“Dickens issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together.”
Karl Marx

“Dickens’s figures belong to poetry, like figures of Dante or Shakespeare, in that a single phrase, either by them or about them, may be enough to set them wholly before us.”
T.S. Eliot

“All his characters are my personal friends – I am constantly comparing them with living persons, and living persons with them.”
Leo Tolstoy

“Psychologically the latter part of Great Expectations is about the best thing Dickens ever did.”
George Orwell

“This was the author’s last great work, the defects in it are as nearly imperceptible as spots on the sun or shadows on a sunlit sea.”
Algernon Swinburne

“Great Expectations is the first novel I read that made me wish I had written it; it is the novel that made me want to be a novelist – specifically, to move a reader as I was moved then. I believe that Great Expectations has the most wonderful and most perfectly worked-out plot for a novel in the English language; at the same time, it never deviates from its intention to move you to laughter and tears.”
John Irving
Great Expectations

Charles Dickens
Great Expectations first published in 1861
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Great Expectations
MY FATHER’S FAMILY NAME being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.

I give Pirrip as my father’s family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister, Mrs Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith. As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father’s gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription “Also Georgiana Wife of the Above”, I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. To five little stone lozenges, each about a foot and a half long, which were arranged in a neat row beside their grave, and were sacred to the memory of five little brothers of mine – who gave up trying to get a living exceedingly early in that universal struggle – I am indebted for a belief I religiously entertained that they had all been born on their backs with their hands in their trousers pockets, and had never taken them out in this state of existence.

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana, wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the
churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry was Pip.

“Hold your noise!” cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. “Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!”

A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled – and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

“Oh! Don’t cut my throat, sir,” I pleaded in terror. “Pray don’t do it, sir.”

“Tell us your name!” said the man. “Quick!”

“Pip, sir.”

“Once more,” said the man, staring at me. “Give it mouth!”

“Pip. Pip, sir.”

“Show us where you live,” said the man. “Pint out the place!”

I pointed to where our village lay, on the flat inshore among the alder trees and pollards, a mile or more from the church.

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me and I saw the steeple under my feet – when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously.

“You young dog,” said the man, licking his lips, “what fat cheeks you ha’ got.”

I believe they were fat, though I was at that time undersized for my years, and not strong.

“Darn me if I couldn’t eat ’em,” said the man, with a threatening shake of his head, “and if I han’t half a mind to’t!”

I earnestly expressed my hope that he wouldn’t, and held tighter to the tombstone on which he had put me; partly to keep myself upon it; partly to keep myself from crying.
“Now lookee here!” said the man. “Where’s your mother?”
“There, sir!” said I.
He started, made a short run, and stopped and looked over his shoulder.
“There, sir!” I timidly explained. “Also Georgiana. That’s my mother.”
“Oh!” said he, coming back. “And is that your father alonger your mother?”
“Yes, sir,” said I, “him too – late of this parish.”
“Ha!” he muttered then, considering. “Who d’ye live with – supposin’ you’re kindly let to live, which I han’t made up my mind about?”
“My sister, sir – Mrs Joe Gargery – wife of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith, sir.”
“Blacksmith, eh?” said he. And looked down at his leg.
After darkly looking at his leg and me several times, he came closer to my tombstone, took me by both arms, and tilted me back as far as he could hold me, so that his eyes looked most powerfully down into mine, and mine looked most helplessly up into his.
“Now lookee here,” he said, “the question being whether you’re to be let to live. You know what a file is?”
“Yes, sir.”
“And you know what wittles* is?”
“Yes, sir.”
After each question he tilted me over a little more, so as to give me a greater sense of helplessness and danger.
“You get me a file.” He tilted me again. “And you get me wittles.” He tilted me again. “You bring ’em both to me.” He tilted me again. “Or I’ll have your heart and liver out.” He tilted me again.
I was dreadfully frightened, and so giddy that I clung to him with both hands, and said, “If you would kindly please to let me keep upright, sir, perhaps I shouldn’t be sick, and perhaps I could attend more.”
He gave me a most tremendous dip and roll, so that the church jumped over its own weathercock. Then he held me by the arms, in an upright position on the top of the stone, and went on in these fearful terms:
“You bring me, tomorrow morning early, that file and them wittles. You bring the lot to me, at that old battery over yonder. You do it, and
you never dare to say a word or dare to make a sign concerning your hav-
ing seen such a person as me, or any person sumever, and you shall be let
to live. You fail, or you go from my words in any particlcker, no matter
how small it is, and your heart and your liver shall be tore out, roasted
and ate. Now, I ain’t alone, as you may think I am. There’s a young man
hid with me, in comparison with which young man I am a angel. That
young man hears the words I speak. That young man has a secret way
pecooliar to himself of getting at a boy, and at his heart, and at his liver.
It is in wain for a boy to attempt to hide himself from that young man.
A boy may lock his door, may be warm in bed, may tuck himself up,
may draw the clothes over his head, may think himself comfortable and
safe, but that young man will softly creep and creep his way to him and
tear him open. I am a-keeping that young man from harming of you at
the present moment, with great difficulty. I find it wery hard to hold that
young man off of your inside. Now, what do you say?”

