

TAKING THE RISK!

BY
BERT
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*Two hundred miles to go, at the average speed of an express train;
and a half-sawn-through steering column lay between young Bob—
racing motor-cyclist—and a frightful crash!*

THE FIRST CHAPTER

It's the Only Way!

"M. a. Long—look at this!"

Bob Weldon rose with a jerk to his feet from amidst the litter of parts about the racing motor-cycle. Forks and steering column in hand, he beckoned his perspiring, oil-stained companion to him.

"Why, what's the matter?"

Long, tired-eyed and "nervy," came round to where the youngster stood, and, with a trace of impatience that in the circumstances was not unnatural, held out a grimy paw for the forks. "Can't I leave anything to anybody?" he said, frowning as he took the component.

Bob fought down the quick sense of resentment called for by the elder man's manner. Long had had a pretty tough grueling these last hours and was rattled. Trouble at the last moment, and with little more than an hour to go before the race, was enough to get on anyone's nerves.

"The steering column's cracked, sir. It must have gone during practice. The metal crystallised, or something." Bob placed his finger on a mark just visible through the thick coating on the tube.

Long's grim mouth tightened. With a lump of waste, he wiped the tube clean, then bent over to scrutinise it closely. The next instant he uttered a sharp ejaculation.

"Crystallised! My lad, that's no flaw! Someone's been at this tube with a hacksaw! Look at it—cut half through, and only hanging on by the eyelids!"

Bob stared aghast. The column into which the handlebars fitted was a vital part. Brazed to the forks themselves as it was, there was no time to replace it; and spare forks there was none. The race in an hour—and not a chance to be ready.

"This will mean you can't start, sir!" The lad hardly dared look at his employer as he spoke.

Long, young and a master of "tune," was, as his apprentice knew, pinning everything on the result of the forthcoming two hundred miles race. On a victory would depend Long's business for the season ahead.

If he won, he would sell a number of his special brand of "hotted-up" speedsters—machines turned out with wondrous care and skill in the rear portion of his small, but famous garage. If he lost—well, it would make all the difference.

For a few seconds the racing man stood frowning, his grey eyes on the damaged part. Then he clenched his teeth.

"I shall start, Bob!" he announced, with quiet decision. "I've got to start. My wife needs that operation, and she can't have it if I don't pull this thing off. A win will mean the money I need for it. I'll have to take a chance, and risk it."

"But that tube will go before you've gone ten laps, sir!" Bob protested, with a swift glance at the concrete trackway about the great Brooklands saucer, with its stretches of high banking. "Travelling at a hundred, and with those rough patches on the track!"

"I'll ram a short liner down inside the column. That'll strengthen it a bit." Long cut his junior short. "Gimme that hammer—and that bit of tubing over there!" He held out his hand imperatively.

Bob passed over the tool and tubing. Anxiety on his frank young features, he stood by, watching while his boss dexterously fitted the short length of weldless steel pipe into place.

Desperate as Long might be, to race the machine under such conditions was madness, little short of suicide. The liner would, of course, strengthen the column. But, even so, the latter might give at any moment, the forks collapse, and the bike with them.

And Long, hurtling onwards at terrific speed, would be hurled headlong from the saddle upon the whizzing concrete beneath. It meant a gamble with death; a gamble that the tube held up, or, if it did not, then that the rider's crash helmet would save him.

"But supposing you're killed, sir?" Bob forced himself to speak what he felt he must point out. "What will happen to Mrs. Long then?"

"I'm insured," Long returned laconically, and with the air of one dismissing an objection for good and all. "There'll be plenty of money for the operation."

He put a finishing touch to his task, held the forks and column up to run his eye down them, then changed the subject abruptly.

"I'd like to know who did this!" he said fiercely.

"All the fellows are jolly good sportsmen here, Mr. Long. I can't think of anyone who would stoop to do such an under-hand thing. Only——" Bob hesitated, something in his mind that he dared not voice.

"I know what you're thinking." Long took him up in a trice. "There is only one man that would stick at nothing down here—only one man that needs to beat me so badly that he's got to use these sort of methods. And that's Moreton Floyd. Eh?"

