

A BARGAIN IN BIKES!



A STORY OF
ROOKWOOD

by
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CHAPTER I LOVELL KNOWS!

"THIS way!" said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome looked dubious.

Arthur Edward Lovell spoke positively. But then, Arthur Edward always spoke positively. Being the fellow who knew best, Arthur Edward saw no reason why he shouldn't be positive.

Four Rookwood juniors stood holding their bikes at a spot where two leafy lanes forked. They did not know the way—unless, perhaps, Lovell did.

Jimmy Silver and Co. had had rather a long spin on their jiggers that afternoon. They were now homeward bound: but still at least six or seven miles from Rookwood School.

They had no time to waste: they did not want to be late for call-over at Rookwood. But they had to decide which of those lanes to take. One of them certainly led in the direction of Latcham and Rookwood. The other might have led anywhere.

Lovell put a leg over his machine.

"This way," he repeated. "What are you waiting for?"

Lovell had chosen the lane that bore to the right. Jimmy Silver was disposed to favour the one that bore to the left. Raby and Newcombe had open minds on the subject; except that they regarded it as most probable that Lovell was mistaken. Lovell generally was.

"We can't be sure——" said Jimmy Silver.

"I'm sure!" Lovell pointed out.

"Well, how do you know if you're so jolly sure?" asked Raby.

"Just common-sense, that's all!" answered Lovell. "The way we've been riding, we have to bear a bit to the right to get back to the Latcham road for Rookwood. Well, that lane bears to the right."

"Sure we don't have to bear to the left?" asked Newcome.

"Quite!"

"Well, I was think——" began Jimmy Silver.

"Don't do it," advised Lovell. "Not in your line at all, old man! Just get on your jigger and come on. We're losing time. Six or seven miles to go, and lines if we're late for roll."

"We shan't be in time for roll, if we take the wrong road," said Jimmy Silver, patiently. "Better make sure——"

"Somebody may come along and put us wise," remarked Raby. "See anybody, you chaps?"

Arthur Edward Lovell gave an impatient grunt. The other three scanned the wooded landscape, the lane they had come by, and the two lanes that forked ahead. They had a very pleasant view of delightful Hampshire scenery: brown woods, fields and meadows glowing in the westering sun: deep leafy lanes and high hawthorn hedges. But they had no view of any inhabitant of Hampshire. Nobody was coming along.

"Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anybody coming?" came sarcastically from Arthur Edward Lovell.

Three fellows were nonplussed. The right road would take them back to Rookwood School in ample time to answer *adsum* when Mr. Dalton called the names in hall. The wrong road, obviously, wouldn't! Undoubtedly they were losing time, as Lovell had pointed out, by standing beside their machines at the corner. But taking the wrong road was not likely to save time—quite the reverse, in fact.

Lovell waited a moment or two. But Lovell was not a fellow to wait patiently. Lovell believed in getting things done. Whether he got them done rightly or wrongly was perhaps a minor consideration.

"Now look here, you chaps," said Lovell, "we can't hang about here for ever, waiting for somebody to turn up. This is the road—I'm absolutely certain of that. Well, come on, and don't waste any more time."

"Not till we know the way to go," answered Jimmy.

"I've told you this is the way!"

"Perhaps!"

"No perhaps about it!" said Lovell. "Any chap with a spot of common-sense can find his way anywhere. Leave it to me."

Still no legs were put over machines. Leaving it to Lovell did not seem, to Jimmy and Raby and Newcome, a solution of the problem.

Again they scanned the surrounding landscape for some sign of an inhabitant. Again they scanned it in vain. Well populated county as Hampshire was, the population seemed at the moment to be wholly collected in other quarters.

Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard and he breathed deep. He was impatient to begin with: now he showed signs of losing his temper. Really, it was irritating to a fellow, who was absolutely certain that he knew, to hang about like this.

"Are you coming or not?" hooted Lovell.

"Not till we know——"

"Well, look here," said Lovell. "I've been late for roll twice this week, and Dicky Dalton told me that next time I was late I should be bunged into Extra. I'm not going to be late to-day, while you fellows moon about like a lot of lost sheep. We've got lots of time to get in for roll if we put it on a bit. You chaps may get off with fifty lines if you're late—but it means Extra on Saturday afternoon for me. I'm going on."

"But if that isn't the right road——" said Raby.

"I've said it's the right road!"

"You don't know——" said Newcome.

"I do know!"

"Better wait a bit," said Jimmy Silver. "You see——"

"Rot!" said Lovell, "I'm going on! If you fellows want to get back to Rookwood, follow on. I'm jolly well not going to be bunged into Extra on Saturday because you want to moon about. I'm going!"

"Look here, old chap——"

Snort, from Lovell. He refused to 'look there.' He plumped into his saddle and pushed at the pedals. He whizzed away down the lane that bore to the right. At the same moment, Jimmy Silver caught sight at last of an inhabitant of Hampshire—a ploughman plodding his homeward way across an adjacent meadow.

"Here's somebody coming!" exclaimed Jimmy. And he shouted, "Lovell! Hold on, Lovell! Hold on, will you?"

Lovell did not even hear. He was already out of hearing: and the next moment he was out of sight, whizzing round a curve of the winding lane.

Right or wrong road, Lovell was gone: putting on speed to make up for lost time.

"Oh, the ass!" breathed Jimmy.

"Well, old Lovell always was an ass!" remarked Newcome. "No good expecting a leopard to change his spots."

"May be the right road after all," said Raby, hopefully.

"Not likely, as Lovell thinks it is," said Newcome, shaking his head.

"We'll soon see," said Jimmy. "That chap will be along here in a few minutes."

The ploughman, plodding across the meadow, was heading for the junction of lanes where the three juniors stood with their bikes. They waited for him to come up. He glanced at the three stranded schoolboys, and Jimmy called to him.

"Can you tell us which of these lanes leads to Latcham?" Latcham was the country town near Rookwood School.

"Yes, zur! That un to the left," answered the ploughman. "Six moile to Latcham from here."

"Thanks."

The ploughman, plodding across the meadow, was heading for the junction of another. They knew the way to Rookwood now—it lay to the left. Lovell had taken the lane to the right! He was far beyond reach of recall: and far, too far ahead to be overtaken in a race! Where he would arrive, if he arrived anywhere, was an interesting but unanswerable question. His friends could only hope that, somehow or other, sooner or later, he would succeed in wandering in at Rookwood: though undoubtedly he would be late—very late—for roll!

"Well, come on!" sighed Jimmy Silver. "We know the way now at any rate! Looks like Extra for Lovell on Saturday! Let's get going."

They got going. That winding lane led them to the Latcham road, and they pedalled through Latcham, and whizzed on to Rookwood, and arrived there ten minutes before old Mack closed the gates. And as they went into hall for calling-over, they wondered where Arthur Edward Lovell was, and whether he had yet discovered that he was on the wrong road.