I said that I would get him the file, and I would get him what broken
bits of food I could, and I would come to him at the battery early in
the morning.

“Say Lord strike you dead if you don’t!” said the man.
I said so, and he took me down.
“Now,” he pursued, “you remember what you’ve undertook, and
you remember that young man, and you get home!”

“Goo-goodnight, sir,” I faltered.
“Much of that!” said he, glancing about him over the cold wet flat.
“I wish I was a frog. Or a eel!”

At the same time, he hugged his shuddering body in both his arms
– clasping himself, as if to hold himself together – and limped towards
the low church wall. As I saw him go, picking his way among the
nettles, and among the brambles that bound the green mounds, he
looked in my young eyes as if he were eluding the hands of the dead
people stretching up cautiously out of their graves to get a twist upon
his ankle and pull him in.

When he came to the low church wall, he got over it, like a man
whose legs were numbed and stiff, and then turned round to look for
me. When I saw him turning, I set my face towards home, and made
the best use of my legs. But presently I looked over my shoulder, and
saw him going on again towards the river, still hugging himself in both
arms, and picking his way with his sore feet among the great stones
dropped into the marshes here and there for stepping places when the rains were heavy or the tide was in.

The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed. On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered – like an unhooped cask upon a pole – an ugly thing when you were near it; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again. It gave me a terrible turn when I thought so, and as I saw the cattle lifting their heads to gaze after him, I wondered whether they thought so too. I looked all round for the horrible young man, and could see no signs of him. But now I was frightened again, and ran home without stopping.

2

My sister, Mrs Joe Gargery, was more than twenty years older than I, and had established a great reputation with herself and the neighbours because she had brought me up “by hand”. Having at that time to find out for myself what the expression meant, and knowing her to have a hard and heavy hand and to be much in the habit of laying it upon her husband as well as upon me, I supposed that Joe Gargery and I were both brought up by hand.

She was not a good-looking woman, my sister, and I had a general impression that she must have made Joe Gargery marry her by hand. Joe was a fair man, with curls of flaxen hair on each side of his smooth face, and with eyes of such a very undecided blue that they seemed to have somehow got mixed with their own whites. He was a mild, good-natured, sweet-tempered, easygoing, foolish dear fellow – a sort of Hercules in strength, and also in weakness.

My sister, Mrs Joe, with black hair and eyes, had such a prevailing redness of skin that I sometimes used to wonder whether it was possible she washed herself with a nutmeg grater instead of soap. She was
tall and bony, and almost always wore a coarse apron, fastened over her figure behind with two loops and having a square impregnable bib in front that was stuck full of pins and needles. She made it a powerful merit in herself, and a strong reproach against Joe, that she wore this apron so much. Though I really see no reason why she should have worn it at all — or why, if she did wear it at all, she should not have taken it off — every day of her life.

Joe’s forge adjoined our house, which was a wooden house, as many of the dwellings in our country were — most of them, at that time. When I ran home from the churchyard, the forge was shut up, and Joe was sitting alone in the kitchen. Joe and I being fellow sufferers, and having confidences as such, Joe imparted a confidence to me the moment I raised the latch of the door and peeped in at him opposite to it, sitting in the chimney corner.

