

CHAPTER XXIX

WYATT AGAIN

It was a morning in the middle of September. The Jacksons were breakfasting. Mr. Jackson was reading letters. The rest, including Gladys Maud, whose finely chiselled features were gradually disappearing behind a mask of bread-and-milk, had settled down to serious work. The usual catch-as-catch-can contest between Marjory and Phyllis for the jam (referee and time-keeper, Mrs. Jackson) had resulted, after both combatants had been cautioned by the referee, in a victory for Marjory, who had duly secured the stakes. The hour being nine-fifteen, and the official time for breakfast nine o'clock, Mike's place was still empty.

"I've had a letter from MacPherson," said Mr. Jackson.

MacPherson was the vigorous and persevering gentleman, referred to in a previous chapter, who kept a fatherly eye on the Buenos Ayres sheep.

"He seems very satisfied with Mike's friend Wyatt. At the moment of writing Wyatt is apparently incapacitated owing to a bullet in the shoulder, but expects to be fit again shortly. That young man seems to make things fairly lively wherever he is. I don't wonder he found a public school too restricted a sphere for his energies."

"Has he been fighting a duel?" asked Marjory, interested.

"Bushrangers," said Phyllis.

"There aren't any bushrangers in Buenos Ayres," said Ella.

"How do you know?" said Phyllis clinchingly.

"Bush-ray, bush-ray, bush-ray," began Gladys Maud, conversationally, through the bread-and-milk; but was headed off.

"He gives no details. Perhaps that letter on Mike's plate supplies them. I see it comes from Buenos Ayres."

"I wish Mike would come and open it," said Marjory. "Shall I go and hurry him up?"

The missing member of the family entered as she spoke.

"Buck up, Mike," she shouted. "There's a letter from Wyatt. He's been wounded in a duel."

"With a bushranger," added Phyllis.

"Bush-ray," explained Gladys Maud.

"Is there?" said Mike. "Sorry I'm late."

He opened the letter and began to read.

"What does he say?" inquired Marjory. "Who was the duel with?"

"How many bushrangers were there?" asked Phyllis.

Mike read on.

"Good old Wyatt! He's shot a man."

"Killed him?" asked Marjory excitedly.

"No. Only potted him in the leg. This is what he says. First page is mostly about the Ripton match and so on. Here you are. 'I'm dictating this to a sportsman of the name of Danvers, a good chap who can't help being ugly, so excuse bad writing. The fact is we've been having a bust-up here, and I've come out of it with a bullet in the shoulder, which has crocked me for the time being. It happened like this. An ass of a Gaucho had gone into the town and got jolly tight, and coming back, he wanted to ride through our place. The old woman who keeps the lodge wouldn't have it at any price. Gave him the absolute miss-in-baulk. So this rotter, instead of shifting off, proceeded to cut the fence, and go through that way. All the farms out here have

their boundaries marked by wire fences, and it is supposed to be a deadly sin to cut these. Well, the lodge-keeper's son dashed off in search of help. A chap called Chester, an Old Wykehamist, and I were dipping sheep close by, so he came to us and told us what had happened. We nipped on to a couple of horses, pulled out our revolvers, and tooled after him. After a bit we overtook him, and that's when the trouble began. The johnny had dismounted when we arrived. I thought he was simply tightening his horse's girths. What he was really doing was getting a steady aim at us with his revolver. He fired as we came up, and dropped poor old Chester. I thought he was killed at first, but it turned out it was only his leg. I got going then. I emptied all the six chambers of my revolver, and missed him clean every time. In the meantime he got me in the right shoulder. Hurt like sin afterwards, though it was only a sort of dull shock at the moment. The next item of the programme was a forward move in force on the part of the enemy. The man had got his knife out now--why he didn't shoot again I don't know--and toddled over in our direction to finish us off. Chester was unconscious, and it was any money on the Gaucho, when I happened to catch sight of Chester's pistol, which had fallen just by where I came down. I picked it up, and loosed off. Missed the first shot, but got him with the second in the ankle at about two yards; and his day's work was done. That's the painful story. Danvers says he's getting writer's cramp, so I shall have to stop...."

"By Jove!" said Mike.

"What a dreadful thing!" said Mrs. Jackson.

"Anyhow, it was practically a bushranger," said Phyllis.

"I told you it was a duel, and so it was," said Marjory.

"What a terrible experience for the poor boy!" said Mrs. Jackson.

"Much better than being in a beastly bank," said Mike, summing up.

"I'm glad he's having such a ripping time. It must be almost as decent as Wrykyn out there.... I say, what's under that dish?"