CHAPTER 2

IN THE DARK

CRASH!

Yell!

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Lovell.

He gasped out that ejaculation as he spun off his machine, and landed on the hard, unsympathetic earth.

It was almost as black as a hat in Coombe Lane: and Lovell was riding without a light! In such circumstances a fellow might have expected an accident. Now it had happened.

It was not, from Lovell's point of view, Lovell's fault. It was just rotten luck all round. Fellows going out for an afternoon spin, intending to get back a couple

of hours before dark, naturally did not take the trouble to plug their lamps on their jiggers—at least, Lovell didn't. Owing to that wrong road, which Lovell had so obstinately believed to be the right one, he had not got in before dark—far from it. Falling night had found Lovell miles from Rookwood.

Lovell had followed that wrong road without a doubt for miles and miles. It was inquiry in a village at least twelve miles from Rockwood that had, at long last, apprised him that he was heading for parts unknown. After which, Lovell negotiated cross-country lanes in deepening dusk: and, more by luck than anything else, found himself on the Latcham road after nightfall. He had still several miles to go: and the laws of his native land required him to put on his light. But how was a fellow minus a lamp to put on a light? It simply couldn't be done.

Minus a light, it was up to Lovell to pay due respect to the law by wheeling his machine. But he was already late, not only for roll, but for prep. Walking it meant that he would be late for dormitory also: which meant a terrific row. Lovell unwisely resolved to give the law a miss and chance it.

So he whizzed along the Latcham road in the dark without a light and by great good fortune passed Coombe, the village near Rookwood, without damaging himself or anybody else. In Coombe Lane he had only a quarter of a mile further to go and he put on speed: anxious to get in, anxious to dodge the last risk of a policeman stopping him and inquiring where his light was. But it was a case of more haste and less speed. Only a quarter of a mile from the school—so near yet so far!—came the crash.

Somebody was tramping in the lane—in the dark. Lovell did not see him, not being a cat able to see in the dark. He, whoever he was, did not see Lovell. Had Lovell's lamp been on, the man undoubtedly would have seen it and avoided the collision. As it was he saw nothing till Lovell landed on him fair and square.

The yell that came from the unseen man as he crumpled up woke echoes far and wide. Lovell, unseated by the shock, landed in the lane, breathless and dizzy.

"Oh! Ah! Ooooh! Strike me pink! Woooooh!" came a howling voice from somebody sprawling in the darkness. "Ow! My leg! Ow! My 'ead! Oo's that? Bust me! Ooooh!"

It sounded like a tramp.

Lovell sat up dizzily. He peered about him. Over-arching branches made the spot impenetrably dark. He could see nothing of the man he had knocked over, though he could hear him quite plainly.

"Oh, crumbs! Oh, dear! Oh!" gasped Lovell, "I—I say, I'm sorry." Even Lovell, irritated as he was by the occurrence which delayed him when he was in a hurry, realised that the other party had a grievance. "I say, I'm awfully sorry——"

"Whur's yer light?" came an angry howl.

"I—I—I——" stammered Lovell, still gasping, "I say, I hope you're not hurt!"

"'Urt? Think you can knock a man spinning without 'urting 'im? I'm 'urt all over, blow yer."

Lovell staggered to his feet. He was sorry—really sorry—if the man was hurt. But he had to get to Rookwood.

He groped for a sprawling bike.

His groping hands, in the dark, contacted, not a bike, but a sprawling man. That man seemed to be in a bad temper, which in the circumstances was not wholly surprising. A fist lashed out of the dark, caught Lovell under the chin, and sent him sprawling again.

"Oh!" spluttered Lovell, as he rolled.

Once more he sat up, gasping for breath, his hand to his chin. He had had quite a hard knock and he was no longer feeling sorry that the man was hurt. Indeed, he was feeling inclined to hurt him some more.

He heard the man scrambling up and a sound from the bicycle. The man in the dark apparently was picking up the fallen machine. Why he was taking the trouble to do so Lovell did not know. But it dawned on him as he heard sounds receding.

He bounded up.

"Here! That's my bike! Give me that bike!" shouted Lovell. He rushed forward. "Gimme that bike! That's my bike! Look here——"

His hands swept empty air. Down the lane was a sound of a bike in motion. Lovell rushed after that sound.

It died away! He rushed on, furiously, but came to a halt at last. He stood staring into the darkness that had swallowed up the bike and the tramp.

Evidently the man was not hurt after all, as he was able to ride a bike. No doubt he had had a very unpleasant shock. That certainly did not justify him in his present measures. And he was riding without a light, just as Lovell had been doing! And he was riding fast! He vanished into the night, leaving Lovell gasping and staring.

"Oh!" breathed Lovell.

He could hardly believe it for some minutes. That tramp—that rascal—that bike-thief—had pinched his bike! He had pinched it and was getting away on it! It was almost incredible—and overwhelming! But that was what was happening.

Arthur Edward Lovell stood almost dazed.

His bike gone: that gleaming, highly polished jigger that was the pride of his heart. It was a good bike—a 'Stargleam'—and Lovell took great care of it: all its bright parts shone like silver: it was in apple-pie condition, and—it was gone! Fellows who ride without a light after dark often meet with unpleasant consequences, but the consequences to the hapless Lovell were really overwhelming. This was worse than meeting an inquiring constable, worse than the spill he had had. That indescribable villain had taken advantage of the accident to pinch his bike. His beloved 'Stargleam' had gone!

"Oh," repeated Lovell.

It was fully five minutes before Lovell could make up his mind that there was nothing to be done. The man was gone. Very likely he was an habitual bike-thief;

certainly he had been very quick to seize this chance. In any case, he was gone: and Lovell was left on foot, to plod his way to the school, bike-less.

It was a dismal, dispirited and exasperated Lovell that turned at last in the direction of Rookwood and tramped away. The sooner he reported the matter to Mr. Dalton the better. Dicky Dalton would telephone to the police-station at Latcham—the bike might be recovered—but in the meantime Lovell had to walk it, with feelings that he could not have expressed in words.

He arrived at last and rang, and old Mack let him in.

"Mr. Dalton's study," said old Mack, briefly.

And Lovell went in to explain to his form-master why he had cut calling-over, cut prep, and arrived just in time for dorm.: and to add that his bike had been stolen.

CHAPTER 3

BORROWING A BIKE

JIMMY SILVER shook his head.

"Better not," he advised.

Grunt, from Lovell.

To say 'Better not' to Arthur Edward Lovell, was practically to spur him on. Opposition had that effect on Arthur Edward.

It was the following day.

Lovell of the Classical Fourth was not in a good temper that day. That was natural enough. A fellow who was booked for 'Extra' on Saturday afternoon, and who had in addition, had his bike pinched, could not be expected to look or feel his bonniest. Lovell was sore and disgruntled: all the more so because he guessed that his chums regarded his disasters as largely his own fault.

