

"Well Wyatt," said the Squire, "what's amiss this morning? I can see something has happened: sit down and let me hear what it is."

"Something *has* happened," said Wyatt, sitting down and looking rather serious.

On his way to the Hall, he had been studying that department of moral philosophy, which treats upon lies of *omission*. In other words, he wanted to tell the Squire, so much of the truth as would save him personally from blame. Mr. Purdee had authorized him to throw the whole blame of the Crooks' escape upon him; but he could scarcely do this if he narrated the whole affair circumstantially.

The Squire leaned back in his great arm chair and eyed Wyatt intently. Mr. Stone, deliberately raised the tankard, nodded to Wyatt, and took a long draught.

"Something has happened, sure enough," said Wyatt, "the two Crooks Dan and Ben, have left the country."

"Is that all?" asked Mr. Stone.

"No that's not all," said the Squire.

"Can't you see that Wyatt has something more to tell us?"

"They've fled the country," said Wyatt, "and it's as well for them if they can get clear away. I was up at Mr. Purdee's place this morning; in fact, I've come straight from there, here. Last night they were wakened by the dog, Spot, and were just in time to catch the young scamps about setting fire to the hay in the barn."

"No," said the Squire, who was expecting to hear of some poaching affray, of perhaps an unusual character.

"Do you hear that, Quill?" asked the Squire.

"I expect," said Mr. Stone, "that they are the fellows who set fire to your barns."

"There's no doubt of that," said Wyatt, "if they were overheard talking about doing it, by the Purdee's."

"Well, well, if I overheard anything equal to that," said the Squire, "and the rascals have escaped you say."

"Yes," said Wyatt, "Mr. Purdee let them go, on condition of their leaving the country at once. I suppose they are going to America, and by this time are in Liverpool."

"Hem," said the Squire, "I suppose there is no use in issuing a warrant now, perhaps it's just as well as it is; they are transported at their own expense instead of that of the County, and that is some consolation."

"I'm afraid the greatest scoundrel is left behind," said Mr. Stone, "that Crooks has been a plague and a pest to the neighbourhood."

"Well," said Wyatt, "I don't think he set his sons a very good example, at least where generosity was concerned, but he has more sense than to do any wilful and malicious damage."

"I don't know about that," said the Squire, "we had better have him away from here. Nobody is safe with such an old villain in the neighbourhood."

"Yes and a younger batch growing up," said Mr. Stone, "to take the place of their brothers, and I suppose they have had the same excellent training."

"Quill," said the Squire, "we must get him out of yonder holding; make a note of that and enquire into it."

"Oh I can tell you everything about that," said Wyatt "Crooks rented for a term of years, five I think, anyhow the term expired at Old Michaelmas (11th October) and he has not renewed yet because Mr. Danson wants to sell the place, and he will do so, he told me, if he can but get a purchaser."

"Hem," said the Squire, "do you hear that Quill?"

"I do," said Mr. Stone, "I do, and I am very glad to hear it."

"Do you know any body likely to be a purchaser?"

"No I don't" said Mr. Stone.

"But I think I do," said Wyatt.

"I hope it is not Crooks," said the Squire. "I've heard he has some money."

"No it's Samuel Purdee," said Wyatt, "you see the place joins to his and it would suit him very well."

"And why does he not buy it then?" asked the Squire, "is he short of money, or does Danson want too much? How is it?"

"I think," said Wyatt, "he has been afraid of giving Crooks offence, because if he buys it, he would expect him to give up the farm, and perhaps the house too."