

LINCOLN BECK'S FAREWELL!

(B)

Michael Poole

A STORY OF
ST. KATIE'S SCHOOL



THE FIRST CHAPTER The Old-Timers

ALTHOUGH this story is chiefly concerned with Lincoln Beck of the *Transitus* Form at St. Katie's School, and of the packet of trouble he struck over the Governors' Annual Meeting, Linky himself hadn't anything at all to do with the beginning.

It begins rightly one dull November evening at the residence of Mr. John Frayne, who, besides being M.P. for Dulchester, was the father-in-law of Mr. Roger Blunt, headmaster of St. Katie's, and also the father of Margery Frayne, who was a great pal of Lincoln Beck, Dicky Dexter, Jimmy Curtis, and Washington Beck.

There was quite a pleasant party gathered in the big lounge. On the following day the Annual Meeting of the Governors of St. Katherine's School would take place. The Governors' Annual was quite a different thing, of course, from Speech Day or Founders' Day, or Sports Day, and there wasn't really a great deal of fuss over it.

Still, you wouldn't expect the whole crowd of governors to gather together at the old school without taking the chance of handing out a lot of good advice to the lads of

Katie's. At six o'clock to-morrow evening, after the governors had had their meeting, the whole school gathered in Big Hall, and they listened to what the pots had to tell them about being good, or getting on, or climbing life's ladder of success, or anything of that sort.

Two or three of the governors who didn't live in the district were staying with Mr. Frayne, and Roger Blunt and his wife had drifted over to the house to have tea with them, and so had one or two other important people. There was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Hubert Rawson, a little meek-looking fellow when he hadn't got his uniform on, but with a sixty horse-power voice which could go at terrific speed when the Admiral got wound up.

And there was Lord Velwood, General Margetts, Sir Thomas Birdlip, and one or two others, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Frayne, and Mr. and Mrs. Roger Blunt, and—Margery Frayne!

"I remember when I was a boy at school—ah, ah, ah!" boomed Admiral Rawson, and told them the story of a wild and giddy joke he'd played in the days of his youth. General Margetts capped it with a story which showed that lads who were going in for the army in those days were even wilder than future admirals.

But you know what it is when some of these old lads get together! If any of the Katie's boys had done any of the things the governors reckoned they'd done, there would

have been a most terrific row, and somebody would have got the sack. But they talked as though they were jolly brave fellows, and kept saying that lads nowadays hadn't the spirit or the pluck they used to have.

Margery Frayne was the only one apparently who began to get a bit fed up with the yarns. She tried to butt in and tell them a few of the things which had happened at her school, just to show them that it wasn't the boys of forty years ago who had all the pluck and sport.

"When I was at St. Agatha's," Margery began, "three of us arranged one night—"

"My dear Margery!" Mrs. Roger Blunt, who was, of course, Margery's elder sister, interrupted promptly. "I'm afraid your childish pranks were not very amusing!"

Why do older, married sisters always want to tick off their younger sisters? Margery writhed, but she didn't give in.

"We had a most terrific lark one night," she began again, ignoring her sister. But this time Jolly Roger himself butted in.

"Did you eat an extra bar of chocolate, Margery?" he asked, laughingly. He meant to be funny, of course, but it upset Margery a bit more.

"It was a most gorgeous joke," Margery said quickly, and made up her mind to go through with her story. "After lights out—"

"Someone let loose a white mouse? Ah, ah, ah!" Admiral Rawson chuckled. "You know, I often think it's a pity in many ways that our girls' schools are so namby-pamby these days. I should like to see girls brought up to be as sporting and full of fun as boys used to be. Stop 'em from all this nonsense of powdering their faces, and patting their hair, and worrying over the latest fashions. Ridiculous nonsense! You can't imagine a girl playing a jolly joke such as I remember we played once. It would be about the winter of 'seventy-eight—"

The Admiral was going ahead full steam, forty knots an hour, and nothing short of a fifteen-inch naval gun would have stopped him. The story was really quite fatheaded, but the way the Admiral told it certainly made everybody laugh. Roger laughed with

the best of them, though it's dead certain that if anybody had tried that trick on at St. Katie's they would have been for the high jump pretty quickly.

"I think the joke we played was really better—" Margery began before the laughter had died down.

"Margery!" Mrs. Roger Blunt spoke quite sternly now. "Little girls should be seen and not heard. You were just saying. General—?"

General Margetts began then. Margery was squashed. Nobody wanted to hear her story of a really top-hole joke. They thought girls were feeble, giggling kids who couldn't do the wonderful things these ancient heroes had done when they were lads. And the worst part of all was the way Nancy, her sister, had squashed Margery, instead of sticking up for her.

"My goodness!" Margery said to herself. "If only I could think of something to make these moth-eaten fossils sit up! If I could get some little scheme to make Nancy realise she can't treat me as an infant in arms these days! Something I could tell them about long afterwards, and make them wish— Oh, my goodness!"

Margery didn't attempt to tell her story again. She listened to the others, their tales, their talk of to-morrow's meeting, and the speeches they were going to make to the boys.

There was usually something special to record at the school meeting. Some fellow had won a big open prize, or been awarded a medal, or there was a presentation to some master because he was leaving or taking up a headship somewhere.

To-morrow there was rather an unusual presentation. It was to Mrs. Roger Blunt, because she'd worked so hard and done so much for the hospital fund. They'd had a gala day at St. Katie's School, which had been a great success, and there'd been lots of other things as well.

Lord Velwood and General Margetts, who were big men on the hospital committee, thought it would be very nice if just a few of them showed how much they appreciated Mrs. Blunt by giving her quite a nice-looking silver casket, and after some talk about it

they came to the conclusion that, as it was also a compliment to the school, it would be the right thing to make the presentation before the whole school.

So to-morrow, beside the Governors, there would be a little mob of the hospital committee, and Lord Velwood would make the presentation and say a few kind words about Mrs. Blunt and also about the school. And Mrs. Blunt would have to stand up and say she didn't really deserve it because everybody had worked; but she felt that the gift was as much to the school as to herself. Loud applause; another little speech by General Margetts; song, "Forty Years On" by everybody; speech by Jolly Roger to say what a fine fellow Lord Velwood was; more applause; speech by Lord Velwood; more applause; National Anthem—and the Governors' Annual Meeting was over for another year.

It wasn't the sort of programme that excited Linky Beck very much!

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Margery Takes a Hand.

AT five o'clock on the afternoon of the Governors' meeting Linky was sitting in Study 7 all alone. The others had pushed off for a time to wash their little hands and faces and make themselves look pretty for the gathering in Big Hall at six o'clock. But Linky felt tired, so he lay on the couch in the gloaming.

The door opened rather stealthily and quietly. In the dim light it was difficult to make out at first whether it was a fellow or a ghost, but then Linky grasped the fact that

it was a real person, dressed in a long, light macintosh and wearing a school cap which didn't seem to fit properly.

"Hullo! Want anybody?" Linky rose lazily and tried to identify the intruder.

"Sh! Where are the others, Linky? Don't make a noise, but it's all right—it's Margery Frayne! I thought I'd pass all right in these things and this light. I say, Linky, can we get down to Big Hall without anyone noticing us? I mean—

You know there's a presentation to-night? I've just got to put the thing on the table, you know!"

"Right-o!" Linky was grinning cheerfully because it seemed so funny to see Margery standing there in that rig-out. Mind you, old Roger would have played merry war if he'd seen her, but Linky wasn't worrying about that.

Margery had a box under her arm, and it was wrapped in brown paper. Linky offered to carry it for her, but she wouldn't let it go.

"I want to put it there without being seen, if possible," she explained. "You see, Lord Velwood—he's making the presentation, you know. Do we go this way?"

Margery didn't explain anything at all really, but Linky grasped the fact that Lord Velwood wanted the parcel put on the table on the platform so that it would be ready for him when the right time came. And, of course, you could quite understand why Margery didn't want anyone to recognise her.

She couldn't have chosen a better time than this. In ten or twenty minutes the school would be blazing with light, but it



"Margery!" exclaimed Mrs. Roger Blunt sternly. "Little girls should be seen and not heard!" And Margery's attempt to tell the stunning joke was squashed. (See Chapter I.)

was just that time of day when you feel it's a bit too early to light up and yet it's getting too dark to do anything.

