

SIX FOR SLEAKE



FRANK
RICHARDS

CHARNE, master of the Felgate Fourth, was a severe gentleman. Every man in the form knew that he had to be wary of Charne, if he kicked ever so little over the traces. The Felgate Fourth couldn't help respecting him, even if they did not love him very much. Normally, not one fellow would ever have dreamed of defying Charne. But when Charne came down with "gates" on Dolcot day, they not only dreamed of it, but thought of it, planned it, and—greatly daring—did it!

It came about through Sleake, who was a quite unpleasant member of the Felgate Fourth. Bullinger had kicked Sleake. Tom King, captain of the form, did not approve of Bullinger's rather overbearing manners and customs. Still, even Tom admitted that there was no special reason why Sleake shouldn't be kicked—a fellow who loafed about with his hands in his pockets while other fellows played cricket, who dodged games practice whenever he could, and

smoked himself green in obscure corners. It was really an incident of no consequence whatever—excepting to Sleake. Sleake retaliated by informing Pook, a Sixth-Form prefect, that it was Bullinger who had introduced gum into the inkpot in his study. Result: a painful contact between a prefect's ash and Bullinger's trousers.

"Sneaking" to a pre. was almost, if not quite, unknown in the Felgate Fourth. Only Sleake was capable of it. The whole form made it clear to Sleake what they thought of him. Unluckily Charne came into the offing while they were ducking Sleake's head in the fountain in the quad.

Charne did not know what Sleake had done, and he did not want to know. He found him drenched and dripping and squealing in many hands: and that was enough for Charne. The sentence of "gates" followed, for every fellow concerned in what Charne called a riot.

"Gates" on a half-holiday would

have been irksome at any time. On Dolcot day it was a disaster. In Study Four there was, as by the yellow Tiber of old, tumult and affright. Tom King and Dick Warren debated whether they had to phone to Dolcot that the match was off, or whether there was the slightest hope that Charne might relent, if Tom went to him and explained that Felgate cricketers simply couldn't stay in gates when they were due for a cricket match at another school.

"No go!" said Warren, shaking his head dismally. "Charne wouldn't even listen. You know Charne."

"We can't cut the match!" muttered Tom.

"Looks as if we've got to."

"It's rotten."

"Putrid, and then some."

"I say." Skip Ruggles joined in the debate. "I say, I've got an idea."

King and Warren looked at their fat chum. They did not value Skip's ideas very much. If Skip had anything to suggest, it was bound to be something asinine. But the situation was so desperate that they were willing to hear a suggestion even from Skip.

"Well, what?" asked Tom.

"What about a picnic?" said Skip, brightly.

They gazed at him.

"Cricket's washed out," said Skip, "and we can't go out of gates. But under the willows in the School Field—"

Skip got no farther than that. Ginger-beer and buns and doughnuts, under the willows in the School Field, appealed to Skip—as a quite happy alternative. His chums had expected something asinine: but not quite so asinine as this. Words were useless in reply to such a suggestion. They did not

answer in words. They rose, and fell on Skip Ruggles, and bumped him on the carpet in Study Four: and, finding some solace in it, bumped him again. Then, leaving him on the carpet, gurgling for wind, they resumed the dismal debate.

"I'm going to Charne!" said Tom at last. "It can't do any harm if it doesn't do any good. I'll try it on, at any rate."

"Nothing in it!" said Warren. "Charne never changes his mind. The jolly old Medes and Persians were fools to him! But try it on, if you like."

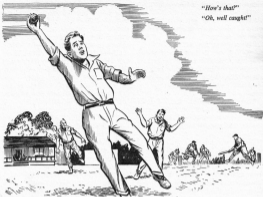
And Tom King went down to Charne's study to try it on.

He came back about five minutes later, and kicked a chair across Study Four: which seemed to indicate that his mission had not been a success. Warren gave him a look of inquiry: Skip, a breathless blink.

"Well, what did Charne say?" asked Warren.



"We can't cut the match," said Tom



"How's that?"

"Oh, well caught!"

"Nothing!"

"Did you tell him——?"

"How could I tell him anything, when he wasn't there?" hooted Tom. "I'd forgotten this was his dashed archaeological afternoon. He's gone out."

"That tears it!" said Dick Warren.

"Tears it to tatters!" moaned Tom.

"I say——!" began Skip.

They looked at him as if they could have eaten him. In this desperate situation, feeling like the Raven's unhappy master, whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster, they had no use for further asinine suggestions from Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

"If you say 'picnic' again, we'll lynch you, Skip!" said Tom King, in concentrated tones.

"I wasn't going to say picnic - I was going to say——"

"Shut up, anyway."

