

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE AFTERMATH

Bad news spreads quickly. By the quarter to eleven interval next day the facts concerning Wyatt and Mr. Wain were public property. Mike, as an actual spectator of the drama, was in great request as an informant. As he told the story to a group of sympathisers outside the school shop, Burgess came up, his eyes rolling in a fine frenzy.

"Anybody seen young--oh, here you are. What's all this about Jimmy Wyatt? They're saying he's been sacked, or some rot."

[Illustration: "WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT JIMMY WYATT?"]

"So he has--at least, he's got to leave."

"What? When?"

"He's left already. He isn't coming to school again."

Burgess's first thought, as befitted a good cricket captain, was for his team.

"And the Ripton match on Saturday!"

Nobody seemed to have anything except silent sympathy at his command.

"Dash the man! Silly ass! What did he want to do it for! Poor old Jimmy, though!" he added after a pause. "What rot for him!"

"Beastly," agreed Mike.

"All the same," continued Burgess, with a return to the austere manner of the captain of cricket, "he might have chucked playing the goat till after the Ripton match. Look here, young Jackson, you'll turn out for fielding with the first this afternoon. You'll play on Saturday."

"All right," said Mike, without enthusiasm. The Wyatt disaster was too recent for him to feel much pleasure at playing against Ripton vice his friend, withdrawn.

Bob was the next to interview him. They met in the cloisters.

"Hullo, Mike!" said Bob. "I say, what's all this about Wyatt?"

"Wain caught him getting back into the dorm. last night after Neville-Smith's, and he's taken him away from the school."

"What's he going to do? Going into that bank straight away?"

"Yes. You know, that's the part he bars most. He'd have been leaving anyhow in a fortnight, you see; only it's awful rot for a chap like Wyatt to have to go and froust in a bank for the rest of his life."

"He'll find it rather a change, I expect. I suppose you won't be seeing him before he goes?"

"I shouldn't think so. Not unless he comes to the dorm. during the night. He's sleeping over in Wain's part of the house, but I shouldn't be surprised if he nipped out after Wain has gone to bed. Hope he does, anyway."

"I should like to say good-bye. But I don't suppose it'll be possible."

They separated in the direction of their respective form-rooms. Mike felt bitter and disappointed at the way the news had been received. Wyatt was his best friend, his pal; and it offended him that the school should take the tidings of his departure as they had done. Most of them who had come to him for information had expressed a sort of sympathy with the absent hero of his story, but the chief sensation seemed to be one of pleasurable excitement at the fact that something big had happened to break the monotony of school routine. They treated the thing much as they would have treated the announcement that a record score had been made in first-class cricket. The school was not so much regretful as comfortably thrilled. And Burgess had actually

cursed before sympathising. Mike felt resentful towards Burgess. As a matter of fact, the cricket captain wrote a letter to Wyatt during preparation that night which would have satisfied even Mike's sense of what was fit. But Mike had no opportunity of learning this.

There was, however, one exception to the general rule, one member of the school who did not treat the episode as if it were merely an interesting and impersonal item of sensational news. Neville-Smith heard of what had happened towards the end of the interval, and rushed off instantly in search of Mike. He was too late to catch him before he went to his form-room, so he waited for him at half-past twelve, when the bell rang for the end of morning school.

"I say, Jackson, is this true about old Wyatt?"

Mike nodded.

"What happened?"

Mike related the story for the sixteenth time. It was a melancholy pleasure to have found a listener who heard the tale in the right spirit. There was no doubt about Neville-Smith's interest and sympathy. He was silent for a moment after Mike had finished.

"It was all my fault," he said at length. "If it hadn't been for me, this wouldn't have happened. What a fool I was to ask him to my place!

I might have known he would be caught."

"Oh, I don't know," said Mike.

"It was absolutely my fault."

Mike was not equal to the task of soothing Neville-Smith's wounded conscience. He did not attempt it. They walked on without further conversation till they reached Wain's gate, where Mike left him. Neville-Smith proceeded on his way, plunged in meditation.

The result of which meditation was that Burgess got a second shock before the day was out. Bob, going over to the nets rather late in the afternoon, came upon the captain of cricket standing apart from his fellow men with an expression on his face that spoke of mental upheavals on a vast scale.

"What's up?" asked Bob.

"Nothing much," said Burgess, with a forced and grisly calm. "Only that, as far as I can see, we shall play Ripton on Saturday with a sort of second eleven. You don't happen to have got sacked or anything, by the way, do you?"

"What's happened now?"

"Neville-Smith. In extra on Saturday. That's all. Only our first- and second-change bowlers out of the team for the Ripton match in one day. I suppose by to-morrow half the others'll have gone, and we shall take the field on Saturday with a scratch side of kids from the Junior School."

"Neville-Smith! Why, what's he been doing?"

"Apparently he gave a sort of supper to celebrate his getting his first, and it was while coming back from that that Wyatt got collared. Well, I'm blowed if Neville-Smith doesn't toddle off to the Old Man after school to-day and tell him the whole yarn! Said it was all his fault. What rot! Sort of thing that might have happened to any one. If Wyatt hadn't gone to him, he'd probably have gone out somewhere else."

"And the Old Man shoved him in extra?"

"Next two Saturdays."

"Are Ripton strong this year?" asked Bob, for lack of anything better to say.

"Very, from all accounts. They whacked the M.C.C. Jolly hot team of M.C.C. too. Stronger than the one we drew with."

"Oh, well, you never know what's going to happen at cricket. I may

hold a catch for a change."

Burgess grunted.

Bob went on his way to the nets. Mike was just putting on his pads.

"I say, Mike," said Bob. "I wanted to see you. It's about Wyatt. I've thought of something."

"What's that?"

"A way of getting him out of that bank. If it comes off, that's to say."

"By Jove, he'd jump at anything. What's the idea?"

"Why shouldn't he get a job of sorts out in the Argentine? There ought to be heaps of sound jobs going there for a chap like Wyatt. He's a jolly good shot, to start with. I shouldn't wonder if it wasn't rather a score to be able to shoot out there. And he can ride, I know."

"By Jove, I'll write to father to-night. He must be able to work it, I should think. He never chucked the show altogether, did he?"

Mike, as most other boys of his age would have been, was profoundly ignorant as to the details by which his father's money had been, or

was being, made. He only knew vaguely that the source of revenue had something to do with the Argentine. His brother Joe had been born in Buenos Ayres; and once, three years ago, his father had gone over there for a visit, presumably on business. All these things seemed to show that Mr. Jackson senior was a useful man to have about if you wanted a job in that Eldorado, the Argentine Republic.

As a matter of fact, Mike's father owned vast tracts of land up country, where countless sheep lived and had their being. He had long retired from active superintendence of his estate. Like Mr. Spenlow, he had a partner, a stout fellow with the work-taint highly developed, who asked nothing better than to be left in charge. So Mr. Jackson had returned to the home of his fathers, glad to be there again. But he still had a decided voice in the ordering of affairs on the ranches, and Mike was going to the fountain-head of things when he wrote to his father that night, putting forward Wyatt's claims to attention and ability to perform any sort of job with which he might be presented.

The reflection that he had done all that could be done tended to console him for the non-appearance of Wyatt either that night or next morning--a non-appearance which was due to the simple fact that he passed that night in a bed in Mr. Wain's dressing-room, the door of which that cautious pedagogue, who believed in taking no chances, locked from the outside on retiring to rest.