They passed one or two people in the corridors, but in the main entrance hall there wasn't a soul about, unless it was Butt, the porter, who was just getting ready to switch on the lights in his little glass-windowed office at the far end of the entrance hall.

Linky and Margery didn't notice him, however, but slipped quietly into the now gloomy Big Hall. On the platform at the far end stood the table, which was already decorated with flowers, and there was a carafe of water and two glasses, several sheets of paper for the chairman, and also a flattish wooden box, about a foot square and three or four inches deep.

"Ah!" Margery seemed tensely excited about something. "Is there anywhere we can put this?"

She had handed the paper-covered parcel to Linky for a moment, and now picked up

the wooden box. The table was covered to-day with a small dark-covered cloth, which Margery lifted for a moment and looked beneath the table.

"There's a ledge here!" she whispered, and promptly slipped the polished wooden box under the table. It was one of these rather ornamental tables, and it had a flat bar about five inches wide running lengthwise across the centre from the two carved supports at the end.

"That's lucky! Topping place!" Margery said. "Cut the string, Linky, and slip the brown paper off! Quick! I don't want to be seen!"

Linky was gently amused by the whole performance, of course. So far as he could make out the box which was revealed when he took off the paper was exactly the same as the one Margery had slipped on the under-shelf of the table, or at all events there was precious little difference. It was fastened at the front by two brass hooks in the way that most boxes of this sort are secured.

But as Margery put it on the table in the same position as the box she had removed Linky noticed that along the sides of this second box a lot of little holes had been bored. He was just wondering what they were for when Margery interrupted his thoughts.

"Now we'll get out!" she commanded. "Keep quite close to me if anyone passes us, Linky! Lord Velwood—I mean, no one must know I've been here."

They got out of Big Hall quite safely, with Linky still pushing the brown paper which he had taken from the box into his pocket. Not a soul did they meet in the entrance hall, but the lights were switched on even as they walked through.

"It's lucky," Margery gasped when they were in the quad. "Can I get out by the drive? Will anyone stop me? You come to the end of the drive with me, Linky, and if anyone does meet us they'll think I'm one of the boys."

There wasn't any difficulty at all in Margery leaving by the main entrance to the school.

"But why did you have to change the boxes?" Linky asked. "And aren't you



Linky stared in amazement as Margery stepped through the doorway. She was wearing a St. Katie's cap and a long mackintosh. (See Chapter 2.)

coming to the show to-night? Mean to say——

"No, I'm not coming!" Margery answered decisively. "And don't breathe a word to a living soul about my going into Big Hall, or about that box, will you?"

"Sure!" Linky agreed. "Nobody saw us, anyway. But what's the——"

"You can tell Dickie Dexter and Jimmy Curtis and Washy that you've seen me," Margery conceded. "But they mustn't say anything about it either. But I'd like them to guess— You'll tell me all about the meeting later on, won't you? It ought to be quite interesting!"

Following Linky's advice, Margery slipped past the porter's lodge at the gates quite easily. Then Linky strolled back and up to Study 7, where he took the brown paper from his pocket. He noticed that this was carefully perforated with many holes, just as the box had been.

Just as he was flinging this paper into the waste basket, Dexter, Curtis and Washy Beck came in.

"About time we got down to Big Hall, isn't it?" Curtis suggested. "What have you been doing, Linky?"

"You'd be surprised!" Linky smiled. "Margery's been here! Fact! Said I could tell you, but you mustn't tell anyone else. Been on some little job for Lord Velwood. Couldn't make out who it was when she crept in here. She's bolted now, because she isn't coming to the meeting. She's a first-class brick, and if she lived in America——"

The Kid asked a few questions, but Linky didn't know anything more. He could only repeat that nobody was supposed to know she'd been to the school.

Ten minutes later they'd all forgotten about the queer visit of Margery Frayne. There was a cheery row in Big Hall, and there was quite a lot of fun going until the pots began to come in. Then the row died down a bit, though the visitors in the front row and the distinguished mob on the platform made a fair old buzz among themselves.

Now Lord Velwood was on his feet and the noise died away while he told them how pleased the Governors were with themselves,



Lifting the cloth, Margery slipped the polished wooden box on to a ledge beneath the table.
(See Chapter 2.)

with the masters, the boys, and the whole world generally. After that Jolly Roger said a piece, and then the Admiral got up and gave his well-known imitation of a destroyer in action.

Then they had a little song just to let the boys exercise their lungs. When that was finished Lord Velwood had another innings. He wanted to tell them all about the Hospital, and how they'd made quite a lot of money this year, chiefly because Mrs. Roger Blunt had taken the job in hand. He knew that the boys of the school had also helped her, and he was sure that they would all be pleased about the little presentation which it was his proud privilege to make this night.

"In presenting this—ah—small, but—ah—I trust, this suitable, token of—ah—the esteem——" Lord Velwood said, and slipped back the catches of the box which was on the table in front of him. He meant to open it gently and then draw forth the silver casket which was reposing within—at least he thought it was!

He was looking at the audience even when he lifted the top of the wooden box. The next second there was a little scream from

some lady sitting on the platform, and Admiral Rawson was jumping to his feet!

As Lord Velwood opened the box about half-a-dozen white mice began to hop out on to the table. Then one of them got too near the edge and toppled off, but promptly began to run about the platform.

If there was one thing more than another Mrs. Roger Blunt couldn't stick it was white mice. And one of the little brutes was actually running towards her!

"Oh!" she cried, and jumped up, just as Roger made a swift grab for the thing. General Margetts was trying his hand at the job of catching those on the table, but they were nippy little fellows and they hopped off. Lord Velwood was stammering and stuttering and trying to look impressive and angry all in the same moment.

The visitors in front were laughing at the humour of the thing, and the lads at the back were standing on forms trying to get a clear view of the performance on the platform. The truth flashed like wireless round the Hall.

"White mice! Mice! Nothing in the box but white mice! What a lark!"

One of the mice had tumbled off the platform and was scooting across the Hall floor. Two or three of the Sixth jumped up and started a hunt, but only succeeded in startling the little fellow so much that he tried to dodge into the darkness.

But the real fun was on the platform, where Admiral Rawson, being one of the boys of the bull-dog breed, showed what a hero can do in an emergency. He made a grab at one of the mice as it dodged under the table, but he slipped and bumped his head against the fairly heavy piece of furniture just hard enough to send it toppling over.

"There's another box!" Someone spotted the second box which had been dislodged from the shelf beneath the table, and they picked it up. Opening it, the real silver casket was discovered quite safe and sound inside.

But the hunt for the mice was going on. The trouble was that as soon as they collared one and stuck it back in the box, another one that had been captured a moment or two before hopped out again and kept the score just about level.

Away at the back of the hall it rather looked as though a riot had broken out. One of the little mice had managed to get so far, and he was giving more sport than an old fox would have done. Jolly Roger soon put a stop to that, and when he cried out "Silence!" even old people shivered a bit.

But five of the mice were recaptured, and the box closed. Lord Velwood looked very red and angry as he opened the proper box. The cloth on the table was wet with the water which had flowed from the vase, and the flowers were pretty hopelessly disarranged.

"I—ah—very much regret—some boy's extremely ill-timed practical joke!" Lord Velwood jerked out. "Most discourteous and inappropriate. I am sure that—ah—the Headmaster will discover the boy or boys who are responsible for this—ah—most ill-considered jest, and—ah—I need not assure him that the Governors will support him in any—ah—action he may take!"

"Hear, hear!" said Admiral Rawson and General Margetts, and nodded to Roger. "Find the boy—expel him!"

As a matter of fact Roger was feeling pretty sick about this performance himself. There were jokes and jokes, but he didn't like the idea that any boy in the school was keen on making the Head's wife look foolish at a moment when a very pleasant and kind compliment was being paid her. And before the Governors, too! There was no room at St. Katie's for that kind of boy!

Lord Velwood handled the matter pretty well, however, and the silver casket was duly presented to Mrs. Roger Blunt, though one couldn't help feeling a bit sorry for her when she had to say "Thank you!" and try to add something kind about the boys who'd helped her. One boy in the school, if not more, hadn't helped her in the least!

