in the Soccer.