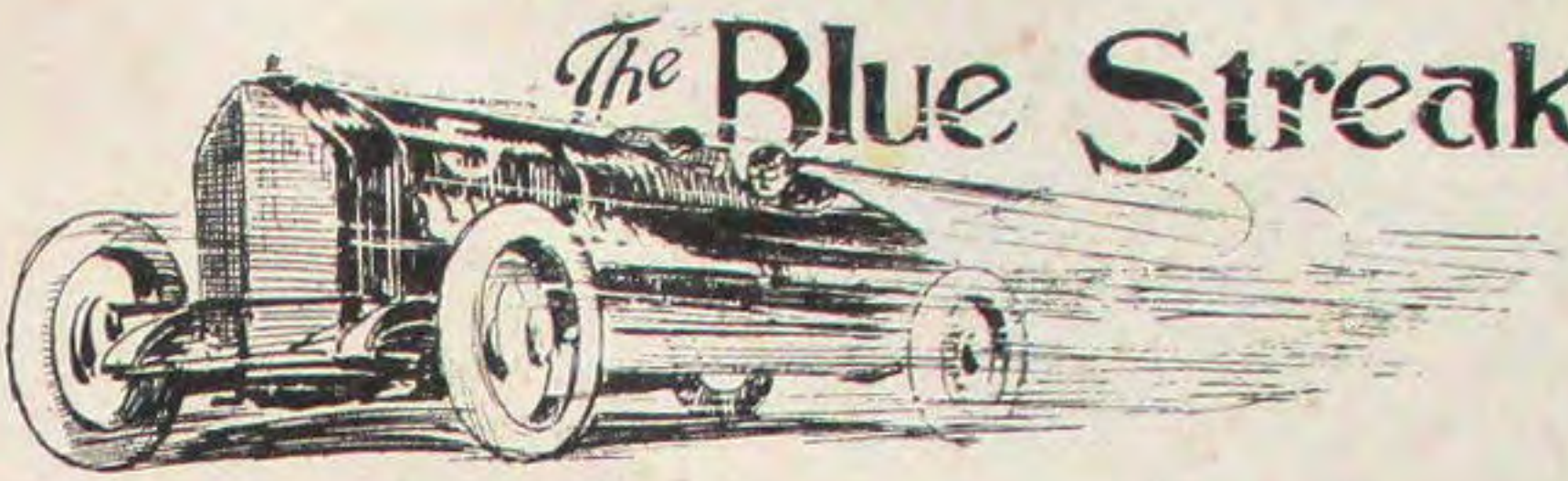


The Blue Streak!

THE STORY OF A GREAT RACE

THE FIRST CHAPTER

The Start!

"First man gets away in ten minutes."

Phil Summers glanced at his wrist-watch and smiled at his companion. The air was filled with thunderous reverberations from the huge exhaust-pipes of a score of great racing-cars, and a fog of evil-smelling blue smoke hung in the air, through which the sun could hardly penetrate. The scene was the starting-point of the great international motor-race known as the Targa Italia, which was to be run over the mountain roads of the rugged island of Sicily. Phil Summers was not yet twenty years old, but to him motor-racing was the greatest thing in life. To-day he was to experience the fulfilment of his greatest ambition; he was to act as mechanic in an important road-race to Ralph Rollo, the most famous of British racing drivers. As Rollo stood quietly by the side of his car, dressed, as Phil himself was, in leather jerkin and racing-helmet, with goggles pushed up on to his forehead, the boy looked at him in undisguised admiration. Slender in build and of medium height, he possessed wrists of steel and iron nerve, as Phil well knew; while it was a by-word amongst race-drivers that "the greatest part about Rollo was his heart!" He had recently broken all records at Brooklands track by driving his monster twelve cylinder "Moonbeam" round at the rate of 140 miles per hour for a lap, a speed which many racing men considered to be well in excess of the safety-limit of the famous track. Yet Rollo had "held" the great car without apparent difficulty at that colossal speed.