“Mrs Joe has been out a dozen times, looking for you, Pip. And she’s out now, making it a baker’s dozen.”

“Is she?”

“Yes, Pip,” said Joe, “and what’s worse, she’s got Tickler with her.”

At this dismal intelligence, I twisted the only button on my waistcoat round and round, and looked in great depression at the fire. Tickler was a wax-ended piece of cane, worn smooth by collision with my tickled frame.

“She sot down,” said Joe, “and she got up, and she made a grab at Tickler, and she rampaged out. That’s what she did,” said Joe, slowly clearing the fire between the lower bars with the poker and looking at it: “she rampaged out, Pip.”

“Has she been gone long, Joe?” I always treated him as a larger species of child, and as no more than my equal.

“Well,” said Joe, glancing up at the Dutch clock, “she’s been on the rampage, this last spell, about five minutes, Pip. She’s a-coming! Get behind the door, old chap, and have the jack towel® betwixt you.”

I took the advice. My sister, Mrs Joe, throwing the door wide open, and finding an obstruction behind it, immediately divined the cause, and applied Tickler to its further investigation. She concluded by throwing me — I often served as a connubial missile — at Joe, who, glad to get hold of me on any terms, passed me on into the chimney and quietly fenced me up there with his great leg.

“Where have you been, you young monkey?” said Mrs Joe, stamping
her foot. “Tell me directly what you’ve been doing to wear me away with fret and fright and worrit, or I’d have you out of that corner if you was fifty Pips, and he was five hundred Gargerys.”

“I have only been to the churchyard,” said I, from my stool, crying and rubbing myself.

“Churchyard!” repeated my sister. “If it warn’t for me you’d have been to the churchyard long ago, and stayed there. Who brought you up by hand?”

“You did,” said I.

“And why did I do it, I should like to know?” exclaimed my sister.

I whimpered, “I don’t know.”

“I don’t!” said my sister. “I’d never do it again! I know that. I may truly say I’ve never had this apron of mine off, since born you were. It’s bad enough to be a blacksmith’s wife – and him a Gargery – without being your mother.”

My thoughts strayed from that question as I looked disconsolately at the fire. For the fugitive out on the marshes with the ironed leg, the mysterious young man, the file, the food and the dreadful pledge I was under to commit a larceny on those sheltering premises rose before me in the avenging coals.

“Hah!” said Mrs Joe, restoring Tickler to his station. “Churchyard, indeed! You may well say churchyard, you two.” One of us, by the by, had not said it at all. “You’ll drive me to the churchyard betwixt you, one of these days, and oh, a pr-r-recious pair you’d be without me!”

As she applied herself to set the tea things, Joe peeped down at me over his leg, as if he were mentally casting me and himself up, and calculating what kind of pair we practically should make, under the grievous circumstances foreshadowed. After that, he sat feeling his right-side flaxen curls and whisker, and following Mrs Joe about with his blue eyes, as his manner always was at squally times.

My sister had a trenchant way of cutting our bread-and-butter for us that never varied. First, with her left hand she jammed the loaf hard and fast against her bib – where it sometimes got a pin into it, and sometimes a needle, which we afterwards got into our mouths. Then she took some butter (not too much) on a knife and spread it on the loaf, in an apothecary kind of way, as if she were making a plaster – using both sides of the knife with a slapping dexterity, and trimming and moulding the butter off round the crust. Then she gave the knife a
final smart wipe on the edge of the plaster, and then sawed a very thick round off the loaf, which she finally, before separating from the loaf, hewed into two halves, of which Joe got one and I the other.

On the present occasion, though I was hungry, I dared not eat my slice. I felt that I must have something in reserve for my dreadful acquaintance and his ally, the still more dreadful young man. I knew Mrs Joe’s housekeeping to be of the strictest kind, and that my larcenous researches might find nothing available in the safe. Therefore I resolved to put my hunk of bread-and-butter down the leg of my trousers.