Bob said nothing. In his heart he knew that what Long said was true.

Floyd owned just such another business as Long's. All through the previous season there had been keen rivalry between them. The "dusts-up" on the track between Long's "Neptune" racer and Floyd's special "Fulmen" had been the talk of the motor-cycle world. Like Long, Floyd must be depending upon the forthcoming race for his season's sales.

Floyd had a cunning, hang-dog look about him. He had done several mean things in the past, unsportsmanlike things that had not tended to enhance his popularity. Also he hated Long—Bob knew that. And yet——

Sharp practice in riding was a different thing to—yes, it was murder, or attempted murder, this tampering with the column. And, decent-minded young fellow that he was, Bob shrank from an accusation he was in no position to prove.

"I'd like to know how anyone got at the machine, anyhow," Long went on, breaking in upon his junior's chain of thought. "That was your carelessness, Bob. This job could only have been done while the 'bus was 'down'—in pieces. And if you'd been on the spot, as you should have been——"

"I did leave for a few minutes," Bob confessed. "I went to borrow a tool from the Dixie people."

"And—well, we won't say who—*someone* slid in and did the business while your back was turned!" Long clenched his fists in impotent wrath, then added philosophically: "Well, it can't be helped now. Shall

have to chance it." And, with the aid of his young assistant, he rapidly completed the reassembly of the machine.

Bob remained silent. It was useless to try to persuade his employer to change his mind. Long was a dare-devil by nature, and obstinate to the core. His mind made up, nothing would alter it. Bob knew his boss too well to believe anything else.

But if Long feared nothing, Bob did. He had a deep sense of affection for the clever and kindly young rider to whom he was apprenticed, and he viewed the prospects of the race with the gravest anxiety.

What could be done to save Long from the smash that, in his desperation, he was so courageously prepared to face for the sake of his invalid wife?

"Perhaps it was largely my fault," the youngster thought to himself as, under Long's instructions, he stowed the motorcycle away in the lock-up shed in the paddock and secured the door. "It's up to me. I've got to think of something—something

"I'm going to have a cup of strong coffee, then lie down till the line-up for the start." Long swung round on his junior as they walked away towards the club-house. "I'm dog-tired with this unexpected trouble cropping up at the last minute, and I want to be fresh for the race. I shall rely on you to wake me."

"Very well, sir," Bob answered gloomily, and watched his master disappear through the door leading into the buffet.

"Well, are you Neptune people going to beat me to-day, or are you packing up, by any chance?" A harsh, nasal voice spoke at Bob's elbow, and the lad spun round, to find himself face to face with a short, pasty-cheeked man, from whose pendulous lip there drooped the fag-end of a cigarette.

It was Moreton Floyde.

"Packing up?" Bob echoed, with a quick, searching look at the other's shifty countenance. "What put that idea into your head, Mr. Floyde?"

"Oh, nothin'!" Floyde flicked the ash from his cigarette with a careless gesture. "I saw you'd got the 'bus in bits this morn-

ing. Just wondered if you were in trouble, that's all."

"We were in trouble. But we're starting, all the same," Bob replied meaningly. "But perhaps you're disappointed, eh, Mr. Floyde?" Again he watched the other closely.

Floyde frowned, and started almost imperceptibly. A sudden look of fear flecked his bloodshot eyes, a look of terror in face of the unexpected.

"I—oh—er—not at all! Why should I?" He raised his hand to take the cigarette from his mouth, but his fingers shook so that the stump fell to the ground. "I—I'd sooner have a good race than a walk-over, naturally."

And, with a curt nod, he strolled away to the buffet door.

Bob drew a deep breath. He had seen enough. Floyde had given himself away. But if he had done that, he had done something more. That look of fear showed that he was now frightened with the possible results of his own act.

Perhaps it was a last-minute repentance. Or perhaps he had never expected his rival would ride. The saw-cut would be discovered, and Long would be out of the race. What would he do now?

Wondering inwardly, Bob strolled by the buffet window, and out of curiosity paused to glance inside.