Still, once the incident had passed and died down, everything passed off quite nicely, despite the silly practical joke with the white mice. Roger hadn't much time for making enquiry that night, because he was entertaining some of the Governors to dinner.

He managed, however, to see Butt, the porter, and questioned him. Butt had

actually taken the right box from Roger himself at a quarter to five and placed it on the table in the Big Hall. Therefore, at ten to five the right box was in its place. But at ten to six the change had been made. Had Butt seen anyone enter Big Hall during that hour?

"Yes, sir. I remember now, sir," Butt answered quite steadily. "It would be about twenty-past five, and I was in my office when I saw two boys enter Big Hall. One of them I recognised as the elder Beck. The other was a smaller boy, and I think he had rather a lot of fair hair, sir, but he was wearing a cap and a big mackintosh, sir, and he was carrying a brown paper parcel."

"Did you recognise this second boy?" Roger asked.

"No, sir. I'm sorry, sir, but— No, sir, I couldn't see his face. He seemed to keep very close to the bigger boy, and it struck me he was trying to hide. I—I'm sorry I didn't ask them what they were doing, sir, but there wasn't anything against them going into Big Hall just then, sir."

"No, no, there wasn't!" Roger agreed. "And you are quite sure that one of the boys was Beck major?"

"I'm quite sure of that, sir. I saw the two come out, and now I come to think of it, sir, I'm sure they were anxious not to be seen. The smaller boy had his collar well up, but Beck turned just as I switched on the lights in the entrance hall. I'll swear it was the elder Beck, sir!"

"Very good, Butt!" Roger said, and after a few more questions, dismissed the porter.

THE THIRD CHAPTER

Jolly Roger On the Track

ROGER ran through the names of all the smallish, fair-haired boys in the school who would be likely to join Beck in a prank of that kind. The most obvious was Richard Dexter of the Transitus, Beck's own particular chum.

That was why almost as soon as morning school had begun the next day Dexter had a

summons to the Beck's study. The Kid had talked over the amazing jest of the evening performance with his chums, but of course it had never entered his mind that Margery Frayne or Lincoln Beck could be connected with it, because all that Linky had said was that she was on some job for Lord Velwood.

Linky had had horrible suspicions, but he never said a word even to his own chums. In fact, he rather wished he hadn't even told them that Margery had been. But why on earth should Margery want to play a trick of that kind? Linky couldn't quite grip it all, but the only thing he knew was that

at all costs he'd got to keep the news of Margery's visit quite secret.

Roger didn't waste much time in getting to the point with Dexter.

"Ah, Dexter," he began, and the Kid could see that he was wearing his well-known Wellington-Napoleon ice-cold steel glitter in his eyes. "I want to get at the truth of a certain matter, and you will be well-advised to answer my questions very carefully, and without any attempt to deceive me. Tell me exactly what part you took in that white-mice hoax last evening!"

"I, sir?" Dexter stared at the Head in



As Lord Velwood opened the box, half a dozen white mice dropped out on to the table. Mrs. Roger Blunt screamed. (See Chapter 2.)



"Now, Dexter!" said the Head, icily. "Tell me exactly what part you took in that white-mice hoax last evening?" (See Chapter 3.)

amazement. "I took no part whatever, sir! I know nothing about it at all, sir."

"Did you not go into Big Hall at about twenty past five last evening, Dexter?"

"No, sir! It would be just on six o'clock when I went in with several others, sir. I had not been in before then, sir, since morning prayers."

"Ah!" Roger debated with himself for a brief period. He had known Dexter for quite a long time, and though there had been lots of little disagreements between them, he was dead certain on one thing. Dexter would never tell a lie to shield himself.

"Whom were you with, Dexter, at twenty past five last night?" Roger asked, much more calmly now.

"There were several of us, sir," Dexter answered, and was obviously trying to recall just what he was doing at that time. "But I know I was with Curtis and Beck minor, sir, and I think Brown and Frensham—"

"I see!" Roger had become quite mild. "Was Beck major there, too?"

Dexter suddenly felt he was on dangerous ground, and funny little suspicions jumped into his mind.

"I—I don't just remember, sir," he answered. "At least, I wouldn't like to be sure, sir."

"No. All right, Dexter. Will you give me your word of honour that you know absolutely nothing whatever about the manner in which these white mice came to be there?"

"Yes, sir," Dexter answered promptly.

"Very good. Thank you very much, Dexter. You may go now." Roger smiled quite kindly upon the Kid. "I am quite satisfied with what you have told me."

Dexter went. It was twenty minutes before another message came to the Trans. Form-room to command the presence of Beck major in the Head's study. Meantime, Butt had brought to the Head a crumpled-up piece of brown paper, with many holes carefully perforated in it. It had been used for covering a box just about the size of the one which had contained the white mice. More, on the inside was a label addressed to Mr. J. Roskillen, the livestock dealer in Dulchester.

"And you found that in Study 7?" Roger asked; and smiled grimly. It would not be a difficult matter to get the truth from Mr. Roskillen as to which boy from the school had recently purchased white mice.

Roger adopted exactly the same attitude towards Linky Beck as he had done towards Dexter.

"What part did you play in that white-mice hoax last evening, Beck?" Roger rapped out, after the first warning.

"I don't know anything about it, sir," Beck said without flinching, but rather sorrowfully.

"I want to warn you, Beck, that it will be better to tell the full truth," Roger warned him again; but Linky merely smiled a bit wearily. "You have had a hand in this hoax? You knew that it was going to be played?"

"I did not, sir," Beck said quite calmly. "I didn't know anything about it till it happened, sir. That is the truth, sir."

Roger looked fixedly at him, and was inclined to believe him.

"Did you or did you not go into the Big Hall at twenty past five last evening, Beck?" Roger rapped out; and then he saw the little look of fear which crept into Linky's eyes.

"Yes, sir," he admitted.

"Ah! Did another boy go with you, Beck?"

"No, sir," Linky answered; because, of course, it wasn't another boy. And, rather foolishly as it turned out, Linky clung to that straw.

"But if I tell you that you were actually seen to enter Big Hall with another boy at five-twenty last night, will you dare to contradict me, Beck?"

"I—I—no, sir," Beck admitted.

Roger began to get angry then. But he got angrier before he was through. He had thought that Beck had quite got over the foolish idea that he could lead Roger astray, and had come to be as straightforward and frank as Dexter or Curtis. But now he simply contradicted himself and landed himself into a hopeless mess under Roger's cross-examination.

He didn't know anything about the hoax first of all, and he hadn't gone into the Big Hall with another boy. Then he admitted that he had gone in with someone else, and that the other person was carrying a box. Then he said he didn't know anything about the white mice, but afterwards admitted that he had taken the paper off the box and stuffed it into his pocket. He didn't mean to play any trick, but he practically admitted that he'd placed the box with the white mice in on the table, and that he knew the other box was on the shelf under the table.

"You are simply playing with the truth, Beck!" Roger rapped out at last. "Who was the other boy with you? Answer me. I shall find out quite easily if you don't."

"I—there wasn't another—I mean, sir, I'm very sorry, but I can't tell you the name, sir."

"Very good." Roger spoke in that icy tone of his which meant that he was really mad. "It is now half-past ten, Beck. I will give you until half-past four this afternoon. If you refuse to make a clean breast of the whole thing—tell me exactly the part you played and the part played by your companion—you will leave this school by the first train possible. You quite understand? The full truth—or expulsion?"

"Yes, sir," Beck said sorrowfully; and wandered forth.

He never even went back to his Form-room, but as the Head had summoned him no one worried much about that. But Linky Beck was slowly gathering together his personal belongings and making preparations to quit St. Katie's.

He was like that, was Linky. You might say that he wasn't really worrying at all, though he did feel regretful at the idea of being turned out in this way. Still, there it was. He hadn't the faintest intention of telling Roger any more than he had done. In fact, he was rather sorry that he'd said so much. The best plan would be to dodge seeing Roger again, and clear out before half-past four. Roger had said "The full truth—or expulsion." And it was expulsion for Linky.

"Better drop him a little note," Linky decided. "It's hard luck, but I don't blame old Roger really. I'll buzz back and see Margery some time later when all the fuss has died down."

