"Never forget", Mrs Smith said. "Never forget what your granny said with her last breath."

"What was that, Mum? " a boy with ragged black hair breathed.

"Your granny looked up from her deathbed and said, 'Never forget, Belinda...You can never have to many mop buckets.'"

"Too many mop buckets? What's that supposed to mean?" the boy asked.

Mrs Smith shrugged. "Dunno, Smiff. She died before she could tell us. Oh, how I cried!"

"Because Granny was dead?" He asked gently.

"No, because we couldn't afford a funeral!" She snapped..

"What did you do?"

Mrs Smith shrugged. "It was the muck cart that ran her down, so it was the muck cart that carried her away to the town dump. She didn't mind. She was dead."

Smiff peered at his mum through the sputtering light of the mutton-fat candle.

"Are you lying, Mum?"

"all our family tell lies, Smiff.. It's what we do best. You know that. But I've never forgotten your Granny's last words and I've never been short of mop buckets. Go out and get me one, son."

Smiff sighed. The coal fire was glowing warm. The street cobbles outside were covered in ice and he had no shoes to his name. The boy wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, took one last loving look at the fire and pushed the door open.

Why doesn't Mum ever send me out to steal something useful," he muttered through his chattering teeth. "Something like a warm, woollen coat?" But she never did.

He stepped over the horse droppings and crossed the road by the green-glowing gas lamp. At last he reached the row of shops. He trotted on past the grocer, the greengrocer and the baker, the hat shop and the pawnbroker till he reached the hardware shop with its tin pots and clothes pegs, china cups and pewter mugs. Smiff slipped through a maze of ropes and riddles, candles and cart-grease, buckets and brooms, knives and forks, hammers and handsaws.

The boy picked up a hammer. He picked up a mop bucket. He looked around. He felt something was watching him. There was no one there... or so he thought.

He smashed the hammer against the side of the mop bucket then marched up to the counter.

A thin old man stood there, as grey as the boy's blanket, and peered at him. "My mother is mad," Smiff said.

You sold her this bucket and it has a dent in the side!" Smiff showed him the dent he had just made. "She wants a new one, or else!"

"Else?"

"Else she'll come down here with her wet mop and shove it up your nose...she says!"

"Better take a new one, son," the shop owner sighed. "I'll lose the money it cost me," He said, shaking his head.

Smiff almost felt sorry for him. But when the old man stepped from behind the counter the boy saw he was wearing boots. He must be rich, Smiff detected.

The boy left the shop with a shining new mop bucket wrapped in brown paper.

A man in a shabby top hat stood on the street corner. His gooseberry-green eyes glowed in the gas light. As Smiff walked past him he clapped his hands softly. "Well done, my little thief," he said. "You almost got away with that."

The boy shivered and it wasn't with the cold. "Are you a watchman?" he asked.

The man smiled and ivory teeth glowed under his thick, dark moustache. "No. Not the watch. I am Samuel Dreep, a teacher."

"I've heard about teachers," Smiff shuddered. "They take rich children into schools and beat them till they learn."

"I don't work for that kind of school," Dreep laughed. "I will walk with you back to your house in Low Street and explain..."

"You know where I live?"

"Oh, yes, young Smiff. We know a lot about you. You are the sort of young man who will do very well in our new school. I am a teacher at the famous Master Crook's Crime Academy and I believe I can help you."

"Master Crook's Crime Academy? I've never heard of it."

"It's a secret... but the name is famous in certain parts of the city. Let me show you."

He pulled out a neat piece of cardboard with a printed picture of a fine house.

**Master Crook's Crime Academy**

Want to rob the rich and give to the poor?

Worried about getting caught?

Then why not train at the world's first crime academy?

Learn from top teachers – masters of the art of crime!

Remember: Look to Crook to get not took!

"Get not took?" Smiff blinked.

"Get not caught... don't get caught,' Dreep shrugged. "But 'get not took' sounds better. It's poetry."

Smiff lead the way through the battered from door into the dark hallway of his house. It smelled of dead cats and cabbage. "Hi, Mum! We have a visitor, " he said and hurried into the warmth of the living room that smelled of dead cabbage and cats. "This is Mr. Samuel Dreep."

"I am here to make an offer. I am from Master Crook's Crime Academy and I want to invite young Smiff to join. I can make him a master of the art of crime. The school opens its doors for the first time tomorrow. Your son can be one of the first pupils. He can make it to the very top."

Dreep pulled a square of paper from inside his coat and slipped it onto the table in front of Mrs Smith. Smiff looked at it. Mrs Smith looked at it.

"I don't like that bit about being caught and hanged, Mum," Smiff frowned.

Master Crook's Crime Academy

I Belinda Smith hereby agree to enrol my son Smiff Smith in the school known as Master Crook's Crime Academy.

I also swear on my granny's teeth:

* not to tell anybody about my child's school or snitch to the law
* to make sure s/he sticks to the school rules at all times and doesn't skive or play truant
* to make sure s/he does the homework
* to support the teachers even if they give him a smack round the ear for being cheeky
* to make sure he has his school uniform and a good pair of boots

The school agrees to:

* give you half of what your child makes from his/her crimes
* pay for your child's funeral if s/he has an accident while doing a dangerous job OR gets caught and is hanged.

Signed

Belinda Smith

"It's all right, son! " She grinned her yellow-toothed grin. "The school will pay. I know you are worried about your dear mother having to fork out for a funeral. No need. Look. It's here on paper." She ruffled his black hair playfully.

"No, Mum, paying for my funeral isn't what I was worried about," Smiff said angrily.

"Look, son, what are the chances of being caught? Eh? The town watch are a bunch of old men that have more noses between them than teeth. They couldn't catch a dead dog if it ran into the town jail and gave itself up."

"Now then, Mrs Smith," Samuel Dreep said softly. "I think there is one small matter I have to tell you about. The small matter of the town watchmen."

"What about them?"

"They won't be around for much longer. What I mean is they are about to be replaced. There is a new sort of law officer about to walk the streets of Wildpool."

"Ooooh! Hear that, Smiff? "

"Yes, Mum, I'm not deaf. I suppose these new officers will be sharper than the old watchmen, will they?" Smiff groaned. "I suppose there will be more chance of me dangling on the end of a hangman's rope?".

"It depends who gets the officers' jobs," Dreep said with a soft smile.

"I still don't like the sound of these new officers. What are they called?"

"They are called police," the tall man said.

"Sounds horrible." The boy sighed. "Don't sign that paper yet, Mum."

Mrs Smith wave it happily in the candlelight "Too late, son, too late. Its all done. You start at Master Crook's Crime Academy tomorrow,"

"Thanks, Mum, " Smiff said bitterly. "Thanks."

"That's all right, son," the woman said and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "Master Crook will make sure those nasty Please Men don't get you. Isn't that right, Mr Dreep?"

"We're working on it right now," Dreep said. "Right now..."