But it was perhaps a more exacting task that awaited him now. A road race is quite a different matter from a track race, and Rollo well knew that the Sicilian mountain course chosen for the Targa Italia was a specially difficult and dangerous one. The steep, winding roads were for the most part rough and stony, while there were no less than three hundred sharp turns on the circuit, which measured roughly seventy miles round. Part of the road, where it ran steeply downhill along a gloomy gorge, was particularly dreaded, for here the road was very narrow, and edged upon one side by the rugged mountain, while upon the other was a sheer drop of many hundred feet into the valley below.

Rollo was perhaps thinking of this, for his face was a shade thoughtful as he patted the long bonnet of the famous "Blue Streak," the specially built road-racer he was driving to-day.

"Wish it was time to start now!" he said, turning to Phil with a laugh. "This waiting about for the word 'go' always gives me the needle."

Phil glanced at his watch again.

"Five minutes more, for the first man," he said. "We're number five, so we start five minutes after him. Ah!"

A big blonde man, in racing garb, came by with a swagger in his walk.

"Ach, Rollo! We meet again, isn't it? Vell, I warn you! To-day I win!" And

with a wave of his hand, the big man passed on to his car, a huge white racer bearing the number 2.

Rollo gave a short laugh.

"That's Shaffner, the leading driver of the German Mercedes team," he said. "A fine driver, too, but a man to keep clear of, I fancy. He won a lot of good races before the war, but he has not had much luck since. He'd stick at nothing to win to-day, I believe."

"Well, he'll start three minutes ahead of us," laughed Phil. "If we can get by him, we'll see that he stays behind us. Shall I start her up?"

"Yes, it's about time."

Quiet and unflurried, Rollo got into the driving seat, while Phil pulled the engine over once or twice. Then, with a quick swing, the eight perfectly-tuned cylinders broke into song.

"The first man's away!" said Rollo quietly, as Phil, after a last swift look round, jumped up beside him.

A devastating roar, a cloud of blue smoke, and a shower of stones flung into the air—and No. 1, a huge red Fiat, driven by a popular Italian driver named Loretto, was off!

"He'll want some catching!" said Rollo.

"Trust the 'Blue Streak,'—and you!" murmured Phil. Another roar, and the big white Mercedes jumped into its stride. Shaffner was away!

Two fast French cars followed at minute intervals, and at last Rollo moved the "Blue Streak" up to the line. Phil pulled his goggles into position, and pumped up the pressure, while Rollo kept his eye on the starter's flag.

"Ach, Rollo!" said the big, blonde man. "We meet again, isn't it? Vell, I warn you! To-day I win!"

"Good luck, Rollo!" came a yell from the corner of the stand, where a little group of British enthusiasts were gathered.

Rollo waved his hand and smiled, the flag fell, and the "Blue Streak" jumped forward, and they were off!