The effort of resolution necessary to the achievement of this purpose I found to be quite awful. It was as if I had to make up my mind to leap from the top of a high house, or plunge into a great depth of water. And it was made the more difficult by the unconscious Joe. In our already mentioned freemasonry as fellow sufferers, and in his good-natured companionship with me, it was our evening habit to compare the way we bit through our slices by silently holding them up to each other’s admiration now and then – which stimulated us to new exertions. Tonight, Joe several times invited me, by the display of his fast-diminishing slice, to enter upon our usual friendly competition, but he found me, each time, with my yellow mug of tea on one knee, and my untouched bread-and-butter on the other. At last, I desperately considered that the thing I contemplated must be done, and that it had best be done in the least improbable manner consistent with the circumstances. I took advantage of a moment when Joe had just looked at me, and got my bread-and-butter down my leg.

Joe was evidently made uncomfortable by what he supposed to be my loss of appetite, and took a thoughtful bite out of his slice, which he didn’t seem to enjoy. He turned it about in his mouth much longer than usual, pondering over it a good deal, and after all gulped it down like a pill. He was about to take another bite, and had just got his head on one side for a good purchase on it, when his eye fell on me, and he saw that my bread-and-butter was gone.

The wonder and consternation with which Joe stopped on the threshold of his bite and stared at me were too evident to escape my sister’s observation.

“What’s the matter now?” said she, smartly, as she put down her cup.
“I say, you know!” muttered Joe, shaking his head at me in very serious remonstrance. “Pip, old chap! You’ll do yourself a mischief. It’ll stick somewhere. You can’t have chawed it, Pip.”

“What’s the matter now?” repeated my sister, more sharply than before.

“If you can cough any trifle on it up, Pip, I’d recommend you to do it,” said Joe, all aghast. “Manners is manners, but still your elth’s your elth.”

By this time, my sister was quite desperate, so she pounced on Joe and, taking him by the two whiskers, knocked his head for a little while against the wall behind him, while I sat in the corner, looking guiltily on.

“Now, perhaps you’ll mention what’s the matter,” said my sister, out of breath, “you staring great stuck pig.”

Joe looked at her in a helpless way, then took a helpless bite, and looked at me again.

“You know, Pip,” said Joe, solemnly, with his last bite in his cheek and speaking in a confidential voice, as if we two were quite alone, “you and me is always friends, and I’d be the last to tell upon you, any time. But such a” – he moved his chair and looked about the floor between us, and then again at me – “such a most oncommon bolt as that!”

“Been bolting his food, has he?” cried my sister.

“You know, old chap,” said Joe, looking at me, and not at Mrs Joe, with his bite still in his cheek, “I bolted, myself, when I was your age – frequent – and as a boy I’ve been among a many bolters, but I never see your bolting equal yet, Pip, and it’s a mercy you ain’t bolted dead.”

My sister made a dive at me, and fished me up by the hair, saying nothing more than the awful words, “You come along and be dosed.”

Some medical beast had revived tar water in those days as a fine medicine, and Mrs Joe always kept a supply of it in the cupboard; having a belief in its virtues correspondent to its nastiness.* At the best of times, so much of this elixir was administered to me as a choice restorative that I was conscious of going about smelling like a new fence. On this particular evening the urgency of my case demanded a pint of this mixture, which was poured down my throat, for my greater comfort, while Mrs Joe held my head under her arm, as a boot would be held in a bootjack. Joe got off with half a pint, but was made
to swallow that (much to his disturbance, as he sat slowly munching and meditating before the fire), “because he had had a turn”. Judging from myself, I should say he certainly had a turn afterwards, if he had had none before.

Conscience is a dreadful thing when it accuses man or boy, but when, in the case of a boy, that secret burden cooperates with another secret burden down the leg of his trousers, it is (as I can testify) a great punishment. The guilty knowledge that I was going to rob Mrs Joe – I never thought I was going to rob Joe, for I never thought of any of the housekeeping property as his – united to the necessity of always keeping one hand on my bread-and-butter as I sat, or when I was ordered about the kitchen on any small errand, almost drove me out of my mind. Then, as the marsh winds made the fire glow and flare, I thought I heard the voice outside of the man with the iron on his leg who had sworn me to secrecy, declaring that he couldn’t and wouldn’t starve until tomorrow, but must be fed now. At other times, I thought, what if the young man who was with so much difficulty restrained from imbruing his hands in me should yield to a constitutional impatience, or should mistake the time and should think himself accredited to my heart and liver tonight, instead of tomorrow! If ever anybody’s hair stood on end with terror, mine must have done so then. But perhaps nobody’s ever did?