Long stood by the counter, a cup of coffee before him. He was talking to another racing man, and his gaze was momentarily averted from the cup.

On his other side stood Floyde, lounging against the buffet, his right hand in his coat pocket. Then the hand rose swiftly, hovered over the coffee cup, and dropped again.

Intuitively Bob sensed what had happened.

Floyde had put something into the hot brown liquid—something that would never taste—something, though, that would make Long sleep like the dead when, a few minutes later, he went, the coffee drunk, to have his nap.

Long took the cup and raised it to his lips.

"Stop!"

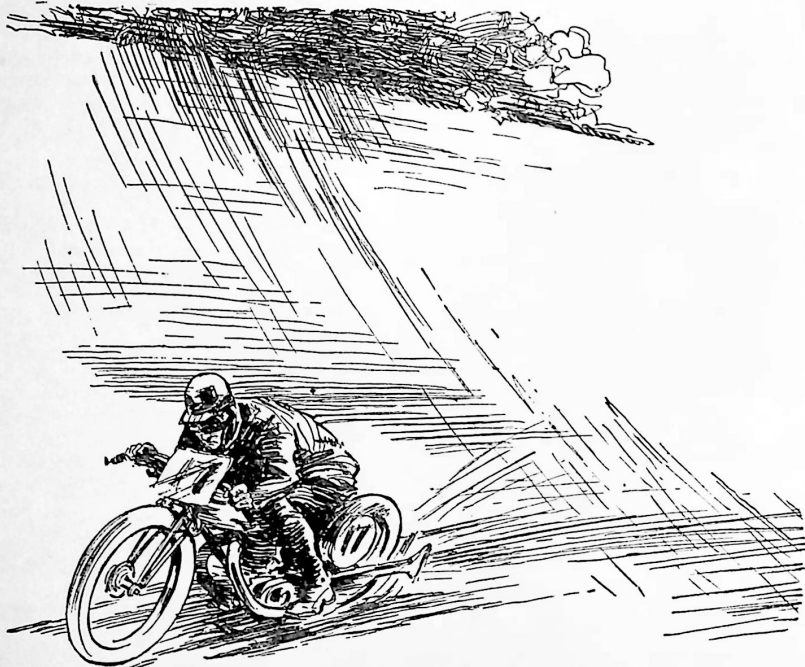
Bob gave a cry of warning, but his voice did not carry through the closed pane. He could never get round to the door in time. The cup was at Long's lips now, and—

Smash in the pane and shout—that was the only way! And the lad's fist clenched and rose.

Floyde faced the starter, his rival would be missing.

"Yes, it's the only way!" Bob muttered to himself as he passed on, leaving Long to drain the doped coffee to the dregs. "I feel an awful rotter, but—yes, it's got to be done!"

An instant later and his expression



Floyde in the lead—yet not by so much! And Floyde was travelling "all out"—

But it never fell upon the glass. In that fraction of a second Bob changed his mind. His fingers unclenched themselves, and the hand dropped limply.

He had a plan—a plan that had come to him as quick as a flash of lightning. He would not interfere with Floyde's crafty scheming. Long should sleep. And when

changed. With a sudden hunch, he squared his broad young shoulders, and a look of fierce resolve came into his eyes.

"I wonder if I can put it over?" was his amazing comment as he walked away.

Another idea had entered his head, and his face reflected that Floyde would not have things all his own way!

THE SECOND CHAPTER

Smashing to Victory!

"WHERE'S Long?"

The starter, flag in hand, glanced down the long line of machines that, their riders beside them, stood ready along the black-painted mark, waiting for the stick to drop.

"Mr. Long is not riding, sir. He's fast asleep. I couldn't wake him."

Bob, who had just pushed Long's "Neptune" up to the line, called across to the official an explanation of its owner's absence. As he spoke, he reached for the crash helmet, hooked over the handlebars.

"Not starting?" The official seemed surprised. "Well, if that's so, my lad, you'd better wheel that bike off the track. Sharp, now! Time's all but up."