When his chums came in to Study 7 they were surprised to find Linky calmly packing his "grip," as he called it, and moving all his personal belongings from the study.

"What's the giddy idea?" the Kid asked in surprise.

"It's come, Kid," Linky bleated gently.

"Poor old Linky's got the boot at last. It's



"What's the idea?" asked the Kid in surprise, as he saw Beck packing his "grip." "I'm just quitting—that's all," answered Linky. (See Chapter 3.)

me for the long, lone trail this journey for sure. I gotta be out of Katie's before four-thirty this very afternoon, or there'll be a terrific fireworks display by Jolly Roger. The full truth, or quit, says Roger. And I'm just quitting. That's all."

"But why? What's the row?" the Kid gasped. "I mean—Oh, my hat!—were you mixed up in that white mice affair last night? But how?"

Jimmy Curtis and Washy Beck were asking questions, and Linky smiled sadly on them all.

"Circumstantial evidence, my little playmates," he murmured. "You're not old enough to understand what it means, but there's many a man been shot for less—"

"Look here," said the Kid suddenly, "Margery came here last night when we were out—"

"Sh!" Linky held up a warning finger. "Forget I mentioned that, children! If you breathe a word, I'll come back and haunt you. No; forget it. Coming to the station to see me off? There's a slow train at three-fifty, and we'll drift down and have some pies at Dawson's—"

They talked and argued with him, but to no purpose. Nothing could be done. They'd only make it worse by interfering, and if they dared try and see Margery Frayne about it, Linky would pulverise their little faces for certain before he went away. He was quitting Katie's. Finish! Salute and farewell!

But the Kid and Jimmy Curtis had a pretty clear notion of what had happened. Margery had come along and got Linky to help her. Linky didn't know what he was doing, really, but for some reason it was imperative that no one should guess that Margery had any part in the hoax. Unfortunately, Linky had been spotted, and had to admit that he'd taken some part; and Roger had told him to quit, unless he would give the name of his companion.

"It's rotten luck!" the Kid agreed with Curtis. "But what can we do? We can't go and ask Margery to give herself away, even if that would do any good, and I doubt it.

But we ought to give old Linky a jolly good send-off. What do you think?"

Curtis didn't think; he got going immediately. Inside forty minutes some fifty fellows knew that Linky Beck, hero of a hundred mighty larks, had been sacked. He hadn't really played that hoax last night, but he was mixed up in it, and—well, one could give a little hint without mentioning names, really, and most fellows somehow grasped the fact that Linky had got the sack just because he wouldn't give away the truth—which was that it was the Head's wife's own sister who'd worked the giddy hoax!

"What rotten luck!" fellows said admiringly. "But he's a sport, is old Beck! Rather! We'll join in any giddy send-off. Oh, if he's got the boot, we'll see he has a jolly decent funeral! Look here, we'll go and bag old Simpson's cab right now. Roger isn't in the house. I saw him push off in a frightful sweat just after lunch."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER

Linky's "Funeral"

As a matter of fact, Roger had gone to interview Mr. Roskillen of Dulchester, the man who sold white mice and doves and rabbits and green parrots and love-birds. Mr. Roskillen shook his head when Roger began questioning.

"I haven't sold any white mice to any boys from your school, sir," he assured Roger. "I'll go further and say I haven't sold any white mice to any boys in the past three months."

Roger questioned him, even explained about the hoax last night, and about the paper found in one of the boys' rooms. Mr. Roskillen began to smile then.

"Ah, yes, sir! But I shouldn't blame any of the boys, if I were you, sir. Let me see, sir, didn't you marry a Miss Frayne? Of course, sir! Well, I might have sold some white mice to Mr. Frayne, or somebody like that, sir. Sorry I can't tell you anything more, sir, but I fancy you'll find the first clue at Mr. Frayne's house, sir. Good-day, sir!"

So Roger went off to the Fraynes' house, because he couldn't get anything more out

of Roskillen, who said he wasn't going to interfere in family matters. Roger reached the Fraynes about a quarter to three. Margery saw him come, but she dodged off because she didn't like the look in his eye.

Mr. Frayne was absolutely staggered at the suggestion that he'd ever bought white mice, or that the affair last night was a family matter.

"Never heard such nonsense in my life!" he declared. "Ah! Excuse me, Roger. The telephone."

But the call was an urgent one for Miss Margery Frayne, and, after some hunting, Margery came forth and answered it. The two men could hear her excited cries into the telephone in a short time.

"What? A funeral? Dulchester station at twenty to four? Oh, I see! But—oh, my goodness! No, wait, Jimmy! What's that? Expelled because of the white mice last night? Oh, Jimmy, but he didn't know a thing! It's most horribly unfair. I don't care; Roger Blunt is a sneak! It's the kind of thing he would do. Oh, you always stick up for him! I say it's unfair. He can't find out himself, and he wants to make Linky tell about me. Yes, of course I did it! Yes, I'll come, but—Are you there, Jimmy? Oh, blow!"

Then she hung up the receiver and came dashing into the study where Roger and her father had been calmly listening to all she'd said.

"What's this, Margery?" Mr. Frayne jumped to his feet as his daughter entered. "Do I understand that you had something to do with that disgraceful hoax last night? I never imagined that a daughter of mine—"

Margery was one of those girls who never do just the thing the other person expects her to do. She rather surprised her father and Roger now by becoming quite calm and gently amused.

"Dear old daddy!" Margery said, in kind and gentle tones. "The night before last you thought it most frightfully funny when Admiral Rawson told his tale about letting loose twenty rats, and everybody wept with joy when General Margetts related how funny it was when he freed half-a-dozen little snakes, and you all laughed—"

"That's quite different!" Mr. Frayne interrupted.

"Of course it is," Margery said gently, and then gave quite a life-like imitation of Admiral Rawson. "Oh, what a great pity it is that girls don't have the same keen sense of jolly fun that boys used to have in my day! Namby - pamby creatures they are! Couldn't play a joke! And even Roger suggested that the most daring thing I'd ever do would be to eat

another bar of chocolate. Nancy wouldn't let me speak at all. Well, was my little joke as funny as Admiral Rawson's?"

"Ah!" said Roger. "So you induced Beck to assist you in that little affair?"

"Beck didn't know a thing," Margery said, in a tired voice. "You don't think I'd drag him into a joke of that sort? It was entirely my own idea, and I did it. I persuaded Lincoln Beck to walk with me so that everybody would think I was a Katie's boy. And somebody sneaked, I suppose, and you've expelled him! I shall write to all the papers and to Mr. Beck and to all the governors, and just tell them what I think about men's sense of honour and justice and humour."



"I haven't sold any white mice to boys from your school for three months," said Mr. Roskillen bluntly. (See Chapter 4.)

Oh, my goodness! When I think of the way they laughed at their own jokes—but don't they get upset when someone does the same thing on them? And you've expelled Beck, and he's going by the slow train this afternoon, and the school are turning out to give him a proper funeral, because they're all proud of him! And I'm going to dash down to the station now, and I shall tell everybody! Good-bye!"

"One minute, Margery!" Roger had jumped to his feet now, and there was a little smile twinkling round his eyes. "Beck has not been expelled. I gave him until four-thirty this afternoon in the hope that I should solve the mystery myself. He seems to have anticipated the final verdict. He's going by the three-fifty, is he? Is your car available, Mr. Frayne? We can do it easily."

Five minutes later the three of them were in the car and whizzing down to Dulchester Station. It's a pity they didn't get an earlier start, because they'd missed the most impressive part of the procession. They just caught up the tail end as it entered the station yard just on three-thirty.

Smithy, the captain of Katie's, had heard the story, and just at first he wasn't quite sure what to do. Then, when he grasped the fact that Linky was really innocent, he decided that it was a top-hole opportunity of showing the school how to play the game. Linky had played the game, and he should go out with flying colours, but without any whimpering.

"Right-o! It's dead certain that Beck's getting the boot because he won't divulge the real culprit?" Smithy asked Jimmy Curtis. "That's good enough! Full musical honours! You've got Simpson's cab? We must get two or three more. No cars! It isn't dignified! Where's young Howe? We'll soon fix this up!"