It was Christmas Eve, and I had to stir the pudding for next day with a copper stick, from seven to eight by the Dutch clock. I tried it with the load upon my leg (and that made me think afresh of the man with the load on his leg), and found the tendency of exercise to bring the bread-and-butter out at my ankle quite unmanageable. Happily, I slipped away, and deposited that part of my conscience in my garret bedroom.

“Hark!” said I, when I had done my stirring, and was taking a final warm in the chimney corner before being sent up to bed, “was that great guns, Joe?”

“Ah!” said Joe. “There’s another convict off.”

“What does that mean, Joe?” said I.

Mrs Joe, who always took explanations upon herself, said snappishly, “Escaped. Escaped,” administering the definition like tar water.

While Mrs Joe sat with her head bending over her needlework, I put my mouth into the forms of saying to Joe, “What’s a convict?” Joe put
his mouth into the forms of returning such a highly elaborate answer that I could make out nothing of it but the single word “Pip”.

“There was a convict off last night,” said Joe aloud, “after sunset gun. And they fired warning of him. And now, it appears they’re firing warning of another.”

“Who’s firing?” said I.

“Drat that boy,” interposed my sister, frowning at me over her work, “what a questioner he is. Ask no questions, and you’ll be told no lies.”

It was not very polite to herself, I thought, to imply that I should be told lies by her, even if I did ask questions. But she never was polite, unless there was company.

At this point, Joe greatly augmented my curiosity by taking the utmost pains to open his mouth very wide, and to put it into the form of a word that looked to me like “sulks”. Therefore, I naturally pointed to Mrs Joe, and put my mouth into the form of saying “her?” But Joe wouldn’t hear of that, at all, and again opened his mouth very wide, and shook the form of a most emphatic word out of it. But I could make nothing of the word.

“Mrs Joe,” said I, as a last resort, “I should like to know – if you wouldn’t much mind – where the firing comes from?”

“Lord bless the boy!” exclaimed my sister, as if she didn’t quite mean that, but rather the contrary. “From the hulks!”

“Oh-h!” said I, looking at Joe. “Hulks!”

Joe gave a reproachful cough, as much as to say, “Well, I told you so.”

“And please what’s hulks?” said I.

“That’s the way with this boy!” exclaimed my sister, pointing me out with her needle and thread, and shaking her head at me. “Answer him one question, and he’ll ask you a dozen directly. Hulks are prison ships, right ’cross th’ meshes.” We always used that name for marshes, in our country.

“I wonder who’s put into prison ships, and why they’re put there?” said I, in a general way, and with quiet desperation.

It was too much for Mrs Joe, who immediately rose. “I tell you what, young fellow,” said she, “I didn’t bring you up by hand to badger people’s lives out. It would be blame to me, and not praise, if I had. People are put in the hulks because they murder, and because they rob,
and forge, and do all sorts of bad – and they always begin by asking questions. Now, you get along to bed!”

I was never allowed a candle to light me to bed, and as I went upstairs in the dark, with my head tingling – from Mrs Joe’s thimble having played the tambourine upon it to accompany her last words – I felt fearfully sensible of the great convenience that the hulks were handy for me. I was clearly on my way there. I had begun by asking questions, and I was going to rob Mrs Joe.

Since that time, which is far enough away now, I have often thought that few people know what secrecy there is in the young, under terror. No matter how unreasonable the terror, so that it be terror. I was in mortal terror of the young man who wanted my heart and liver; I was in mortal terror of my interlocutor with the ironed leg; I was in mortal terror of myself, from whom an awful promise had been extracted; I had no hope of deliverance through my all-powerful sister, who repulsed me at every turn; I am afraid to think of what I might have done, on requirement, in the secrecy of my terror.