"Thought your boss might wake up, and dash up at the last second, eh?" Floyd, who lay next in line to the Neptune, peered round with a sneering grin. "Well, you can just shift that old iron out of my way, my lad."

And he jerked a thumb at the machine in Bob's strong young hands.

"Excuse me, sir"—Bob ignored Floyd, and shouted across to the starter—"but I'm riding in Mr. Long's place. He—he's not well. He'd be here to explain otherwise."

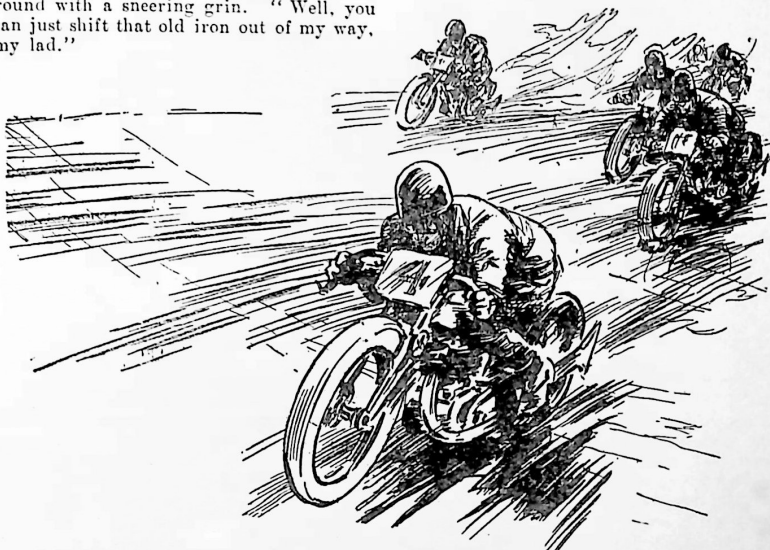
"Rot!" Floyd gave a sudden start, then faced the official. "This kid will only kill himself, Mr. Laweson. You won't allow him to start, surely?"

Laweson, his flag poised, hesitated. And while he hesitated, Bob cut in.

"So you're afraid of the Neptune, Mr. Floyd—no matter who rides it?" he challenged in a loud voice, at which a titter of laughter ran down the waiting line of pilots.

Floyd was not popular.

He flushed angrily, and muttered something inaudible. But the titter decided Laweson. With a slight shrug, he nodded his head.



—He was playing no nursing game. Instead, he had let his motor have its head, forcing the pace all the way—forcing—forcing! (See Chapter 2.)

"All right, Weldon. You can start, since it seems Long wishes it. Buck up with that helmet!"

Astride his machine, Bob strapped on the cushioned headgear, his fingers steady and nerveless, despite the pounding of his heart against his ribs. Then, gripping the bars, he dismounted, and crouched, ready for the push-off.

Swoosh! The flag fell with a slick, and in a flash the harsh crackle of twenty exhausts smote the air. The race was on!

One push, and the Neptune fired, to leap forward with a bound that all but tore it from Bob's unaccustomed hands. But he saved himself by a hair's-breadth, and, with a fearful wobble, righted the 'bus as he swung himself aboard. The next moment, and he was crouching low over the tank, his chin on the bars, the Neptune throbbing beneath him as he whirled off down the track.

He had a vague glimpse of Floyd, getting away beside him; of the others pushing, coaxing, forcing, and mounting their machines. Then the thunder of the barking exhausts came back in smashing reverberation from off the high banking; the hill and the members' bridge spanning the track beyond rushed to meet him, and he forgot the field as he settled down, calmly and methodically, to face the two hundred miles of whirlwind travelling that lay ahead.

Two hundred miles! Two hundred miles to go, at the average speed of an express train!

And that half-sawn-through steering tube was all that lay between him and a frightful crash!

His grim mouth tightened, as well it might. But his teeth gritted indomitably.

Thank Heaven, Long was not riding! He was sleeping on, oblivious of the race, the risks, and the dreadful issue upon which the finish must depend.