THE SECOND CHAPTER

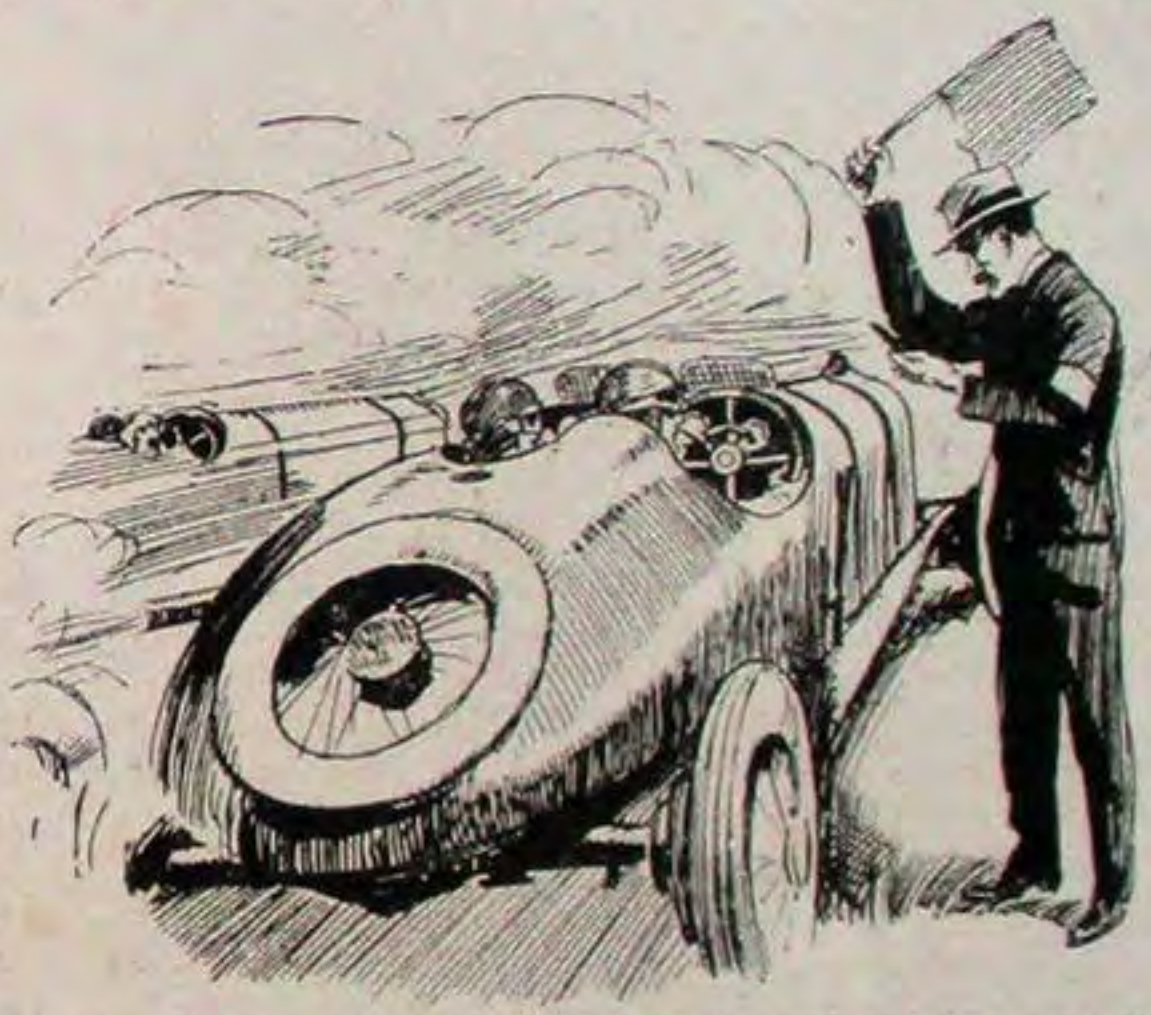
A Great Race!

THE "Blue Streak" had hardly got into her stride, when, with a hiss from her wonderful brakes, which acted on all four wheels, Rollo checked her sharply for the first bad corner. Round they swung, with barely a skid, and the car shot forward again as the brakes came off and the throttle opened, like a greyhound slipped from the leash. But another bad corner already loomed in sight, demanding a further check on the speed. It was then that Phil realised the magnitude of the task that lay before Rollo, in setting out to drive a car capable of a speed of one hundred miles per hour, over a course which made it impossible to average half that speed. Each of the three hundred corners in the seventy odd miles of narrow, winding, mountain road had to be faced no less than four times, for the race consisted of four circuits.

For the whole distance of over two hundred and fifty miles it would be a case of acceleration, with the engine screaming round, then on with the powerful brakes, a wrench round the corner, and down with the accelerator again! Such a race does not allow margin for the slightest error of judgment, which would almost certainly mean disaster.