If I slept at all that night, it was only to imagine myself drifting down the river on a strong springtide to the hulks; a ghostly pirate calling out to me through a speaking trumpet, as I passed the gibbet station, that I had better come ashore and be hanged there at once, and not put it off. I was afraid to sleep, even if I had been inclined, for I knew that at the first faint dawn of morning I must rob the pantry. There was no doing it in the night, for there was no getting a light by easy friction then;* to have got one, I must have struck it out of flint and steel, and have made a noise like the very pirate himself rattling his chains.

As soon as the great black velvet pall outside my little window was shot with grey, I got up and went downstairs; every board upon the way, and every crack in every board, calling after me, “Stop thief!” and “Get up, Mrs Joe!” In the pantry, which was far more abundantly supplied than usual, owing to the season, I was very much alarmed by a hare hanging up by the heels, whom I rather thought I caught, when my back was half-turned, winking. I had no time for verification, no time for selection, no time for anything, for I had no time to spare. I stole some bread, some rind of cheese, about half a jar of mincemeat (which I tied up in my pocket handkerchief with my last night’s slice), some brandy from a stone bottle (which I decanted into a glass bottle I had secretly used for making that intoxicating fluid, Spanish liquorice
CHAPTER 2

water, up in my room – diluting the stone bottle from a jug in the kitchen cupboard), a meat bone with very little on it, and a beautiful round compact pork pie. I was nearly going away without the pie, but I was tempted to mount upon a shelf to look what it was that was put away so carefully in a covered earthenware dish in a corner, and I found it was the pie, and I took it, in the hope that it was not intended for early use and would not be missed for some time.

There was a door in the kitchen, communicating with the forge; I unlocked and unbolted that door, and got a file from among Joe’s tools. Then I put the fastenings as I had found them, opened the door at which I had entered when I ran home last night, shut it, and ran for the misty marshes.

3

I t was a rimy morning, and very damp. I had seen the damp lying on the outside of my little window, as if some goblin had been crying there all night, and using the window for a pocket handkerchief. Now I saw the damp lying on the bare hedges and spare grass, like a coarser sort of spiders’ webs, hanging itself from twig to twig and blade to blade. On every rail and gate, wet lay clammy, and the marsh mist was so thick that the wooden finger on the post directing people to our village – a direction which they never accepted, for they never came there – was invisible to me until I was quite close under it. Then, as I looked up at it while it dripped, it seemed to my oppressed conscience like a phantom devoting me to the hulks.

The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me. This was very disagreeable to a guilty mind. The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist, as if they cried as plainly as could be, “A boy with somebody else’s pork pie! Stop him!” The cattle came upon me with like suddenness, staring out of their eyes, and steaming out of their nostrils, “Holloo, young thief!” One black ox, with a white cravat on – who even had to my awakened conscience something of a clerical air – fixed me so obstinately with his eyes, and moved his blunt head round in such an accusatory manner as I moved round that I blubbered out to him, “I couldn’t help it, sir! It wasn’t for
myself I took it!” Upon which he put down his head, blew a cloud of 
smoke out of his nose, and vanished with a kick-up of his hind legs 
and a flourish of his tail.

All this time I was getting on towards the river, but however fast I 
went, I couldn’t warm my feet, to which the damp cold seemed riveted, 
as the iron was riveted to the leg of the man I was running to meet. I 
knew my way to the battery, pretty straight, for I had been down there 
on a Sunday with Joe, and Joe, sitting on an old gun, had told me that 
when I was ’prentice to him regularly bound we would have such larks 
there! However, in the confusion of the mist, I found myself at last too 
far to the right, and consequently had to try back along the riverside, 
on the bank of loose stones above the mud and the stakes that staked 
the tide out. Making my way along here with all dispatch, I had just 
crossed a ditch which I knew to be very near the battery, and had just 
scrambled up the mound beyond the ditch, when I saw the man sitting 
before me. His back was towards me, and he had his arms folded, and 
was nodding forwards, heavy with sleep.

I thought he would be more glad if I came upon him with his break-
fast in that unexpected manner, so I went forwards softly and touched 
him on the shoulder. He instantly jumped up, and it was not the same 
man, but another man!