Well, he—Bob Weldon—had no invalid wife in dependence upon him. Alone in the world, it mattered little whether he lived or died. And he had given Floyd his chance; he left the Neptune unwatched

while the scheming rival stole in and worked his dirty trick.

Yes, it was his "pigeon," Bob thought, as he roared off down the track. That column would probably go, in which case—well, Long would not crash, anyway.

And if the tube held up? What then? A win?

You never knew! Even that was barely possible, despite the field of hardy, experienced pilots riding against him. A hundred to one chance—an impossible chance, almost!

Well, he would take it! He had saved Long from a smash! Could he snatch victory from defeat as well?

Only the long eternity of the desperate, high-speed struggle ahead—only those two hundred miles of nerve-racking torture and ceaseless risk could provide an answer! What would it be?

One hundred and fifty miles! Some fifty-five circuits of that dazzling white concrete track, of banking and "straight," of never-ending vibration and spine-pounding onrush!

And still the tube held up! Still the quivering thing of aluminium and steel that Herbert Long had fashioned swept onwards round the vast oval track, the roar of its wizard-tune engine unfaltering.

And the field?

For the hundredth time Bob risked a swift backward glance across his shoulder. Many had fallen by the wayside, their machines at rest, in mute protest against the fearful strain of the speed battle, now nearing its finish.

Ahead lay Floyd, flat down upon the tank of his Fulmen racer, leading the struggling chain of rival speedmen strung out behind him. On his heels, Baxter, another redoubtable champion, clung doggedly, astride a well-known mount of mass-production manufacture. And third lay Bob Weldon, his Neptune a-throb with the torrential pulsations of its screaming engine.

Floyd in the lead—yet not by so much! Only a furlong separated him from Baxter.

And less than fifty yards divided Baxter from Bob.

And Floydé was travelling "all out"; he was playing no nursing game. Instead, he had let his motor have its head, forcing the pace all the way—forcing—forcing!

Did he hope to run the field off their legs—or, rather, wheels? Did he plan to shake that sawn-up tubing through by sheer battering of speed shock? Or was he running—running away from the dreadful thing that might happen when the tube gave, running as a man half-demented by terror might flee from the spectre of his own misdoing?

As he lay down to his bars, his wrists and fingers numb with the ceaseless quiver of the whipping grips, Bob wondered. And as he wondered, his eyes set on the track ahead, he found himself gaining.

Baxter, the second man, was growing larger, his bent back nearer. And Floydé?

A little—how long Bob could not tell, for he only counted the laps, and even of their tally he had grown weary—a little, and Baxter fell away, lost in the dust-flung wake astern.

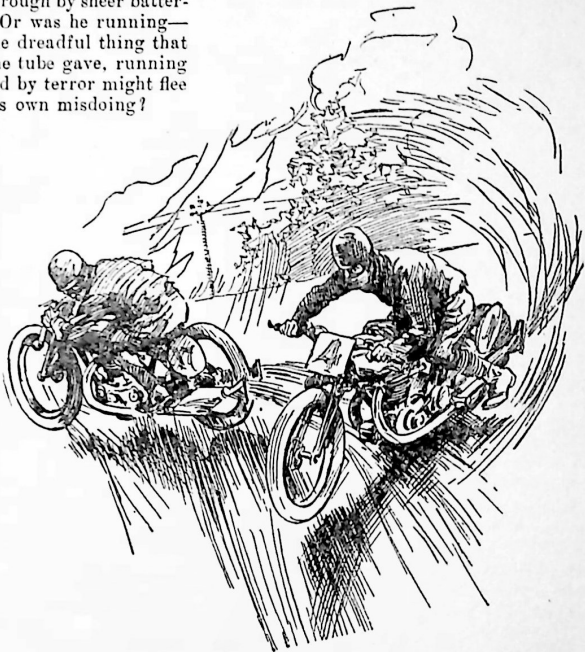
Ahead, Floydé—Floydé and that furlong of intervening space that gulfed him and his projected victim. A furlong, and the race—another twenty-five miles up! Well, if that lead were to be wiped out—

Bob's finger moved to the throttle lever, and in response the engine throbbed to a new note that sent the Neptune shooting forward with a bound.