"But I was going to say——"

"Put a sock in it."

"I tell you I was going to say——"

"Shut UP!" yelled King and Warren together.

"Oh, all right!" said Skip, indignantly. "If you don't want to play Dokot this afternoon——"

"You fat, fooling, fooling, fathead, we can't play Dokot, as we're gated, and Charne's gone out and we can't ask him——"

"Yes, but I was going to say——"

"Pack it up before we bump you again."

"Will you listen to a chap?" howled Skip. "If Charne's gone off with that

archaeological gang he belongs to——"

"He has, fathered."

"Well, he never gets back till late when he goes on those stunts. Not till after calling-over."

"What about that, ass?"

"Well, how's he to know if we go over to Dolcot?" asked Skip. "He wouldn't even dream that we'd walked out on him. When Charne says gates, it's gates: and that's that. But just for once——"

Tom King jumped. So did Dick Warren. Walking out on Charne was, certainly, a somewhat desperate resource. The consequences were awful, if Charne knew. But would he know? Those archaeological expeditions, as everybody was aware, kept Charne out late. The cricketers would be back from Dolcot long before Charne came back from archaeology. Charne was accustomed to say "Do this!" and he doeth it! It would hardly occur to his mind that, for once in the history of the Felgate Fourth, that form had daringly, deliberately, desperately, disregarded his commands, passing them by like the idle wind which they regarded not!

Tom's eyes met Dick Warren's. They nodded simultaneously.

"By gum!" said Tom. "Why not?"

"Why not?" agreed Dick.

Really, there were a good many reasons why not. But Tom King and Dick Warren agreed in disregarding them.

"Come on!" said Tom.

Staying only to give Skip an appreciative smack on a fat shoulder — which made Skip yell — Tom dashed out of the study, with Warren at his heels. Ten minutes later a whole crowd of juniors — whom Charne, if he spared a thought for them from archaeology, supposed

to be sedately within gates — were slipping quietly out of Felgate to take the train at Fell. They told one another that it was as safe as houses, with Charne at a distance archaeologising: Charne would never know a thing. Sleake of the Fourth, still a little damp, and more than a little resentful and malicious, had a different opinion. Sleake's idea was that Charne was going to know, for the simple reason that, when he returned to Felgate, Sleake was going to tell him!

II

It was a glorious day. The skies were blue, with dots of fleecy white clouds, and there was a gentle, balmy breeze. The Dolcot pitch was perfect, and Tom King and Co. had the first knock. The Dolcot men were a good cricketing crowd, who played a good game. Everything, in fact, was about as perfect as a thing could be in this imperfect universe, and everyone was merry and bright. Everyone enjoyed the game — Skip Ruggles as much as anyone. True, he was not playing: but he sat under one of the shady Dolcot beeches with a large bag of cherries, which was the next best thing; and loudly did Skip clap, with fat, sticky hands, when Tom King hit a succession of fours. Sadly he sighed when Bullinger went out for a duck: but cheerily he braced up again when Dick Warren came in and added twos to Tom's fours. Everyone was happy that bright summer's afternoon: Skip probably the happiest of the whole Felgate crowd, for was it not he who had made that happy suggestion in Study Four, of taking advantage of Charne's archaeological absence, and coming over to Dolcot in defiance of Charne's edict? Skip justly regarded

himself as the "onlie begetter" of the great and glorious victory won by Felgate juniors that day: and even the cherries gave him less satisfaction.

It was a hard-won victory, the result on the knees of the gods right up to the finish. Felgate made fifty in their first innings: and, by a coincidence, Dolcot put up exactly the same figure. In their second knock, the visitors made it sixty, leaving Dolcot sixty-one to get after tea if they wanted to win. When Felgate went into the field again, Tom King said impressively to his best chum:

"One of your hat tricks, mind, or I'll shove your head in the fountain, like we did Sleake's, when we got back."

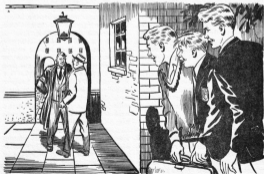
Dick Warren chuckled.

"Anything to oblige!" he answered.

And, whether it was the prospect of having his head shoved in the fountain like Sleake's, or more probably good

bowling and good luck, Dick Warren did perform the hat trick as requested, sending three Dolcot bats runless home, and causing Skip Ruggles to clap sticky hands with reports like pistol shots.