But Rollo was not in the least dismayed. After going somewhat cautiously for the first few miles, he settled down to drive a great race. Half way round the first circuit, he caught the first of the French cars, while almost immediately after the other Frenchman pulled up with engine trouble.

Shaffner was in hot pursuit of the Italian in front of him, but Loretto drove like a demon, and at the end of the first lap was still successfully staving him off. By this time Rollo was hard on Shaffner's heels, and several times the crew of the "Blue Streak" caught sight of the flying white Mercedes on the winding road in front of them. Of the dozen or so cars that started behind them, Phil saw nothing, but as a matter of fact several of these came to grief in the first lap, while none of the others were fast enough to overtake the three leaders.



The flag fell, the "Blue Streak" jumped forward, and they were off!

In the second lap Shaffner, driving like fury, managed to get by the red Fiat, almost forcing it off the road in doing so. The Italian made frantic efforts to regain his position, but the German did not mean to be caught, and Rollo, now fairly on his mettle, managed to get by the Fiat in his turn, only to experience a puncture immediately afterwards.

This mishap cost him nearly a couple of minutes, and several cars went by while he and Phil were rapidly changing the punctured wheel. However, Rollo quickly began to pick up the time he had lost, and at the end of the lap, when he pulled in at the replenishment pits for a fresh supply of petrol, oil, and tyres, he found he was lying third. Shaffner got away from the pits just as Rollo pulled in, and the Italian left only a few seconds later.

"We've got to get a move on now, Phil," muttered Rollo, as the "Blue Streak" roared off in pursuit of the two leaders exactly one minute twenty seconds later.

Rollo settled down grimly to his task as the "Blue Streak" roared along, slithering round corners now in a shower of dust and stones, and only kept on the road by those wonderful steel wrists of Rollo's. It seemed to Phil impossible for any man alive to drive a car faster, or even as fast, over that tricky, dangerous course. Yet it was near the end of the circuit—the third—before they sighted either of the two leading cars.

Then Phil gave a sudden shout, as he saw a gleam of white in a cloud of dust just flitting round a corner ahead.

"It's Shaffner! Loretto must have got past him! Hurrah!"

Rollo smiled. Loretto was a magnificent driver, and he had a wonderful car. If he, Rollo, could not beat the German, he hoped that the plucky Italian would.

It was by a superb bit of driving indeed that Loretto had edged his big Fiat past the great white Mercedes. The engine of Shaffner's car suddenly began to misfire, and the German, cursing his luck, felt his car slowing down. Furiously, the driver jammed his foot down on the throttle-pedal and his good engine, after a momentary splutter, roared off again at full power. But the momentary checking of the German car's speed had given

Loretto, hanging grimly on at his rival's rear wheels, his chance.

Even as the engine of the big Mercedes regained its full-throated roar, the Fiat was by, in a shower of stones and a thunder of sound!

The Italian led in the race as he passed the grandstands to start on the last lap, and the roar of delight from the crowd was heard by the crew of the red Fiat even above the roar of the exhaust and of the wind in their ears.

Before the roar had died away, Shaffner dashed past the stands, with Rollo hard on his heels. The crowd went mad with excitement. Who would win?

Rollo crouched over the wheel of the "Blue Streak," with every line of his face tense. He knew the time had come to make a supreme effort, if he hoped to win. And yet he had to restrain himself. One slip, one error of judgment at one of the innumerable corners, and he would be out of the race.

He drove as he had never driven before, and at last was rewarded by a glimpse of the white Mercedes, flying along in front. Rollo made up his mind that he must pass Shaffner in the next five miles, if at all; for that distance farther on was the place where the road wound down the gorge, at the edge of the precipice, and here it was practically impossible to pass another car.