In less than ten minutes everything was in hand. Boys were dashing down to Dulchester to get yards and yards of black ribbon and to buy talking tommies and any other musical instruments which would help the good work.

It was years and years since there'd been a "funeral" to a fellow who'd got the sack

from Katie's, and the older fellows, who dimly remembered that great affair, were dead keen on another, just as the younger ones were equally keen on being in to-day's show.

By three-fifteen practically the whole school was gathered in a side street near the top end of Dulchester High Street. Black ribbon was being cut into suitable lengths, and they were putting great bows about their necks. The drivers' whips—there were five cabs now, because the Sixth had rolled up in force—were also decorated.

"Up you get, Linky!" Smithy commanded, and he clambered after him on to the roof of the cab.

Curtis and Dickie Dexter would ride inside until they reached the station.

The bobbies on duty in Dulchester had a shock when they saw the procession, because they'd never been warned to expect anything special to-day. But five cabs, each with two or three boys sprawling on the top, and other boys leaning through the windows below, were followed by a pretty orderly crowd of boys who were singing or playing weird musical instruments.

"There's a long, long trail a-winding
Unto the land of my dreams,
Where the nightingales are singing,
And the white road gleams——"

Smithy had given the order for this song, because it struck him as being jolly appropriate to sing to one who was going out on the long, lone trail. But as they wound into the big station yard and the last sad notes wailed away, the word was passed down to switch over to "Forty Years On When Afar and Asunder, Parted are those who are singing to-day," and as everybody knew that backwards, they let it rip in great style.

The noble citizens of Dulchester had been a bit staggered by the procession at first, and they joined up, asking questions.

"What's it for? Who's it for?" they asked. "Has somebody won something?"

"No; it's a funeral! Fellow's got the boot—sacked—because he wouldn't sneak. We're giving him a send-off."



With Lincoln Beck perched forlornly on the roof of the first cab, the "funeral" procession wound towards the station.
(See Chapter 4.)

"Follow up! Follow up! Follow up!"

The cabs are drawn up now quite close to the station entrance, and there was old Linky standing up on the top of the leading one with a gorgeous grin on his bright young face. Oh, but this was a proud moment in Linky's life! If there was anything he liked more than the next thing, it was to be right in the lime-light, with a chance to make a speech and be the giddy hero of the moment.

And there was a first-class crowd packing the station yard now. People who'd been drifting on a joy-ride through Dulchester had turned round to see what the fun was; there were half a dozen cars squeezed in at the back, so that nobody noticed particularly the big closed car which had crawled in right at the very back just as Linky held up his hand.

"Gentlemen of St. Katie's!" Linky bawled out, and felt like a twin brother of Mark Anthony. "Standing here at this sad but joyous moment of my life—standing here as a humble but proud citizen of that great republic beyond the seas, the United States of America, I want to say that, though the bolt has fallen, the big boot has jerked forward,

and soon I shall be going forth on the long, lone trail, leaving my happy boyhood days behind me. I want to say that I am a proud man at this moment. I am proud that during this past year——"

Oh, Linky could say his piece very nicely! Probably he'd have gone on a lot longer, but Smithy pulled him back when the mob began to cheer, and Linky just stood by Smithy's side, blinking and grinning gladly. Somehow, he had a vague idea that away at the back Jolly Roger was peering forth from a big car, but just at present Linky was too happy to care twopence. As a matter of fact, he rather hoped Roger was there!

"Gentlemen," Smithy yelled out, "the time grows short. Soon the ancient tin kettle which drags the three-fifty over the iron rails will be creeping into the station. Before we part with our noble friend, let us cheer him on his way by singing 'Bonny Linky's noo awa' to the tune of 'Bonnie Charlie.' Band, please!"

Smithy had a jolly good idea of the right stuff to sing at a ceremony of this sort. The talking-tommies buzzed and the air was filled with voices singing: "Bonnie Linky's noo

awa', Safely o'er the friendly main—" And when they came to the refrain: "Will ye no' come back again, Will ye no' come back again? Better lo'ed ye canna be, Will ye no' come back again?" it seemed frightfully pathetic in a jolly cheerful sort of way, if you know what I mean?

Linky yelled out for all he was worth: "I will, boys! I'll be coming back to this old burg! And it'll be pork pies at Dawsons—"

"Hear, hear!" they cried, just as Smithy bent down from the top of the cab, because someone was calling his name in a fiercely commanding manner.

It was Roger! Smithy gasped just a bit when he realised that the Head himself was standing right by the cab!

But Roger was grinning a little bit himself, though he had to shout out to make himself heard. A shrill whistle had sounded from somewhere afar, and already fellows were yelling out: "Here's the train! The train! Good-bye, Linky! Good-bye, old son! Three cheers for Linky Beck! Hip, hip—Hooray!"

"Tell Beck he is not to go!" Roger simply shrieked it out. "He was told to see me at four-thirty. He will return to the School because I have learned the truth. He was not responsible for that hoax. Disperse the crowd in an orderly fashion, Smith!"

Roger himself quietly slipped back into the mob then, but other fellows became aware of the fact that the Head was present, and it rather put a damper on the cheering.

Smithy, of course, was a bit staggered at first, but he was the sort of lad who quickly

gets a grip of things. He managed to yell the truth into Linky's ear, and then he held up his hand for silence in the crowd just as the train came puffing into the station behind them.

"Gentlemen!" Smithy yelled out. "The funeral is postponed—No, cancelled completely! Beck is innocent! We shall return to the School in our own time and in orderly manner. Three cheers for Beck!"

They cheered; they laughed; then they cheered again, and began to laugh still more. It had been a great ceremony, and after all, there wasn't anything really pathetic about it, because Beck hadn't got the boot! Reprieved at the last moment! Quite the sort of thing you sometimes read about in books, and it absolutely put the gilt edging on a jolly fine rag. And nobody could get into a row over this, because even the Beak himself had had to come to tell Beck he wasn't sacked!

The motor cars sounded their horns and there was quite a fierce row in the station-yard as the

crowd began to wander forth again—to Dawsons', where they make the pork-pies, to Millers' where they have a topping soda-fountain, or even to the Cloisters, where they do the thing in first-class style.

It took Smithy and Beck and their pals some time to get clear, because they had to arrange a few details with the cabmen. (Just casually, it may be added that it was Mr. Cyrus Beck, Linky's father, who eventually paid for the lot!) But the big closed car belonging to Mr. Frayne, M.P. for Dulchester, was still



Margery came dashing across the road, her eyes shining with excitement. "Oh, Linky! Wasn't it splendid!" she exclaimed. (See Chapter 4.)

standing there when Smith and Beck, Dickie Dexter, Jimmy Curtis, Washy Beck, and one or two others, wandered out, though they couldn't see who was sitting inside.

Then someone suddenly dashed across and hailed Lincoln Beck. It was Margery Frayne.

"Oh, Linky! Wasn't it splendid? You made a topping speech! Oh, how do you do, Captain Smith? You know who really did put the white mice in that box? I did! And you wouldn't blame me one little bit if you'd heard the tales some of the Governors told about the tricks they played when they were boys! I'd like to tell you——"

"Come and have tea with us, Margery!" Linky suggested, because he really felt that there ought to be some sort of celebration over this. "We're going to the Cloisters——"

"I'll come!" Margery said. "I'd better not go through the town with you, because some of these weird people would start talking again about what they did when they were young! I know them! They were ever such a lot better, or a lot worse, than we could ever be. But I'm coming to the Cloisters!"

And she did. It was a first-rate little party which gathered there to celebrate Linky's farewell and return. Mr. Roger Blunt had drifted back in the car with Mr. Frayne, and you can take it for granted that they had really enjoyed the show just as much as anybody else! Jolly Roger wasn't afraid that this sort of thing would upset the bright lads under his care, because he'd soon bring them back to earth again, if they got any wrong notions that life at Katie's was just one excitement after another!

When the morrow came the joke about the white mice, and the glorious rag which had taken place over the great send-off to Lincoln Beck, had both taken their rightful place in the history of things which had happened. There was no fuss, no excitement. Even Linky's final interview with Roger over the affair was quite a tame, quiet affair.