They were sympathetic about 'Extra' on Saturday. They were deeply concerned about the loss of his bike: and sincerely hoped that the police would be able to trace it. But, at the same time, they seemed to think that Lovell had as good as asked for it.

Lovell had persisted in taking the wrong road, instead of waiting as his friends had done to ascertain the right one. He had ridden after dark without a light, which was not only reckless, but a defiance of the law. He had knocked a man over, and that man had pinched his bike. Jimmy and Raby and Newcome had got home from that spin without taking wrong roads, breaking the law, knocking people over, and losing their jiggers, and really, they could not help thinking that Lovell might have done the same. Tactfully, they did not say so: but Lovell could guess that they thought him to blame somehow, truly sympathetic as they were.

So, at the present moment, Lovell was less inclined than ever to listen to the voice of reason. He was more than ever the fellow who knew best.

After class with Dalton, the 'Fistical Four' had gone down to the bike-shed. The Rookwood First Eleven were playing cricket at Rookham that day: and a good many fellows were going over, after class, to see Bulkeley and his merry men beating Rookham Ramblers, or being beaten by them, as the case might be. Three members of the Co. had bikes available; one hadn't! Lovell might have borrowed a jigger in the Classical Fourth: but, in the circumstances, jiggers were scarce. In fact, every man who owned a bike wanted it: and in all the Classical Fourth there was no jigger for Lovell to borrow. But, as it happened, three bikes were available if not borrowable. Three jiggers, belonging to Tommy Cook, Tommy Dodd, and Tommy Doyle, of the Modern Fourth, were still on the stands. And Lovell had his eye on the jigger that belonged to Tommy Cook. It was not a 'Stargleam,' like his own precious lost machine: but it was a good jigger and Lovell was not long in making up his mind.

"I'm going," he said. "That jigger will suit me! I shall have to shove the saddle up a bit—you fellows needn't wait."

"Better not——"

Grunt!

"Those Modern chaps will be going over to Rookham, like everybody else," said Raby. "There are some Modern men in the first eleven, you know."

"Cook won't lend you his jigger," said Newcombe.

"I'm not going to ask him," said Lovell, coolly. "Rather a lark on those Modern ticks to walk off with a Modern jigger. Ain't they always japing us?"

"Bagging a man's bike isn't a jape," Jimmy Silver pointed out. "Look here, Lovell, you can get over by train——"

"Twice as long," answered Lovell. "I'm bagging Cook's jigger. If the Modern cads don't like it, well, they can lump it."

"Look here, old chap——"

"Rot!"

"But——"

"Rats!"

Lovell, as usual was not to be argued with. It was true that Classicals and Moderns at Rookwood were deadly rivals and foes: and that alarums and excursions between the rivals of Rookwood were rather the rule than the exception. Still, there was a limit: and in the opinion of three members of the Classical Co. bagging a man's bike was not exactly a 'jape'. Lovell took the opposite view: no doubt owing to the fact that he was disgruntled, and the still more important fact that he wanted a bike to get over to Rookham.

Heedless of the opinion of lesser mortals, he opened the tool-bag for a spanner, to put the saddle up. Lovell was the tallest fellow in the Fourth Form, with an ample length of leg.

"You chaps needn't wait," he said. "I'll overtake you fast enough—I can bike your heads off if you come to that."

"Look here, Lovell——"

"Oh, cut off and don't jaw," said Lovell, irritably.

Evidently, there was nothing doing. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome wheeled their machines out, mounted at the gate, and pedalled away. Lovell proceeded to deal with the saddle of Tommy Cook's bike.

Having adjusted it to his satisfaction, he replaced the spanner in the tool-bag and wheeled the machine out of the bike-shed—almost running it into three Modern juniors who were coming in.

Lovell caught his breath. As a Classical man he despised all Modern ticks: but even Lovell was aware that he could not handle three Modern ticks in a bunch, and for a moment he was dismayed. Luckily, it did not occur to Tommy Dodd and Co. that it was a Modern bike that the Classical junior was wheeling out.

"Hallo, going over to Rookham, Lovell?" asked Tommy Dodd, casually.

"Yes—my pals have started already," answered Lovell, carelessly.

"I heard that you'd lost your bike——"

"Oh, I've borrowed one," said Lovell, in the same careless tone, and he ran the machine past the three Moderns, put a leg over it, and whisked out at the gate. He grinned as he shot away.

The three Tommies went into the bike-shed for their machines. Then they stared. Where three jiggers should have been there were only two.

"Here, where's my bike?" exclaimed Tommy Cook, in surprise and wrath. "If some cheeky ass has borrowed my jigger——"

"Lovell!" exclaimed Tommy Dodd.

"Oh, howly mother av Moses!" exclaimed Tommy Doyle. "He said he'd borrowed a bike——"

"My bike!" yelled Tommy Cook. "That Classical tick—my bike! Why, I—I—I'll——" Tommy Cook spluttered with wrath.

"And we could have stopped him——" gasped Tommy Doyle.

"We'll jolly well stop him now!" exclaimed Tommy Dodd. "Get out your jigger—quick! You follow on, Cooky, old man—we'll jolly well get that bike back! Come on, Doyle!"

Almost in the twinkling of an eye Tommy Dodd and Tommy Doyle ran their machines out and mounted. Arthur Edward Lovell was still in sight, going strong down Coombe Lane, heading for the road to Rookham.

"Put it on!" breathed Tommy Dodd.

The two Moderns ground at their pedals. Far in the rear, Tommy Cook followed on foot, in the hope of mounting a recaptured bike later. The cyclists were soon out of sight.

Arthur Edward Lovell glanced back over his shoulder. Perhaps he had rather expected pursuit. Whether he expected it or not, there it was.

Little cared Arthur Edward! He was a good man on a bike, almost half as good as he believed he was. He was not in the least alarmed. Certainly, if the

two Moderns ran him down, he had no chance against the two of them. But they were not going to run him down. So far from being alarmed, Arthur Edward Lovell waved a derisive hand at his pursuers and then drove at his pedals.

He whizzed on. After him whizzed Tommy Dodd and Tommy Doyle, going all out. Lovell had no doubt that he could beat any Modern tick in a bike race. Dodd and Doyle, on the other hand, had no doubt that they could beat any Classical tick. They were going to try their hardest, anyway. Three bikes fairly flew along Coombe Lane, and swept out into the Rookham road, Lovell just keeping his distance ahead. A mile—two miles—along the Rookham road, and Lovell was still the same distance. And it was quite possible that Lovell might have kept just that distance ahead, had he not, glancing back over his shoulder at his pursuers, failed to observe a deep rut in the road just in front of him. His front wheel plunged into the rut, and all that Arthur Edward Lovell knew next was that he was sitting on the grass verge beside the road, with Tommy Cook's bike sprawling across his legs; and Tommy Dodd and Tommy Doyle, coming up like the wind, jumping down and jumping at him.