Nearer and nearer to the big white racer crept Rollo, until at last he was within fifty yards, in a cloud of choking dust. Then came one of the worst corners on the course, a sharp left-hand turn. Shaffner, driven on by the "Blue Streak," approached it rather too fast, skidded violently, and went round wide to the right, almost broadside on, his back wheels missing the bank by inches. His car consequently lost some way, and in an instant Rollo had changed gear, shot round on the inside of the Mercedes in a shower of stones, and was past! Phil saw the German tug desperately at his steering-wheel in a mad effort to lock over his front wheels so that they fouled the back wheels of the "Blue Streak," as she went past. Had he succeeded in doing so, it is probable that both cars would have gone off the road together, in one glorious smash. But fortunately the German was just too late in pulling his huge car round. With her eight cylinders roaring out their thunderous song the "Blue Streak" drew clear, and Phil could not suppress a triumphant shout, as they plunged down the narrow winding road which traversed the gloomy gorge.

"Now to catch Loretto, if we can!" he thought. And then, as his eyes took in the narrow ledge in front of their flying wheels, which was the road, he gave a cry of warning.

"Look out, Rollo! The Fiat!"

For not a hundred yards in front was the red Fiat racer, drawn up on the road as near to the mountain side as it was possible to get, with her crew working feverishly to change a wheel. So narrow was the road that there was barely room for a car to pass between the stationary car and the edge of the precipice.

Rollo took in the situation at a glance. It was impossible to pull up in time, at the speed they were going, and even to apply the brakes might cause the "Blue Streak" to swerve from her course. Without the slightest slackening of speed, therefore, he rushed for the narrow strip of road that was clear. Phil involuntarily shut his eyes, as he afterwards confessed, and clung to his seat like grim death.

A twist of those strong wrists of Rollo's; a skid which took the back wheels within an inch of the edge—and no farther; and a shower of stones which rattled down over the precipice into space—and they were through!

Phil had a glimpse of Loretto standing, white-faced, by his car, wheel—spanner in hand, as they flew by; he waved his hand, and the "Blue Streak" was gone!

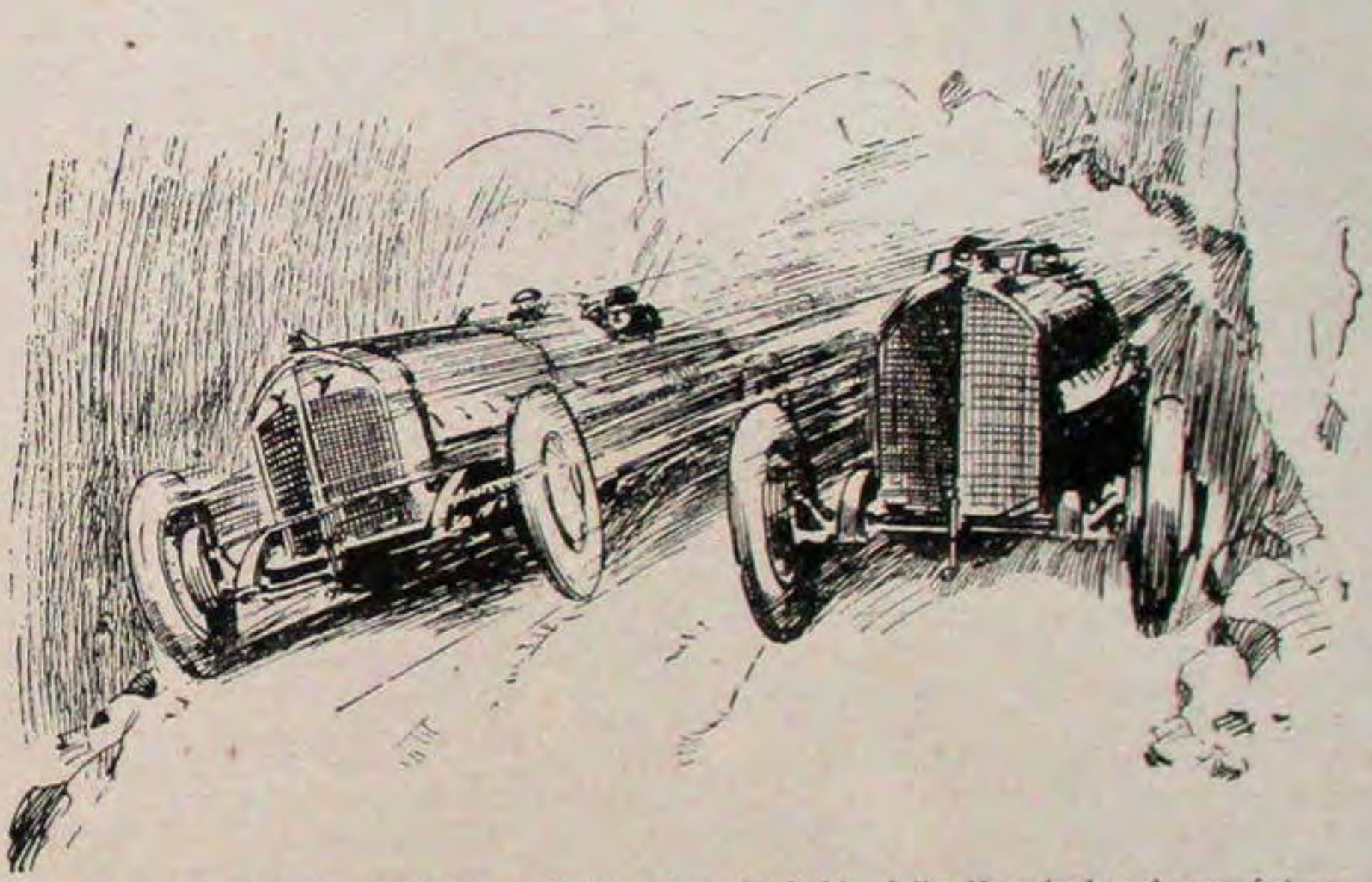
Shaffner got by, on the Mercedes, in no less miraculous fashion, but the experience shook his nerve somewhat, and he never looked like catching Rollo from that moment.