Linky was gently ticked off, quietly crushed back into his proper place. He wasn't a giddy hero or anything. He was just Beck major of the Transitus form of St. Katie's! That was Jolly Roger's little way!

THE END

Famous Fellows in Fiction



Billy Bunter

The fattest fellow in his Form
Is portly Billy Bunter;
In spite of feeds in hall and "dorm."
He's hungry as a hunter.
He never gets enough to eat,
He hastens to inform us;
And yet, when schoolmates stand him treat,
His appetite's enormous!

His "country seat" is Bunter Court,
A large and stately mansion,
According to his own report,
Which suffers from expansion!
He boasts of belted earls and lords
To whom he is related;
The Bunter Crest is two cross-swords
We've heard it freely stated!

Our porpoise is a journalist
Of mighty reputation;
His WEEKLY never should be missed,
It's crowded with sensation.
His spelling is a work of art,
It differs far from Dutton's;
His "Essay on a Stale Jam Tart"
Will make you burst your buttons!

He follows on a fellow's trail
As grimly as a warder,
And unto him unfolds a tale
About a postal-order.
"I wish you'd lend me eighteenpence!"
He'll say, in tones of pleading;
But if you've any common-sense,
You'll walk away unheeding!



By ALFRED EDGAR

A burst dam—a racing car—and a death-defying dash to save a town!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Avalanche

"YOU can see all the way from the far end of Black Gill right to Ross Dam," said Tom Burrows, as he steadied himself against the wind, one hand gripping the side of the stone cairn.

"I don't care how far you can see," came the growling answer from his chum, Jim Hart. "If I let go of this cairn I'll get blown away! Seen all you want to see? If you have, we'll start climbin' down—although I'm blessed if I know how we're going to. I can hardly make anything out with this rain in my eyes!"

"Sha'n't be a minute, I just want to look down the Gill," said Tom, as he slipped a pair of field-glasses from his case, and focussed them on the misty depths below.

The big stone cairn, in the shelter of which the chums were standing, was built on what seemed to be the verge of a precipitous drop into the dark ugliness of Black Gill—two thousand feet below them!

They were standing on top of Gill Scaw, and the vista of the wild Cumberland

mountains stretching about them was shrouded in writhing mist and pelting rain. The wind was whistling around the cairn, whipping at their waterproofs and stinging them with its chilliness.

But of these discomforts Tom Burrows felt nothing. His glasses swept from the dull, grey stretch which marked the tumbling waters of Ross Dam to the far end of Black Gill—and he grunted with satisfaction as he saw that the Gill was clear.

Because at any moment the southern wall of Ross Dam might burst before the pressure of the millions of tons of water behind it. The most desperate efforts to stop the breakage had been just sufficient to hold the water—but there was more bad weather in the sky, and the reservoir engineers knew that another storm would mean the bursting of the dam.

Tom was one of these engineers, and he had climbed up Gill Fell in order to make certain that when the dam burst, its waters would flood safely away along Black Gill, at the end of which they would augment a natural lake.

That this should happen was essential.

If Black Gill were blocked, the flood would be checked, and would take an alternative route down Ross Vale to the Cumberland town of Rossthwaite.

The reservoir normally held something like seven thousand million gallons, and, under the abnormal flooding, this had been increased by nearly half as much again—the rush of waters through Ross George would mean that the town would be wiped away as though it had never been in existence—and the people with it.

There was, of course, the possibility that the dam would not burst, but that chance was very remote.

Because he was a junior engineer at the works, Tom was doing what he could to ensure the safety of Rossthwaite. He had persuaded Jim to climb Gill Fell with him and, as his glasses swept the valley below, he picked out the red bulk of the car by which they had reached the foot of the fell.

"I can see your 'bus down there!" he called to his chum.

"I'll be jolly glad when I get back to it!" growled Jim. "I don't mind tellin' you that I'm scared of the climb down!"

Tom glanced at him, and he chuckled a little. It was queer to hear Jim admitting that he was scared of anything because, young as he was, he had gained a name as one of the most daring drivers that had ever used a racing track.

Jim Hart was a speedman—some folk said he was a madman, from the way he drove! He had driven on nearly every racing track in Europe, and he was as keen on motors as was Tom on his own special branch of engineering.

Jim had been spending a few days with his old school chum at Rossthwaite, and, although he was grouching and grumbling at the weather, the wind and the wild fells over which they had climbed, he was actually enjoying himself hugely.

For a moment or so, Tom gazed down at the red car below them. Even through

the powerful glasses it looked small, so distant was it. The machine was one of Jim's racing cars—long, low, and immensely fast. It was the only spot of colour in the whole of Black Gill—and was certainly the first machine of its kind that had ever climbed along the narrow sheep-path on which it stood.

At last Tom lowered his glasses and turned to say something to Jim; instead he remained staring past his chum, then an awed: "Gosh!" broke from his lips. Jim turned, and he, too, stood spellbound at the sight which met his gaze.

Black clouds were surging from out the



Forked lightning streaked from out the black clouds and the very rock split asunder. Enormous masses heaved out and came slamming downwards. (See Chapter 1.)

misty greyness of the sky, sweeping low over the summits of the fells. Lightning seared and lashed across the sable murk, and above the whine of the wind they heard the crashing roar of thunder.

At their height, it had the appearance of a storm sweeping along the ground. The mighty clouds were thick and heavy with rain; the fells would be streaming with water under the storm—and that would mean the bursting of the dam!

"We're in for it now!" gasped Jim.

"Better shift before it breaks on us!" Tom answered. "Black Gill is clear enough, so if the dam goes everything'll be all right, and—"

"So long as it doesn't go before we get the car clear!" Jim broke in.

"Phew! I never thought of that!" Tom exclaimed. "If she goes before we get clear of the Gill we shall be nicely caught!"

They were almost flattened to the ground by the wind as they left the shelter of the cairn, and then they went slipping and sliding over the coarse, lank grass, sloshing through little tarns and stumbling over the rocky outcrop, bent to the wind and rain.

Water streamed from them in little rivulets, and soon both were gasping with their efforts. In a little while they had dropped from the upper level to easier going, and then began the long, dangerous descent to Black Gill.

On the other side of the valley was a sheer wall of rock, towering to an enormous height, part of it actually overhanging the Gill. It was a stupendous sight, and the smooth, sheer stretches of rain-soaked rock reflected the vivid flashes of lightning with mirror-like intensity.

The chums had completed half the descent ere the storm actually broke.

By this time they were partly sheltered by the fell, and missed the full force of the wind and water; for all that it was only by straining muscles and sinews that they managed to keep moving.

"Looks as though that lot could fall on top of us!" gasped Jim, nodding to the opposite wall of Black Gill.

"It'd squash your car if it did drop," Tom answered him with a grin. "But it's been like that for hundreds of years, so it—"

Phew!" His exclamation was almost drowned in a crackling roll of thunder which seemed to sound right above their heads, and with the roll the rain came down in a solid wall.

They struggled on. If the dam broke before they reached the Gill they were likely to be stranded on the fells, because that ten thousand million gallons of water which the dam held back would just about fill Black Gill; it would certainly make it impassable.

Up above them the storm fiends were venting their spleen on the scaw tops and the heights. Lightning slashed in sabres of fire, searing the clouds, running along the ground, wrecking the blackness of the sky with blazing cuts.

The thunder rolled in wild crescendo, echoing back from the mighty rock wall on the opposite side of Black Gill, almost stunning the fiercely clambering pair by its shock and roar.

It seemed to them that the centre of the storm was swinging above their heads. Dazzling lightning lit the depths of the Gill as they climbed downwards.

They saw a forked tongue streak through mid air, bringing them both to a halt with their hands across their eyes, half blinded by the brilliance of it. They straightened as the thunder rolled mightily, deafened and half-stunned. And then—

It seemed to them that the very sky burst. From out an eye-searing heart of white fire behind the black clouds, forked lightning slashed in a hundred darting branches. They saw it streak down to the top of the black wall before them, saw it run and play around the rock, striking into the solid mass, and bathing everything in bluish glare.

The opposite side of Black Gill and the cloud above was scored by lurid streaks of awful light, and with it came a staggering bellow of thunder that rocked the senses and dazed the minds of the two lone spectators.