CHAPTER 4

STRANDED!

ARTHUR EDWARD LOVELL sat in the grass by the Rookham road and gurgled for breath.

He was feeling tired. He was, in fact, feeling completely 'done in.' He had been through a strenuous time.

Dodd and Doyle had recaptured the borrowed bike. But that was not all. They had lingered a few minutes to make it quite clear to Lovell what they thought of a Classical tick who bagged a Modern man's jigger.

Lovell put up a scrap but that only made his last state worse than his first. The two Moderns rolled him over, bumped and rumped and crumpled him, and left him for dead as it were. Then they rode away, Tommy Dodd leading Cook's recaptured bike by the handle-bars.

Lovell for quite a long time could only splutter, in a dizzy and breathless state, feeling as if he had been through a mangle. He needed a rest after that strenuous tussle with the Moderns, and he had plenty of time for one, for he was not thinking of walking it to Rookham. Rookham, and the first eleven match there, had to be washed out. And he was in no hurry to walk back to the school which lay several miles behind him.

So he sat and gasped for breath: and a little later, had the pleasure, or otherwise, of seeing three cheery cyclists coming up the road—Dodd, Doyle and Cook of the Modern Fourth.

Tommy Cook, following on afoot, had met his comrades coming back with his bike: and now the three were riding for Rookham: passing Lovell sitting by the roadside.

They grinned at him as they passed and waved derisive hands. Lovell could only glare at them. He did not feel sufficiently energetic even to heave a turf at them as they whizzed by.

They vanished up the road. Lovell sat where he was, gradually feeling a little better. Several more Rockwood cyclists passed him: Rawson and Erroll and Oswald, of the Classical Fourth, and then Tracy and Howard of the Shell. They stared at Lovell in passing, perhaps wondering why he was sitting there. Arthur Edward could only give them sour looks. Hansom of the Fifth, with a bunch of Fifth-form men, swept by: and then three or four more juniors, Lovell's expression growing sourer and sourer as he watched them pass.

But as yet another Rockwood cyclist came in sight a new idea occurred to him. He got on his feet and waved his hand to Valentine Mornington of the Classical Fourth.

Morny glanced at him and slowed down.

"I say, hold on, Morny," called out Lovell.

Morny reluctantly held on, putting one foot to the ground.

"What's up?" he asked. "Cut it short! I'm late—spot of trouble with a tyre. I've got to put it on, if I'm going to see anything of the cricket at Rookham."

"You're going to Rookham?"

"Yes, yes."

"Well, look here, what about giving me a lift behind you on your bike?" asked Lovell. "I could get a foot on the foot-rest, and hold to your shoulders, and——"

Mornington, staring at him, burst into a laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell did not laugh. He frowned: or rather, scowled.

"What the thump are you cackling at?" he demanded, gruffly.

"Your little joke, old scout."

"I'm not joking——"

"You are!" said Morny, laughing.

"Look here, will you give me a lift on your bike or not?" roared Lovell.

Morny continued to chuckle. Lovell was heavy. Pulling his weight up hill and down dale, when he was in a hurry, did not seem to appeal to Morny, somehow.

"Not!" he answered, cheerily.

And he shot onward.

Arthur Edward Lovell breathed hard. Really, it was asking rather a lot: but it had been the last and only chance of getting to Rookham. Had Jimmy Silver or Raby or Newcombe been available, no doubt they would have played up. But the Co. were at Rookham by that time, happily unaware of Lovell's misadventures with a borrowed bike, and never dreaming how he was stranded.

He leaned on a wayside tree, with his hands in his pockets, surveying the landscape with a jaundiced eye.

There was nothing for it but to walk back to the school. Slowly, sadly, Arthur Edward Lovell started at last on the home-trail. At a little distance down the road was a stile, giving access to a footpath across the fields, which saved a considerable part of the walk. Lovell headed for the stile to take the footpath.

A man was seated on the top bar, smoking a cigarette, in the shade of the trees. A bicycle leaned against the stile. Lovell glanced at it as he came up. It was as handsome a jigger as his own lost 'Stargleam,' though very different in appearance. Lovell's lost bike shone like silver: but this machine was black from end to end: painted as black as the ace of spades.

Then he glanced at the man on the stile, rather wondering to see so handsome a jigger in possession of so shabby an owner. The man was undoubtedly very shabby. He had a rather battered bowler hat cocked on one side of a rather greasy head and a cigarette in his mouth. Judging by his hands and face, soap was beyond his means: but evidently he could afford cigarettes, for six or seven stumps lay in the grass, with as many burnt matches. He had sharp little beady eyes, which fixed rather furtively on the Rookwood junior. He touched his hat very civilly.

"Had a tumble, sir?" he asked.

"Eh! Oh! No! Not exactly," answered Lovell.

"I see you pass on a bike, sir, some time back," said the man on the stile. "Not an accident, sir, I 'ope?"

"Oh! No!"

"You look a bit dusty, sir—thought p'raps you'd 'ad a spill. If anything's 'appened to the bike, sir, I'd lend a 'and and willing—I'm in the trade, you see, sir, 'Arry 'Arris, second-hand cycles and repairs, that's me, sir. I'm on my way to Rookham now to sell that there bike." He nodded towards the machine leaning on the stile. "Good machine that, sir—p'raps you know something about bikes?"

"Oh! Yes!" said Lovell.

And he came to a halt at the stile.

CHAPTER 5

A BIKE AT A BARGAIN!

JIMMY SILVER and Raby and Newcome put up their bikes in the bike-shed and went to the House rather wondering what had become of Lovell. They had watched the wind-up of the cricket match at Rookham, and had the satisfaction of seeing Bulkeley's men beat the Ramblers by a handsome margin of runs. But they had seen nothing of Arthur Edward Lovell.

There had been a big crowd on the Ramblers' ground, so it was not surprising that they had missed him there, if he had arrived later. But he was not to be seen among the crowd of Rookwood men coming back after the match: and two or three fellows whom they had asked had replied that they had seen Lovell sitting by the roadside, apparently admiring the scenery. Which was a little puzzling.

"Looks as if he never came after all," remarked Jimmy Silver. "Must have started, as Oswald and two or three other chaps seem to have seen him on the road. Spill, perhaps."

"Even Lovell couldn't have taken the wrong road, going to Rookham," remarked Newcome, thoughtfully. "Of course, if there was a wrong road handy, Lovell would take it."

"Jump at it!" agreed Raby.

"Here, Muffin!" Jimmy Silver called to Tubby Muffin in the quad. "Seen Lovell?"

Tubby grinned.

"Yes! He looked tired when he came in. Dusty all over, too. I asked him if he'd had a fall and he only called me names."