But the British race-driver dare not slacken speed for an instant. He was leading, and he vowed to himself that, if his engine would only stand up to the gruelling, he would never lose his lead now. Yet the slightest mistake in driving would be disastrous. Never had Rollo's cool head and iron nerve stood him in such good stead! Round corner after corner he swirled, skidding as little as possible

to save his tyres. The "Blue Streak" fairly ate up the miles which separated them from the winning-post. Rollo's luck held. The visions of tyre-trouble, which had worried Phil ever since they had won the leading position in the great race, began to fade, as the miles flew under their wheels. The good eight-cylinder engine never faltered. Nothing but the rankest bad luck could rob them of victory now. Would the winning-post never come in sight! Ah, there it was at last!

On tip-toe the crowd waited, in the hope of welcoming the Fiat into second place. But they were doomed to disappointment.

Shaffner brought the Mercedes in three minutes after Rollo, and was closely followed by the plucky Italian Loretto, who had quickly got going again after the mishap which had deprived him of his lead. He received a tremendous ovation from his compatriots, in which Phil and Rollo joined heartily. It had been a magnificent race.



In an instant Rollo had changed gear, shot round on the inside of the Mercedes in a shower of stones, and was past!

The "Blue Streak" flashed past the stands and over the line an easy winner, to the accompaniment of wild "View holloas" from the band of English sportsmen present, and loud cheers from the sporting Italian crowd.

The latter was obviously disappointed at the non-appearance of their champion, Loretto, who had been leading at the beginning of the last lap. But, in the absence of the red Fiat, Rollo's blue racer was an infinitely more welcome sight than the white car of the German driver would have been

"'Bout as exciting a little speed burst as I've ever had!" drawled Rollo, as he heaved himself stiffly out of the driving seat. "Feeling tired, Phil?"

"Yes!" said Phil frankly. "But, by gum, Rollo, you're wonderful!"

He held out his hand to the race-driver, who gripped it tightly.

"The 'Blue Streak' wins!" he said with a smile.

THE END