But the Dolcot men rallied from that setback and runs piled up again. It had looked like pie, with Dolcot three down for ducks: but nothing is more certain than that cricket is an uncertain game. Dolcot had, apparently, a sting in its tail: wickets went down, but runs went up; and Tom King cast a very serious eye at the board when last man was called: the home score stood at fifty-eight. With two to tie, three to win, and a wicket yet to fall, it was anybody's game: everyone knew that the next over would be the last, and it was a thrilling moment. Tom would have felt better if Warren had been bowling: but Bullinger was bowling now, Warren



"Okay!" "Right as rain."

in the field. Skip's cherry bag was empty, but he would not have dipped a fat paw in it had it been full: Skip's gooseberry eyes were glued on the game. Bullinger sent down the ball, which was snicked away for a single.

Fifty-nine! One to tie, two to win, for Dolcot: and Bullinger's best was not good enough. The ball came down, to be swiped away: and that game was a goner. But was it?

Not quite: for Dick Warren, with a bound that a kangaroo might have envied but never equalled, rose to it: and there was a smack as the leather, hot from the bat, slammed into a palm—that clucked and held.

"How's that?"

"Oh, well caught!"

It was a narrow margin. But what did margins matter? That catch had worked the miracle, and Felgate came victorious off the field. Skip rushed up to thump Warren in the back. Nobody could have guessed, from his exuberant glee, that only a few hours ago Warren had lent a hand in bumping him on the carpet in Study Four! Skip chirruped with glee.

He chirruped all the way home to Felgate. Some of the cricketers had rather more thoughtful looks. Now that it was over, the Dolcot match duly played and duly won, some of them wondered whether there were going to be any less agreeable consequences. If Charne got wise to it——

Still, how could Charne?

They were back at Felgate for calling-over, and Charne had not yet returned from archaeology. A little later he was seen to come in. He remained visible for some time, and was seen chatting with other beaks, and with Langley, the Felgate captain: and so long as the

visibility was good, some rather anxious eyes turned on him. But nothing transpired, and it became fairly certain that Charne knew and suspected nothing, never even dreaming that his authority had been set at naught: and he went to his study at last, and when his door closed on him, Tom King pressed Warren's arm, and murmured:

"Okay!"

"Right as rain!" agreed Warren.

"And it was jolly well my ideal!" said Skip.

And they went up to Study Four for prep, in the cheeriest of moods, and never even remembered the unpleasant existence of Sleake.

III

"Well?"

Charne rapped out that monosyllable. He had no high opinion of Sleake. Certainly, he had come down hard and heavy on the Fourth for ducking him. But he did not like his stealthy ways: and he was not pleased to see him come into his study. So he rapped.

"If you please, sir——!" began Sleake.

"Well?"

"I think you ought to know, sir, that a whole crowd went out of gates this afternoon, while you were away, and played cricket at Dolcot, and——"

"Stop!"

Sleake stopped.

Charne sat looking at him. There was thunder in his brow. Judging by his look, the rebels were going to have the time of their lives, now that Charne knew. Whops all round, detentions for half-holidays, perhaps going up to the Head! The blackey grew Charne's brow, the more Sleake inwardly rejoiced. They were going to be sorry for that ducking

in the fountain! Something worse than a ducking was coming their way.

There was a long pause, while Charne's pin-point eyes almost bored into Sleake. Obviously, he was very angry. He spoke at last: and his voice was very deep.

"If this had come to my knowledge from any other source, the most severe punishment would have been awarded for such disregard of my authority in my form. But as I cannot act on information received from a tale-bearer, I have no choice now but to pass the matter over. I cannot, however, pass over your act in coming here, Sleake, and informing on your form-fellows. You must learn, Sleake, that tale-bearing is a despicable thing, not by any means good enough for Felgate. I shall, at all events, endeavour to impress that on your mind."

Charne rose to his feet and picked up his cane.

Sleake stared at him - almost goggled at him. Pook had acted on "information received", and he had not doubted that Charne would do the same. Charne's views, however, seemed quite different from Pook's. Charne was angry, very angry: but it dawned on Sleake now

that he was the chief object of it! Charne pointed to a chair with the cane.

"Bend over that chair, Sleake."

"But - but - I - I -!" stammered Sleake.

Then the thunder rolled:

"BEND OVER!"

Unhappily, wishing from the bottom of his heart that he hadn't come to Charne's study with a tale to tell, Sleake bent over the chair. The cane rose and fell, rhythmically, and dust scattered from trousers. Whop! whop! whop! whop! whop! whop! It was a full "six". All the Felgate Fourth knew that Charne could whop: but Sleake had never realised it so thoroughly as now. He was squirming like a worm when it was over.

Charne pointed to the door with the cane.

"Go!"

Sleake went - squirming.

Tom King and Co. heard nothing from Charne. They were very pleased to hear nothing: and had no doubt that Charne knew nothing. Charne perhaps looked a little grim in the form-room the next day but that was all: the whole affair had happily ended with six for Sleake!