"Well, he's in," said Jimmy, as they went into the House. "He's got back, anyhow, whatever's happened."

They went up to the end study to look for Lovell there, and there they found him.

Arthur Edward was seated at the study table, and seemed busy. He had a pen in his hand, a sheet of paper before him, and a wrinkle of thought on his brow. Apparently he was engaged in some sort of arithmetic. He glanced up as the three came in.

"Oh! You fellows," he said, absently. And he wrinkled his brow again over his arithmetic.

"Did you get to Rookham?" asked Jimmy. "We never saw anything of you there."

"Oh! No! Those Modern cads got the bike away from me, and I was stranded on the road. I walked back."

Three fellows exchanged a smile: but they tactfully forbore to make any remark. Lovell's bright idea of bagging a Modern tick's bike had, evidently, not worked out.

They rather expected Lovell to inquire how the Rookham match had gone. But his mind seemed full of other matters. The figures he had been scrawling on the paper seemed to occupy his attention.

"What's that?" asked Raby. "Something for Dalton?"

"Oh, no. I'm just making some calculations, that's all."

Again Lovell wrinkled his brows. He was no whale at arithmetic. He had been known to get simple sums right. But it had not often happened.

His three chums regarded him curiously. It was utterly unlike Lovell to touch anything of an arithmetical nature, if he could help it. Yet here he was at it of his own accord.

"But what——" asked Newcome.

"Well, look here," said Lovell, "I've got to raise some money. I've paid the man ten shillings on account—it was all I had with me——"

"What man?"

"I'll tell you in a minute: but I want to get this clear. I've got to get hold of four pounds ten somehow."

"Four pounds ten shillings!" said Jimmy, staring. It was a large sum for a Fourth-form junior to contemplate.

"Just that," said Lovell.

"But what the dickens——" asked Raby.

"I've got half a crown," went on Lovell. "Oswald owes me five bob, which I can collect. I lent Towny two bob—that's all right. I can borrow a pound from Mornington—he's got lots. I think I can bank on that. He's rather a jeering ass, but he ain't mean. That's as far as I've got. Well, half a crown, and five bob, and two bob, and a pound—that's one pound twelve and six——"

"Eh?"

"One pound twelve and six——"

"Is it?" gasped Jimmy Silver, while Raby and Newcome grinned.

"Well, isn't it?" demanded Lovell, warmly. "Think I can't do simple arithmetic?" He gave a hurried glance at his scrawled paper. "I—I mean, it's one pound eleven and six—that's it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows have come into the study to cackle like a lot of hens while I'm working this out, you'd better clear," said Lovell, gruffly. "It will be call-over soon——"

"Why not make it one pound nine and six?" inquired Newcome, blandly.

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"That's a bit nearer the mark, old chap," said Raby.

"Rot!" said Lovell.

However, he went over his calculations once more, with a wrinkled brow and an air of deep concentration. Then he looked up, frowning.

"I mean one pound nine and six," he said, "and there's nothing to cackle at, that I can see. How much can you fellows lend me?"

"But what's it all about?" asked Jimmy Silver. "If you've got to raise the wind, old man, you can rely on your pals. But what——"

"It's a bargain," explained Lovell. "A big bargain. Practically the chance of a lifetime."

"But what——"

"A fellow has to have a bike," said Lovell. "From what they said at the police-station, how much chance do you think I have of ever seeing my 'Stargleam' again?"

His chums did not answer that. As a matter of fact, they did not suppose that Lovell had a ghost of a chance of ever seeing his 'Stargleam' again. The police,

of course, would take the matter up, and do the best they could: but as Lovell had not even seen the man who had stolen his bike, and had not the remotest idea of a description of him, prospects could not be considered hopeful. A stolen bike was easy to disguise with a new coat of paint, and it was probably, before this, as hard to identify as the man who had pinched it. Possibly it was still in the neighbourhood, if the bike-thief happened to be a local character. But that was not much to go upon.

"You don't think they'll get it back for me?" said Lovell.

"Well," said Jimmy, "they'll try, of course. But——"

"That's how it stands," said Lovell. "That villain, whoever he was, got away with my bike and it's a goner. Well, that bike cost my pater fifteen guineas: and I just can't ask him for a new one. He might even think it was my own fault I lost it——"

"Oh! Might he?" gasped Jimmy.

"Well, I was riding after dark without a light, and that's how it happened, you know. I wasn't really to blame as it couldn't be helped—but people might not see that," said Lovell, shaking his head. "The fact is, if I asked the pater for a new one he would be more likely to hand me a lot of jaw than a new bike. Besides, it would be rather thick sticking him for a new bike only a few months after he stood me that 'Stargleam.' And as it happens, I can get a second-hand bike to see me through, a first-class machine, practically as good as my old 'Stargleam,' and it's only five pounds."

Lovell's chums began to understand what the unaccustomed arithmetic was about.

"It's a bargain," went on Lovell, "a real genuine bargain."

"Must be, if it's as good as your old 'Stargleam,' for five pounds," said Jimmy Silver. "You've looked it over, of course?"

"I'm not exactly a fool!" said Lovell.

"Not?" asked Newcome.

"Look here, Newcome——"

"It looks like a jolly good bargain, from what you say, Lovell," interrupted Jimmy Silver, hastily, "if you've tried it——"

"Of course I have! The man asked me to give it a test, and I ran it up and down the Rookham road and it ran just like silk," said Lovell, impressively. "So far as I could tell, it was just as good as my old 'Stargleam,' and I fancy I know something about bikes. Well, Harris——"

"Who's Harris?"

"That's the man who's selling it. Harris is letting it go for five pounds—and it's dirt cheap at the price. He deals in second-hand bikes and can't afford to keep stock on his hands for long—that's how it is, as he explained to me. Well, I jolly well examined the bike and tested it on the road, and it was all he said, and more. I'm not losing a chance like that—it's the biggest bargain in jiggers ever at five quid."

Lovell's chums had to agree to that. Five pounds was a low price for a jigger

as good as a fifteen-guinea 'Stargleam': that could not be doubted. And in the matter of bikes, at least, Lovell's judgment was reliable. He did know all about bikes.

"Well, that sounds all right," conceded Jimmy Silver, "and if you've made up your mind, old chap——"

"I jolly well have," said Lovell. "I had a ten-bob note, and I paid it to Harris as a sort of deposit. I've got his receipt here."

Lovell pointed to a rather grubby paper, apparently a leaf torn from a pocket-book. His chums glanced at it. On it was written in pencil:

Received ten shilings on account.
Sined,
Enry Arris.

"That's leaves four pounds ten shillings," said Lovell. "Well, I've got, or as good as got, one pound eleven and six—I mean one pound nine and six. I've got to raise the rest, to make up four pounds ten, that will be three pounds and eight—er—three pounds and six——"

"Not quite!" grinned Newcome.

