

Mark, who had come in by the door at the back of the shop, and who now stood staring with wonder like myself.

"Why, I must have scared him," cried Mark, laughing heartily. "The moment he set eyes upon me he bolted."

Simultaneously we both did the same thing.

Our staircase has a window opening over a lane, which by a sharp turn leads up into the main street that the houses front.

Mark and I both ran to this window. The thought had flashed through the mind of us both, that if this bird-selling fellow was up to no good, as seemed not unlikely, he would most probably avoid a straight course up the broad high-road.

We were right. He had dodged round the first crooked corner he came to. As we reached the window there he was, hurrying along at a steady trot, his hat pulled low down, and muffled, with his big coat, up to the chin.

Suddenly a heavy drop or two of rain fell, and he quickly turned his face upwards. His scowling eyes and lowering black brows were plain to see.

Then I remembered the face.

A sick feeling ran over me. I pulled Mark back from the window.

"Come along, my boy," I said. "We're leaving the shop to take care of itself. Come!"

Mark looked at me.

"Why, dad, it's you are scared now. What's it all about? Do you know him? He looks an arrant scoundrel."

"Ay," I replied, and I tried to laugh, though I did not for the moment feel much like it. "He does not look worse than he is."

"Then you *do* know him," said Mark, as we returned to the shop.

There is a small looking-glass hangs behind our parlour door, and I looked at myself in it, though I am not a vain man.

I had a long gaze at my boy, too, when he was not noticing me. Something to be proud of there, for Mark is as handsome a fellow for his sixteen years as you might see, and as good as he is handsome.

"I have never believed them when they say you are like me, Mark," I said, later on, when we sat at tea, "but I must believe it now!"

"Like what you *were* at his age," put in Mark's mother. "Well, you have found out something. And what has opened your eyes all at once?"

By-and-by I told them the story.

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To begin, I must go back a good many years. I was apprenticed to a bookbinder in a big city, miles away from the quiet country place where I was born and had lived the best part of my fifteen years.

Neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, had I. If ever a lad was a stranger, and alone, that I was, in the days I am now speaking of.

Yet it was a piece of good fortune had placed me where I was, for in the general break-up of affairs, following my father's sudden death, there was not left even the wherewithal to pay a premium for me to learn a trade, and it was only through an acquaintance speaking to a friend of his for me, that I was taken as an apprentice, without fee or payment of any kind.

I had one fellow-apprentice, and I did not see much of him. He had a home, parents, sisters, and he rather looked down upon me, I expect.

He went away every Saturday and came back on Monday morning. Our master always slept at home

with his family, a few miles out of town, so, after working hours, we lads had the place to ourselves, with old Betty, who kept the place clean and did for us. She was deaf, and lived mostly in the kitchen.

We might have been better friends, Joe Banks and I, but our tastes were quite unlike. He did not care for books, further than the binding of them—our business. I was always dipping into them when I got a chance; often, I am afraid, to the neglect of my work. Indeed, it was my fondness for reading which had made me so readily follow up the chance of learning a trade that took me, as it were, into the thick of it.

Joe was fond of playing the dandy. He had a ring, and a cane with a tassel to it, and his ambition was to go into the park of a summer evening, and gaze at the grand equipages and mix with the smart people as much as he could. I went with him once, but I could see no fun in it, and I gave him the slip and went home. Well, we are not all alike in our tastes. Perhaps my ways seemed just as unaccountable to him.

I used to get a dip into one book and another as they came through our hands. Old volumes that we would have to re-bind sometimes I could manage to get a good way into, between whiles, and of evenings. History and tales, biography, and voyages and travels. Nothing came amiss. I seldom managed to finish anything—only when an odd volume happened to be left with us, and by some chance was never called for again.

But of all the books, what took my fancy most was Natural History. Any mortal thing bearing on birds, beasts, or fishes, took hold of me to that extent that I cannot describe. One time, when the master was away, and allowed us boys so much to board ourselves, I half starved myself (living on bread and dripping) to buy a book I had only been able to get a glimpse of as we were binding it. It was about pigeons, and that it was turned the scale.

Often I had felt lonely and miserable enough when Joe Banks started merrily away to Greenleigh. He had asked me once to go down home with him, but I felt at that time too shy and miserable to care for going among strangers, and afterwards—well, to tell the truth, my clothes got very shabby. I grew fast, and altogether I did not fancy myself smart enough to be introduced to Master Joe's fine friends.

"You're all right, with your books and things," he said, one fine Saturday, as he prepared to leave.

"Oh! I'm all right," I made answer, as merry as could be.

It was not very cheerful, though, up in the garret where we slept, and where, more than once, I believe I blubbered a little, watching Joe out of sight, swinging his cane, and sticking out his little finger for the ring to glitter in the sunshine.

But after that day, when I got the book I have spoken of, I never had a dreary moment, nor envied Joe his home or his friends. I forget the name of the book or its writer now, but I know it began with a wonderful account of the way the Persians used to tame and train their pigeons, the messages they sent, the fun they had with them; and then it went on to tell all about the feeding; and the breeding, and the keeping of them, and what sort to buy, and so on. I made up my mind there and then. I had no more idea *how* I was going to carry out my plan than you may have how to catch an ostrich, or tame a whale, but I was going to do it—*to keep pigeons*.

First thing I made up to old Betty. She was as deaf as an adder, and, in answering my questions put to her, you might be sure only of one thing—she never by any chance lighted on the right one. So when I now asked her could I have "those bits of wood?"