Down upon the leader it drew, slowly the gap narrowing—narrowing!

Once Floydé looked round, did something that set his mount in swifter motion, then looked again. And at this Bob's finger touched the throttle anew; the gap went on narrowing. And when Floydé tried a second time to quicken up, the distance held.

Another subtle movement of the throttle lever, some play with the air lever, and the



Just in time, Bob checked himself, dropped behind and, pulling on the bars with all his might, forced his mount inwards, his front wheel missing the deadly brink by inches! (See next page.)

Neptune drew on. Now Floydé's back was growing, its number card insistent with the punch of a poster, the black figures of which held Bob's eye in some strange, magnetic lure.

On—on—and the laps piling up! What was that? The seventieth circuit! And but two more to go! Another bare six miles!

The Neptune crept in on its rival. Now it was level! And as he came up, travelling close on ninety, yet with the seeming crawl of a snail, Bob saw the other turn. For a fleeting moment Floyd's ashen face looked into his, and those frightened, bloodshot eyes blinked across at him in mingled fear and fury!

To be beaten by a boy—a new-comer—an apprentice! And on the Neptune, too! For that one passing instant the mute message of Floyd's narrowed eyes told their own story of hate, despair, and fierce resolve.

He swung outward and upwards. As Bob made to pass him, he thrust over and over, out across the track and up the wide, steep banking, forcing the youngster with him.

Nearer and nearer the top—nearer and nearer! Below, the track, white and whizzing, a thing of streaks and whirling nothingness. Above—no, level here—the edge, with the brink beyond! The brink, and a plunge sheer into the trees below!

Just in time Bob checked himself, dropped behind and, pulling on the bars with all his might, forced his mount inwards, his front wheel missing the deadly brink by inches. Then, throwing the throttle full open, he shot forward down the banking and inside the Fulmen, which was still whirling on, high above him, along the bank-top.

R-r-r-p! As the Neptune took the drop, the speed counter swept upwards, and the engine howled like a thing in pain as it roared to capacity on the fierce downward sweep. Again level with Floyd—this time inside!

Then—

With a sudden, vicious sweep, the other bore inwards down the banking without warning in a mad, headlong plunge that drove Bob to the rails, and bade fair to force him into them. Floyd's eyes, ablaze with the light of murder, glared into his, grim with evil purpose. For a tense, awful moment the two machines swung level, their riders knee to knee, while Bob fought frantically to slip from the trap his rival had laid for him.

A second later, and the Neptune slid clear,

with but an inch to spare. Floyd and his mount fell away behind, masked somewhere in the dust of Bob's going. The Byfleet banking and the bend flew past, a stretch of flat followed, and the fork at the head of the kilometre straight shot up.

The last lap! The last of all those grim two hundred miles—with Floyd hanging on behind, how near he could not tell.

And the lead! He had the lead at last!

Bob's pulse quickened; his heart began to thud against his ribs with the relentless pounding of a steam-hammer.

Less than three miles to go, and the Longs depending upon the issue of these next few moments!

Would that tube hold up? Would the engine carry on? That tyre! It had looked worn on the last pull-up for fuel!

His heart in his mouth, Bob crouched over the bars, listening—listening. Surely the deep, purring note of the engine was faltering! Surely that was a miss, a hesitancy, vague but audible, in the full-throated crescendo of its monotonous roar?

But no! The hill—the members' bridge! These came and vanished, and the bike flew on unchecked. Round the turn and on to the high banking athwart the railway, a flying plunge off the bank and down on to the long stretch of "railway straight" beyond.

The wind whistling past his ear-rolls, and the wild scream of the "fire" music a-surge behind, he swept on to the straight, the concrete a-rush beneath the plunging wheels of his machine as he tore down upon the finish—that Never-Never Land that called and beckoned, yet seemed so unattainable, so far off!