"Perhaps you can do simple arithmetic better than I can, Arthur Newcome," said Lovell, with a snort.

"No perhaps about it, old bean. One pound nine and six from four pounds ten shillings leaves three pounds and sixpence."

"Well, if it does, so much the better," grunted Lovell. "You fellows will have to lend me three pounds—I dare say I can manage the sixpence."

Jimmy Silver whistled.

"It won't be easy, old man," he said. "But if you're keen on that bike, we shall have to scrounge it somehow. Next week——"

"Next week isn't much use," said Lovell. "Harris is bringing the bike here to-morrow, after class."

"Well, quids don't grow on every bush, you know," said Raby. "Precious few juniors in the studies at Rookwood that could raise four pounds ten all of a sudden."

Lovell frowned.

"I'm not a chap to ask favours, as a rule," he said, stiffly. "I'm asking you, as my pals, to help me through this. I simply can't let a bargain like that go. But if you'd rather not——"

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Raby. "We'll help all we can. Hallo, there's the bell—that's calling-over."

"Oh, bother the bell," said Lovell, irritably. "I want to get this worked out. I suppose we'd better go down, though."

"Sort of," grinned Newcome.

And the 'Fistical Four' went down to hall for calling-over: Lovell a little worried over the problem of raising the wind, but tremendously bucked at having secured such a bargain in bikes: and his chums wondering how on earth they were going to raise a pound each to lend him in order to secure that big bargain.

CHAPTER 6

DOUBTING THOMASES!

"CONTIGUERE omnes intentique ora tenebant——"

"For goodness sake," said Lovell, "chuck it."

"Prep.! you know," murmured Jimmy Silver.

"Blow prep.," said Lovell, irritably.

"What about con with Dalton to-morrow?" asked Raby.

"Blow Dalton, and con," said Lovell. "I think you fellows might talk sense for once."

It was prep. in the Classical Fourth. In the end study, Jimmy Silver and Co. sat round the table, with a section of the second book of the *Æneid* to prepare. Lovell, never very keen on prep., was giving it a miss: passing it by as if it did not matter: as, indeed, it didn't, in comparison with that wonderful bargain in bikes.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome, while duly interested in the wonderful bargain and quite sympathetic on the subject, nevertheless had to remember construe in class in the morning. Lovell eyed them reproachfully and impatiently.

"I've told you that Harris is bringing the bike here to-morrow," he said. "I've got to pay for it when he does. It's not so jolly easy to work it out—without bothering about that rot——"

"We'll talk it over after prep.," said Newcome.

"We'll talk it over now," said Lovell.

"But look here——"

"I can scrounge one pound nine and six—say, one pound ten," said Lovell, unheeding, "if you fellows can shell out a pound each, that will do it. But can you?"

"Um!" said Jimmy Silver. "I've got six shillings."

"I've got three," said Newcome.

"I've got ninepence," said Raby.

"That's nine and ninepence," said Lovell, "Say ten! Oh, gum! That means two pound ten from somewhere else. It wants thinking out—if you're not so keen on prep.!" added Lovell with scorn.

Jimmy Silver sighed. He was not exactly keen on prep.; but he did not want to hand out howlers like Lovell in class. But 'Uncle James' of Rookwood was always patient.

"Well, we shall have to scrounge it somehow," he said, "if the man won't wait for his money. But look here, Lovell, any cycle-dealer will keep a machine for a chap with a deposit paid. Make the deposit up to two pounds, say, and ask him to leave it over till next week——"

"Harris told me that he can't afford to carry stock, that's why he sells second-hand jiggers at cut prices. That machine's well worth a tenner second-hand, and I'm getting it for five. If I don't buy he will sell it somewhere else—he was on his way to Rookham to sell it, in fact, when I met him, but he agreed to hold it over till to-morrow."

"Might ask him, at any rate," said Raby.

"How can I ask him when I shan't see him till he comes along with the jigger to-morrow afternoon?" said Lovell, irritably.

"You know where he lives, I suppose?"

"How should I know where he lives?"

"Well, don't you?" asked Raby, staring.

"Of course I don't, as I never asked him."

Three fellows, quite forgetful of prep., stared across the study table at Arthur Edward Lovell. So far Lovell's chums had taken it for granted that Lovell was buying that bike at some establishment where second-hand bikes were dealt in. Evidently they had taken too much for granted.

"I don't quite make this out, Lovell," said Jimmy Silver. "If you don't know where Harris lives——"

"Haven't I said I don't?"

"Then how the dickens did you get in touch with him at all, and know that he had a bike to sell?"

"I met him on the Rookham road, after those Modern cads stranded me," explained Lovell. "I was walking back and passed him sitting on the stile of Giles's pasture. He'd seen me pass him on a bike, and then saw me walking back, and thought I'd had a spill, and offered to help with the jigger if it needed it, being in the cycle trade. Jolly civil of him, I thought. Then when he mentioned he was taking that bike to Rookham to sell it——"

"But——"

"I was interested, of course, as I want a bike," said Lovell. "I saw at a glance that it was a first-class jigger. When he told me he was asking five quid for it, of course, I made up my mind at once. It was the chance of a lifetime."

"But——" exclaimed Raby.

"Blessed if I know what you're butting about?" said Lovell, crossly. "Think I don't know a good bike when I see one?"

"I dare say the bike's all right. But——"

"You don't know the man?" exclaimed Jimmy. "Had you ever seen him before?"

"Not that I know of."

"You're going to buy a bike for five pounds from a stranger that you've never seen before?" asked Newcome.

"Why not?"

"And you've paid him ten bob on account?" exclaimed Raby.

"That was all I had about me."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"But, my dear chap——" said Jimmy.

Lovell stared from one to another, more and more irritated.

"What the thump are you looking like a lot of moulting owls for?" he demanded.

"What's the matter? I tell you it's a splendid jigger—as good as my old 'Stargleam,' or jolly near—I tried it out on the road——"

"How do you know it was his to sell?" asked Newcome.

Lovell stared at him.

"Gone crackers?" he asked. "I suppose the bike was his, as he was selling it. Think he'd be selling somebody else's bike?"

"How do you know he hadn't just pinched it from outside a gate?"

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"Look here, Lovell," said Jimmy Silver, quietly, "the man may be all right——"

"Of course he's all right," snapped Lovell.

"But he's a stranger to you, you've never seen him before, you don't even know where he lives. You simply can't buy a bike from a perfect stranger like that——"

"Can't I?" said Lovell.

"It's not sense," urged Jimmy. "There are plenty of bike-thieves about, and I suppose they must sell the bikes they pinch."

"They look for mugs to sell them to," remarked Newcome.

Lovell breathed hard.

"Let's have this clear," he said. "I've struck a marvellous bargain just when I want a bike. I know it won't be easy for you fellows to help me out with the cash. If that's what's worrying you, put it plain, and don't start a lot of silly difficulties for nothing. Are you going to scrape up that three quid or not——"

"If the man's genuine——" began Raby.