And as they swayed precariously on the slippery grass down which they were climbing, they saw the very rock opposite them split asunder!

Slowly, as though prised by unseen giant fingers, a cavity appeared, shearing from top



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A RACE FOR LIFE WITH THE FLOOD!

to bottom. Enormous masses of rock heaved outwards, hefting into midair ere they came slamming down, then the whole wall of rock seemed to disintegrate.

Gargantuan masses that must have weighed thousands of tons were flung the width of the Gill, striking the ground below the crouching clumps and making the earth shudder and tremble. Small rocks and huge stones whistled and hummed about them, crashing home on the outcrop to the shelter of which they sprang.

For minutes they remained there until the fellside ceased to tremble and the roar of falling rock ceased, then they looked out.

There was no wall of rock facing them now. It had vanished, and the torrential rain was beating down the dust and earth which filled the air.

"Wiped out!" exclaimed Tom. "Struck by lightning!"

"And my car's under that lot," Jim answered.

"Under——"

Tom broke off. When he spoke again there was a strange, vibrant note to his voice. "The Gill is blocked—look!"

Black Gill was blocked from side to side and to a height of hundreds of feet by the collapse of the rock wall.

"The dam—if it should burst, the water won't get away down here," Tom went on. "It'll flood down Ross Vale, and—and——"

"Wipe out the town," supplemented Jim. "But it hasn't burst yet."

"It will, though, with all this rain. We shall have to—do something. Come on."

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Forlorn Hope.

SIDE by side they scrambled on down the slope of the fell. Every few yards their progress was all but barred by masses of rock tossed clear across the breadth of the Gill, and a dozen times their stumbling feet started small avalanches which drove the loose shale and rock fragments into the blackness below.

"Not much hope for—the car," said Jim as they moved.

"We left it over to the left," Tom answered. "Maybe it missed the rock and——"

"Not much hope of that," Jim answered. "The best old 'bus I ever had has gone west."

The rain, the half light from the clouded sky, and the thrashing wind made their climb difficult, but soon they were moving along the mass of freshly fallen rock, and a little later they made for the sheep-track which ran along the bottom of the Gill, reaching it at a



A giant boulder thundered to earth, narrowly missing the leaping shape of the great racing car. (See Chapter 2.)

point clear of the collapsed wall.

"The car was along this way," said Tom.

In half a minute they were picking a path through masses of rock which towered high above their heads, stumbling over loose fragments, and trying not to lose direction amidst the distorted ground about them.

It looked hopeless to expect the machine to have escaped. Ere they reached the place where they had left it, the sheep-track was blotted out under the rock.

"We'll find it flat as a pancake," muttered

Jim. "There'll be a fifty-ton rock across the scuttle, and a— Hallo!"

He checked as they turned a butte of rock. Ahead of them was the solid mass of the fallen wall, and the lightning flashes showed two mighty pinnaces of rock leaning one against the other—between their bases was the big red car.

"Mind, in case anything slips!" warned Tom as they approached.

Closer examination showed the car to be comparatively unharmed. If either of those pinnaces had touched it, it would have been smashed flat. As it was, they had hit one another, and the metal bodywork of the machine was scarred and dented by the impact of fragments which had resulted from the rocky collision.

They pulled the machine by hand from its shelter. Clear of danger, Jim inspected it quickly, while Tom cleared the seats and the cockpit of pieces of rock.

"Seems to be all right," Jim called exultantly above the bellow of the storm. "I'll start her up, we may be able to pick a road through this."

He grabbed the starting handle, and the powerful engine responded sweetly.

"If we get clear, run up to the dam," called Tom, as Jim scrambled to his place behind the wheel.

"If the dam busts it'll be good-night for us," answered Jim cheerfully. "Thought we were going to warn Rossthwaite?"

"Afterwards. I've got an idea—you know Ross Gorge?"

"Yes," called Jim. He knew it for the bottle-neck to Ross Vale, after which the valley broadened out, with the town beyond.

"There's dynamite in the dam-house," Tom said quickly. "If we could get it, charge one of the walls at Ross Gorge and—"

"And blow her down, block the valley, just like the lightning's blocked this one, eh?" asked Jim quickly. "Bright idea, Tom. Chancy work, but it might save the town; it'll hold some of the water back, anyhow. Sit tight."

The mighty engine under the long bonnet of the racing car roared as the red machine rolled forward.

Tom was never quite sure of what happened during the next half-minute. He was almost blinded by the glare of incessant lightning and the whip of stinging rain; he was tossed like a cork in a whirlpool as the car lurched and staggered over the piles of broken rock, he was all but deafened by the thunder and the stammering roar of the car's exhaust, echoing back from the tottering rocks all around.

Twice great masses of rock thundered to earth near the car; shaken from their freshly-found positions by the vibration of the thunder and weakened by the streams of water which now came cascading down the slopes from above.

A third giant rock almost hit them. Jim saw it tottering. If it fell it would block their path. He accelerated violently and the machine jumped forward with a roar of defiance. For the fraction of a second it looked as though the rock must catch and crush them. Tom shrank in his seat; he saw Jim's hands twist deftly on the wheel—then they were clear, and the rock slammed down at the very tail of the car, the thunder of its impact vibrating through the whole fabric of the machine.

Seconds later, and they were thundering away along the sheep-track, going all out, and with streams of spray shooting from the threshing wheels.

It was less than half a mile to the dam, and Jim drove all he knew. It meant death if the dam burst, but there was the chance of bringing off Tom's scheme and saving the town. That was worth all the hazard.

So along that rough-marked sheep-track the red machine showed its paces, its wide-mouthed exhaust streaking lurid flame and its chattering bellow rivalling the thunder.

In something under a minute they shot like a red flash past the entrance to Ross Vale; a few moments later the black wall of Ross Dam loomed up before them.

The centre of the wall was thick with great buttresses of concrete—reinforcements that were unfinished and which might have been successful but for the rains which had flooded the Cumberland hills.

From the centre of these buttresses water

was pouring in a great stream, hissing through the fracture, which was weakening with every passing second.

Defly Jim swung the car round to face away from the dam; he left the engine running as he followed his companion to the ground.

"Up to the shed!" shouted Tom above the tumult which surged about them. "Don't think she'll go just yet."

He led the way up a long flight of stone steps, which brought them to a stone building on the very edge of the great dam wall.

Now they were able to look out across the threshing waters of the artificial lake. The wind lashed the dark surface to mountainous waves, the crests of which were lit by the flashes of lightning. The whole grey space was an inferno of swirling, tortured water—raging strength that threatened the safety of the township at the other end of Ross Vale.

On the far side, bulking blacker than the blackness of the stormy sky, was Blair Fell, Matterdale Scaw, and Brendreth Pikes—great hills which poured their accumulations of water into the over-filled dam, putting greater and greater pressure on the hissing fracture almost beneath the feet of the chums.

Grim and vicious loomed the bulk of these heights, seeming to lean over in the storm-light, as though watching the battling waters below.

By force and fall, torrent and burn, they sent their water flooding down, bent upon the final fracture of the ramparts of the dam.

The chums permitted themselves no time to stare at this scene. In a dozen strides, Tom was wrenching at the fastenings of the near-by door; soon it slammed behind them, and the change to quietude after the bruit of the storm made both of them gasp.

There was sufficient light for them to see by, and Tom wrenched open the doors of a cupboard in the wall.

"Here's the battery, Jim! Catch hold!" And he passed to his chum a heavy, square box, with a bar handle at the top. To one side

of the box was attached a big, thick coil of wire.

Jim lifted down three round packets of dynamite, strapping them swiftly together. Right into the heart of them he dropped a copper fulminate of mercury detonator, whipped it to the ends of the battery coil wire, and then grinned at his chum.

"O.K., Jim! Mighty dangerous way to have to carry this; we'll be liable to blow ourselves up with it in the car and——"

"It's either that or drowning," Jim broke in. "I don't like the look of things outside—we'd better be shifting, eh?"

"Yes, come on! Drive to the far side of Ross Gorge. There's an old slate-quarry there, and I'll dump this lot down one of the passages. We've three hundred yards of flex, so we can explode the packet in safety."