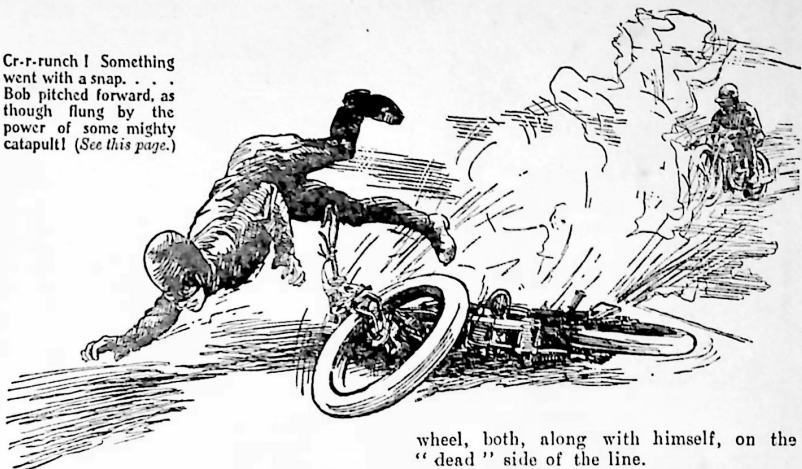
What was Floyd doing? Where was he? And Baxter?

That menacing growl in the vibrant exhaust blast astern! The engine—was it failing now?

The timing-box ahead—the fork, sweeping up! That line of white, staring faces by the rails! The Vickers sheds, with their flat, black walls!

The finish—but a shade beyond. Yes, the race was his—his!

Cr-r-runch! Something went with a snap. . . . Bob pitched forward, as though flung by the power of some mighty catapult! (See this page.)



Cr-r-runch! Something went with a snap, lost in the howl of the belching exhaust. The front wheel moved forward—slowly, slowly. It was travelling away from him! It—

He pitched forward with a swift, dynamic lurch, as though flung by the power of some mighty catapult. The tube—he had forgotten.

Crash! With a frightful thud he hit the track, head-on to the crown of his helmet, and spun over, to land a-sprawl, flat-chested upon the concrete, and shot madly onwards in a flying, whirling heap.

Lad, motor-cycle, an errant front wheel, with its buckled forks, slewed over the line together in a jazzing series, as spindrift cast upon the shore.

Five seconds later, and Floyd followed, to flash by in a drunken curve as he braked in to finish and avoid the wreckage on the track.

Bob scrambled to his feet, bruised, shocked, and sore—breathless, but unhurt. For a few seconds he stared wildly about him, swaying, dizzy, and uncomprehending.

Then his eyes fell upon the finishing line, upon the wrecked machine and its parted

wheel, both, along with himself, on the “dead” side of the line.

By a miracle he was over! He had won! Long, sleeping his doped sleep, was saved—and Mrs. Long with him!

Gasping, he staggered forward, to reel into the arms—friendly arms—outstretched to take him.

“Great Scott, young man! Thank your lucky stars you crashed at about ninety! If it had been forty-five now—”

But Bob was not interested in the vagaries of crash lore just now. He was full of his astounding victory, and all that it would mean. Of that, and of something he meant to say—and do—to Floyd when he got that worthy alone and to himself!

But the meeting between them never came to pass, for Floyd realised that he had gone too far, and that his best plan was to put as many miles between him and Long and his plucky young apprentice as was possible. All this was to the good, as future events went to prove, for now Long's motor-cycle business is in a very flourishing condition—a circumstance which Long appreciated to the extent of taking a new partner into the business.

And the new partner is Bob Weldon, the boy who took the risk!

THE END



MR
QUELCH



PETER
TODD



HARRY WHARTON



DR.
LOCKE



TOM
REDWING



BOB CHERRY



JOHNNY BULL



FISHER
T. FISH



HURREE
JAMSET RAM SINGH

Leading Lights AT GREYFRIARS SCHOOL



GEORGE
WINGATE



MR PROUT



SIR JIMMY
VIVIAN



FRANK
NUGENT



LORD
MAULEVERER



BILLY
BUNTER



HAROLD
SKINNER



PERCY
BOLSOVER



HORACE COKER



HERBERT
VERNON-
SMITH



WILLIAM WIBLEY