"I don't want any more of that," interrupted Lovell. "I fancy I know my way about and I don't want teaching. You'll see that the man's genuine enough when he wheels in that bike to-morrow."

"When!" murmured Newcome.

Lovell glared.

"Perhaps you think he won't turn up with the bike at all?" he bawled, in a voice audible far beyond the walls of the end study.

Newcome shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't think—I know," he answered. "Honest bike-dealers don't do their business on a stile without mentioning their address. That man, whoever he is, and whatever his name may be——"

"His name's Harris."

"He told you so——"

"Yes, he did."

"Then I expect it isn't Harris——"

"Look here, Newcome——"

"That man, whatever his name is, has got ten bob out of you," said Newcome. "He won't come within ten miles of Rookwood with that bike. He'll be too busy looking for another mug to get ten bob out of."

Lovell rose from the table. His face was crimson with wrath.

"So that's it, is it?" he said. "You fellows think the same, I dare say?" He glared at Jimmy and Raby.

"Looks like it, to me," admitted Jimmy.

"And to me," said Raby, with a nod.

"All right, then," said Lovell, "leave it at that. I'm a mug, and I've been taken in by a diddler—all right! Keep your three quid, if you've got it—I'll raise it somewhere outside this study, and thank you for nothing."

Arthur Edward Lovell tramped across to the door.

"Hold on, old man," said Jimmy. "Prep., you know—look here, Lovell, you ass, you can't cut prep.——"

Lovell did not answer. Whether he could cut prep. or not, he was going to! He tramped out of the end study and shut the door after him with a bang.

Jimmy Silver and Co. looked at one another.

"That ass will get into a row, if a pre. spots him out of the studies in prep.," said Newcome.

"Anyhow, this lets us out," said Raby. "I suppose we could borrow the three quids, scrounging up and down the form: but it won't be wanted, as ten to one the man was only spoofing Lovell and won't turn up at all."

Jimmy Silver nodded. And the three resumed prep. Lovell had no doubts: he was, as usual, convinced that he was the fellow who knew. But none of his chums had any expectation of seeing Mr. Harris turn up on the morrow with that bargain in bikes.

CHAPTER 7

MR. HARRIS TURNS UP

"Who's that?"

Arthur Edward Lovell smiled.

He could afford to smile!

"That's Harris," he answered, carelessly.

"Oh!" ejaculated three fellows together.

It was after class the following day. The 'Fistical Four' were gathered at the side-gate near the bike-shed. It was the appointed hour when Mr. Harris, cycle-dealer of no known address, was due to arrive with the bargain in bikes.

Only Arthur Edward Lovell expected to see him.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome admitted that it was possible. But they did not think it likely. The whole thing seemed to them altogether too fishy. A fellow who would hand ten shillings to a stranger, nothing doubting, was a fellow to be diddled: and there was little doubt in the minds of Lovell's chums that he had been 'done' by a 'diddler.' So three faces registered surprise when a man was seen coming up the road on an all-black bike and Lovell announced that it was Harris.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome exchanged glances, and then fixed their eyes on the approaching man.

He was a stranger to them, but Lovell, of course, knew him at once. It was the Mr. Harris he had met at the stile on the Rookham road. He was riding the all-black bicycle which, in spite of its low price, was as good a jigger as Lovell's own lost 'Stargleam.' It was natural for Lovell to smile! He was amused by the expressions on the faces of his friends. Three doubting Thomases had to be convinced now. For here was Harris!

The Co. scanned the man and did not like his looks very much. His shifty eyes seemed very watchful under his battered bowler hat, cocked aslant on his greasy head, and he looked as much as ever in want of hot water and soap. Still, here he was, with the bike!

"So that's Harris," said Jimmy Silver.

"That's Harris," assented Lovell.

"And that's the bike?" asked Raby.

"That's the bike!"

"Looks a good jigger," said Newcome.

"Glad you can see it," said Lovell. "I fancy I know something about bikes. Of course, it may be only a fancy," added Lovell, sarcastically, "you fellows seem to think that I'm a mug to be diddled by the first spoofer that blows along. Well, here's Harris: and you can look at the bike when he comes up, and see for yourselves. You'll think it cheap at five quid."

The Co., undoubtedly, were surprised to see Mr. Harris. Possibly they were a little disconcerted also. Feeling bound to stand by Lovell, if the bike did unexpectedly turn up, they had been busy that day 'scrounging' the three pounds that was required to make up the necessary sum. They had succeeded: and now they owed money up and down the form, which was a mortgage on their resources for some time to come. If Mr. Harris had failed to turn up, that cash could have been returned to the lenders, and nobody would have been a penny the worse. Except for Lovell himself. His ten shillings would not have been seen again. Now, of

course, it would be wanted. However, they were going to stand by Lovell and see him through. Certainly they considered it a very rash proceeding to buy a bike from a perfect stranger without even knowing his address. But that was Lovell's business, if he chose so to do. Arguing with Arthur Edward Lovell produced the same effect as water on a duck. The more his friends fancied that he was in the wrong, the more Arthur Edward was convinced that he was in the right. So the Co. did not waste any more breath in argument.

Mr. Harris rode the bike up to the gate, jumped down and touched his battered bowler to the four Rookwood fellows.

"'Ere you are, sir!" he said, addressing Lovell. "Jest on time, sir. And 'ere's the jigger, sir, and I don't mind saying that you're getting a bargain in that there jigger, sir."

Lovell nodded and smiled.

"Let's have a look at it," said Jimmy Silver.

"Look at it all you like, sir," said Mr. Harris, affably. "You'll find that it's a first-class machine, sir."

"Looks like it," admitted Jimmy.

"And it's jest what it looks, sir! Your friend's getting a bargain in that bike, sir."

"Don't I know it," said Lovell, cheerfully. "You fellows look at it—you'll find it all right."

"P'raps you'd like me to make out the receipt, sir, while your friends is looking at it," suggested Mr. Harris. Apparently he did not want to lose time.

"Go ahead," said Lovell.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome all looked at the bike very carefully.

Their first impression had been that Mr. Harris was some 'diddler' dealing with a mug, and that having extracted ten shillings from Lovell he intended that to be the end of the transaction. That impression had turned out to be erroneous: Mr. Harris had turned up with the machine, and was waiting to receive the balance of four pounds ten shillings. So, in spite of Lovell's extensive knowledge of the subject, they wouldn't have been surprised to find the bike more or less of a crock, specially brightened up to impose on a 'mug.' But it needed hardly more than a glance to ascertain that that was not the case.

Arthur Edward Lovell might be an ass in some respects, at least in the opinion of his friends, but he did know a good bike when he saw one. It was a first-class machine, fully the equal of Lovell's lost 'Stargleam.' That it was a big bargain at five pounds admitted of no question.