He was wrapping battery and dynamite in a waterproof sheet as he spoke; a few seconds later they were breasting the storm outside and making for the steps and the car



The penned waters broke the weakened rampart and surged in fierce pursuit of the car, flooding it to the wheel-hubs as it roared forward. See Chapter 3.)

THE THIRD CHAPTER

A Race for Life

AFTER the calm of the stone building, it seemed as though the storm was doubled in intensity at their coming. Lightning flickered about the jagged heads of Brandreth Pikes and played on the slopes of Blair Fell, while the rain slashed the stonework which they trod, and the dam wall quivered under the mighty thrust of the millions of tons of water which it was holding back.

"Matter o'—minutes!" roared Tom, as they reached the steps, and the two of them plunged downwards to where the big red racer awaited them.

Water from the fracture in the wall was washing the wheels. The fiercely hissing stream had grown in volume in the short time that they had been absent. Even as they reached the car, a buttress cracked and gave—vanishing like smoke as a white spume of water gushed out in a mighty roar.

It was the beginning of the end.

"Quick!" yelled Tom, and the two flung themselves to the car.

Defly Jim wriggled to the wet seat behind the wheel, and Tom clambered over the side, hugging his perilous burden—it wanted only a sharp knock to blow them and the car to oblivion.

"Right!" he shouted—and his word was drowned by a terrific smashing sound from behind them.

He turned his head, to see buttresses break and fall, while the edge of the dam wall above them rocked over.

"Get away—she's going!"

Water was hissing and dragging at the under part of the big car as it surged forward; the burning exhaust-pipe hissed and made steam as it slapped into the stream—and behind, the giant wall of the dam dissolved like sugar before the waters that thundered on to its weakened fabric.

In a smother of spray the red machine leaped from the spot, and as it gathered speed the penned water finally broke the rampart and came tumbling in fierce pursuit.

Tom looked over his shoulder to see a solid

wall of water bearing down on them. He saw great masses of masonry tossed high from the heaving, foaming flood; spray and spume blotted out the sky—the whole world changed to a welter of fierce, angry water that was dropping down on them.

Flooded to the wheel-hubs, the racing car roared forward—thirty yards behind was a wall of water which gained every moment. If it reached them it would lift the machine and whirl it away, just as it was lifting and whirling things a thousand times heavier.

The water chased down on them—and even as it seemed to Tom that it must swamp them, the car drew away. They had reached the widened part of the road, where Ross Vale branched from Black Gill, and in the open space the water lost some of its force.

Two hundred yards farther on, and they entered Ross Vale. It was a narrow, sunken road, with the slopes on either side gradually closing in and becoming more vertical as the vale narrowed to the gorge.

And now Jim let the car all out.

The water would flood to the blockage in Black Gill, and then, thwarted, it would change direction and its whole force would come sweeping down Ross Vale. Before that happened, they had got to reach the old quarry and explode the charge of dynamite—doing in the gorge what the lightning had done in Black Gill a little time before.

It was a question of seconds. Jim knew that. He'd got to run a better race than any he had ever run on the Continental speedways.

If they failed, Rossthwaite would be flooded; unsuspecting townsmen would die in the swirling waters that would storm the town—trapped, helpless, and with no chance of escape.

Jim's foot went down on the accelerator, and with all the strength of his sinewy arm he held the great car to its course. It leaped and rocked madly on the rutted, uneven road, bumped and lurched from side to side as it tore forward with terrific speed.

A yard-long flame tongued from the exhaust, challenging the storm-glare, while its bellowing roar hurled defiance to the raging waters that surged in grim, terrible pursuit.

Jim's eyes were half-closed to the slash and sting of the fierce rain; his jaw was grim-set and every nerve and muscle in his body was keyed and strained to hurl the great car onwards.

The threshing wheels slammed fountains of wet earth behind, spray shot out as the machine dashed through road-wide pools—it roared on, a mad mass of mechanism that embodied the very spirit of that awful storm.

The walls of the vale seemed to lift and rush to meet them.

"There's a track on the right!" Tom had to shout with all his might to make his chum hear. "You'll see it—pull up there!" A moment later, and he yelled: "There it is—brake! Slow up!"

He was scrambling from his seat as Jim brought the car to a skidding halt. He reached the ground, fumbled for a moment or so with the waterproof wrapping; then—

"I've got the dynamite. You hang on to the battery and let out the wire. For the love o' Mike don't touch the plunger—or you'll blow me up. I'm goin' to dump it inside that shaft there!" and he pointed to a gaping opening a score of yards away.

He was off, then, stumbling and slipping on the track.

Jim glanced over his shoulder. Away up the Vale he could see the wall of water leaping forward. Black Gill had been filled; the flood was commencing the assault on the town.

Could they get away in time? Scrambling, slipping, sliding, hugging his perilous burden, Tom made his way towards the old quarry; then he vanished inside.

Jim paid out more and more of the twin flex, casting glances over his shoulder the while at the water that came rushing down.

He could see it flooding the narrow, sunken road—a roaring wall that would give them no chance if it caught them!

The wire ceased to run out.

He saw Tom dart from the black shaft-mouth and come racing down the track.

Now the advance of the water was all about them, with the mass of it not far behind.

"Come on!" Jim roared.

Tom fell, rolled half a dozen yards, scrambled up, then made a leap for the car. He tumbled into the cockpit as

Jim let in the clutch and the machine started.

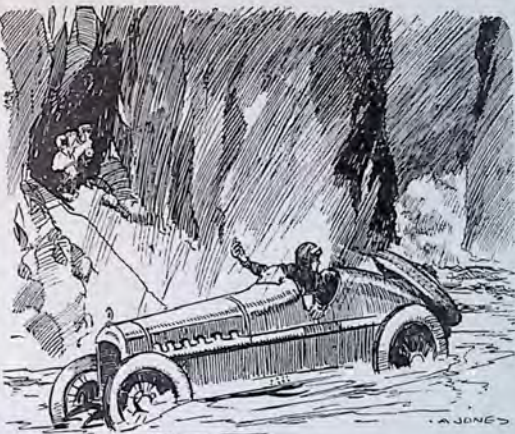
"Steady! Steady!" yelled Tom. "Mind the wire!" He was working wildly on the battery as Jim slowed the car.

A hundred yards they went—then the racing water caught them and lifted the rounded tail of the machine; for a second the back wheels spun wildly.

"Let her go! We'll be swamped!" Jim shouted.

"Better that than crushed!" Tom answered him. "Must get clear!"

Water canted the machine sideways, and Jim fought to straighten the car.



"Come on!" yelled Jim, and his pal made a stumbling rush to gain the car ere the wall of advancing water swooped down. (See this page.)

"Sit tight!" bawled Tom.

From the corners of his eyes Jim saw his chum's hand slam down on the plunger of the battery.

"Right! Get out of it, an'—"

Tom's words were clipped short by a stupendous roar which came from behind them. A mighty gout of vivid flame slashed from the side of Ross Gorge. Huge masses of rock surged outwards, and then were blotted from sight by vast clouds of smoke.

The surging water behind the car seemed to make one last effort to overwhelm the chums. It lifted the car clean from the ground, slewing it round, playing with it, and then as suddenly dumping it again as Jim throttled down—a moment afterwards and the machine was resting in the middle of a shallow stream.

"Blocked it!" gasped Tom. "Look."

Jim turned, to see the smoke wafting away before the wind, disclosing piled masses of rock where previously there had been nothing but the narrow road—rock which held back the force of the flood.

Presently Jim pulled the machine to the side of the track and clear of the water, then they went back and climbed the side of the newly-fallen rock.

Beyond it what had been a valley was now a lake, its surface rippled and broken by the breeze of the passing storm.

Above, the cloud-wrack chased across the sky and a shaft of weak sunlight came streaking down, lighting up the rest of the gorge and glinting the wet, red roof-tops of the town beyond.

The chums shook hands in mutual congratulation, and as they did so they saw that the sun was shining on the car below them.

Its red body was battered and dented in a hundred places; its paintwork was scratched and scored; the wheels dripped water and the tail was caked in mud. But in the quietude which followed the storm, the sound of the still-running engine rolled out with a satisfied purr—as though the red car, too, was looking down on the town which it had saved, and was content.

THE END

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