"O.K.," said Raby, with a nod.

"Who'd have thought it?" murmured Newcome. "It's a jolly good jigger, and cheap at the price! Lovell's got hold of a good thing."

"Topping," said Jimmy Silver. "It's practically Lovell's old 'Stargleam' over again! The bike's all right."

"Can't see the make—it's been painted out," said Raby. "But I shouldn't wonder if it was a 'Stargleam' like Lovell's old jigger."

"Here, Jimmy," called out Lovell.

And Jimmy turned from examining the bike. Mr. Harris had made out the receipt on a leaf of his pocket-book, and all that remained was to hand Mr. Harris the sum of four pounds ten shillings.

Lovell had in his hand the thirty shillings he had raised from his own resources. Jimmy proceeded to sort out the three pounds that had been 'scrounged' up and down the Classical Fourth. He could not help noting how greedily Mr. Harris's shifty eyes glinted at the money.

He could not help feeling a misgiving. Mr. Harris's looks did not inspire confidence: and it was, in Jimmy's opinion, not merely rash, but absolutely fatheaded, to buy a bike from a stranger, who for all the Rookwood juniors knew might be a bike-thief disposing of his plunder. But Lovell was not prepared to hear a word on that subject: so Jimmy did not waste words on it. He handed over the three pounds to Lovell, who handed the money to Mr. Harris in exchange for the receipt.



"You won't be sorry you bought that bike, sir," he said.

Mr. Harris touched his hat very affably.

"You won't be sorry you bought that bike, sir," he said. "You'll be satisfied with that there bike."

"I'm sure of it," said Lovell.

And Mr. Harris took himself off, leaving Arthur Edward Lovell in possession of that bargain in bikes, and feeling extremely pleased with himself, with the bike, with Mr. Harris, and with things generally. He was in debt to the tune of four pounds, which was likely to put paid to his pocket-money and tips from affectionate relatives for some time to come. But he was in possession of a bike which was as good as his lost 'Starglean' over again: and in addition, he had proved to his doubting friends how right he was and how wrong they were. Altogether, Arthur Edward Lovell felt that he had reason to be pleased: and in fact his satisfaction knew no bounds.

But——

CHAPTER 8

UNEXPECTED!

"OH!" ejaculated Lovell.

He was startled.

Startled, indeed, is hardly the word. He was so amazed that he almost fell down. His eyes seemed to pop from his head.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome looked at him. What was the matter with Lovell, they could not guess. But only too plainly, something was the matter with him.

Lovell had opened the saddle-bag, and taken out a rag therefrom to wipe off some dust that the bike had collected on its way to Rookwood. Lovell was a particular fellow with bikes. He unfolded that somewhat oily rag from the saddle-bag and was about to wipe off the dust when suddenly he ejaculated, and, holding the rag up in the air, stared at it with popping eyes. A fellow who had suddenly seen a ghost could not have been more startled: but what there could possibly be in a cleaning-rag to startle him to such an extent was a mystery to his friends.

"Oh!" repeated Lovell.

"What——" asked Jimmy Silver, blankly.

"That—that—that rag——" Lovell's voice was almost faint. "L-look at it! Look at it! Oh!"

His friends looked at it. Having looked at it, they noted that it was not the usual sort of cleaning-rag that was found in a cycle-bag, but an old worn handkerchief that had been devoted to the purpose. But in that so far as they could see, there

was nothing remarkably out of the common, certainly nothing to produce such a startling effect on Lovell.

"Well?" said Raby.

"What the dickens——" asked Newcome.

"It—it—it's an old hanky——" stammered Lovell.

"I can see that," said Jimmy Silver. "Whoever owned that bike used an old hanky for a cleaning-rag. What about it? You used an old hanky for a cleaning rag on your 'Stargleam.'"

"It—it—it——" Lovell seemed to articulate with difficulty.

"It's what?"

"It's the same rag!"

"WHAT!"

Three fellows jumped.

"It—it—it's got my initials in the corner—look!"

They looked! They gazed! They stared! Undoubtedly, in the corner of that old disused hanky, used as a cleaning-rag for a bike, there were the initials: A.E.L. Amazedly they realised that the cleaning-rag appertaining to that bargain in bikes was the same cleaning-rag that had been packed in the saddle-bag of Lovell's lost 'Stargleam.' There could be no mistake about it—and it was no wonder that Lovell was startled. His friends were startled, too!

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Oh!" repeated Raby and Newcome, like echoes.

"How—how—how did it get there?" asked Lovell, faintly. He hardly needed to ask the question: for already a dreadful suspicion was forcing itself into his mind.

That bike, excepting that it was newly painted all black, was Lovell's lost 'Stargleam' over again! And he had found his own cleaning-rag—that soiled hanky—in the saddle-bag!

"Oh!" repeated Jimmy Silver. "Oh, my only summer hat! Look here, Lovell, what was the number of your old bike?"

"2244642!" answered Lovell.

Jimmy pounced on the bike and examined it for the number. Raby and Newcome gazed at him breathlessly—Lovell almost beseechingly. Lovell wanted him to read out any number but 2244642. That was really too much!

But it was that very number that Jimmy read out:

"2244642!" he said.

"Oh!" almost moaned Lovell.

"Your own bike!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Lovell's own bike!" said Raby. "Oh, crikey! That fellow who calls himself Harris was the man Lovell ran into the other night, and who pinched his bike."

"And gave it a coat of black paint before he looked for a mug to sell it to!" said Newcome. "Oh, scissors! He never knew Lovell, as he never saw him in the dark that night——"

"And Lovell never knew him," said Raby. "Harris is the man who pinched the 'Stargleam' and he's sold it back to Lovell for five pounds."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Oh, holy smoke!"

Lovell stood speechless. It was not to be doubted now. That bargain in bikes was his own jigger—Mr. Harris was the bike-thief who had cut off on it—and, having disguised its appearance, Mr. Harris had been looking for a 'mug' to buy it: and Arthur Edward Lovell had been the mug! And Mr. Harris had walked off with the cash Arthur Edward had paid him for his own bike!

The expression on Arthur Edward Lovell's face was really extraordinary. Speech failed him. But he found his voice at last:

"He—he—he's not been gone ten minutes! I'll—I'll get after him—I'll—I'll—I'll——" Lovell did not state further what he would do if he caught Mr. Harris. He hurled himself on the bike, and tore away in the direction Mr. Harris had taken ten minutes ago.

And Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome, like the good pals they were, did not laugh till he was out of hearing.

Then they yelled.

* * *

A TIRED and dusty Lovell came back just in time for calling-over—without having found Mr. Harris. And for days and days afterwards, any fellow in the Classical Fourth who thought it amusing to see Arthur Edward Lovell go off at the deep end, had only to mention that Bargain in Bikes.