And yet this man was dressed in coarse grey too, and had a great 
iron on his leg, and was lame, and hoarse, and cold, and was every-
thing that the other man was – except that he had not the same face, 
and had a flat, broad-brimmed, low-crowned felt hat on. All this I saw 
in a moment, for I had only a moment to see it in: he swore an oath at 
me, made a hit at me – it was a round weak blow that missed me and 
almost knocked himself down, for it made him stumble – and then he 
ran into the mist, stumbling twice as he went, and I lost him.

“It’s the young man!” I thought, feeling my heart shoot as I identi-
fied him. I dare say I should have felt a pain in my liver too, if I had 
known where it was.

I was soon at the battery after that, and there was the right man 
– hugging himself and limping to and fro, as if he had never all night 
left off hugging and limping – waiting for me. He was awfully cold, 
to be sure. I half-expected to see him drop down before my face and 
die of deadly cold. His eyes looked so awfully hungry, too, that when I 
handed him the file and he laid it down on the grass, it occurred to me
he would have tried to eat it if he had not seen my bundle. He did not turn me upside down, this time, to get at what I had, but left me right side upwards while I opened the bundle and emptied my pockets.

“What’s in the bottle, boy?” said he.

“Brandy,” said I.

He was already handing mincemeat down his throat in the most curious manner – more like a man who was putting it away somewhere in a violent hurry, than a man who was eating it – but he left off to take some of the liquor. He shivered all the while so violently that it was quite as much as he could do to keep the neck of the bottle between his teeth without biting it off.

“I think you have got the ague,” said I.

“I’m much of your opinion, boy,” said he.

“It’s bad about here,” I told him. “You’ve been lying out on the meshes, and they’re dreadful aguish. Rheumatic too.”

“I’ll eat my breakfast afore they’re the death of me,” said he. “I’d do that if I was going to be strung up to that there gallows as there is over there, directly afterwards. I’ll beat the shivers so far, I’ll bet you.”

He was gobbling mincemeat, meat bone, bread, cheese and pork pie, all at once, staring distrustfully while he did so at the mist all round us, and often stopping – even stopping his jaws – to listen. Some real or fancied sound, some clink upon the river or breathing of beast upon the marsh now gave him a start, and he said suddenly:

“You’re not a deceiving imp? You brought no one with you?”

“No, sir! No!”

“Nor giv’ no one the office to follow you?”

“No!”

“Well,” said he, “I believe you. You’d be but a fierce young hound indeed, if at your time of life you could help to hunt a wretched warm-int, hunted as near death and dunghill as this poor wretched warmint is!”

Something clicked in his throat, as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike. And he smeared his ragged rough sleeve over his eyes.

Pitying his desolation, and watching him as he gradually settled down upon the pie, I made bold to say, “I am glad you enjoy it.”

“Did you speak?”

“I said I was glad you enjoyed it.”
“Thankee, my boy. I do.”

I had often watched a large dog of ours eating his food, and I now noticed a decided similarity between the dog’s way of eating and the man’s. The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog. He swallowed, or rather snapped up, every mouthful, too soon and too fast, and he looked sideways here and there while he ate, as if he thought there was danger in every direction of somebody’s coming to take the pie away. He was altogether too unsettled in his mind over it to appreciate it comfortably, I thought, or to have anybody to dine with him, without making a chop with his jaws at the visitor. In all of which particulars he was very like the dog.

“I am afraid you won’t leave any of it for him,” said I timidly, after a silence during which I had hesitated as to the politeness of making the remark. “There’s no more to be got where that came from.” It was the certainty of this fact that impelled me to offer the hint.


“The young man. That you spoke of. That was hid with you.”

“Oh ah!” he returned, with something like a gruff laugh. “Him? Yes, yes! He don’t want no wittles.”

“I thought he looked as if he did,” said I.

The man stopped eating, and regarded me with the keenest scrutiny and the greatest surprise.

“Looked? When?”

“Just now.”

“Where?”

“Yonder,” said I, pointing, “over there, where I found him nodding asleep and thought it was you.”

He held me by the collar and stared at me so, that I began to think his first idea about cutting my throat had revived.

“Dressed like you, you know, only with a hat,” I explained, trembling, “and… and” – I was very anxious to put this delicately – “and with… the same reason for wanting to borrow a file. Didn’t you hear the cannon last night?”

“Then there was firing!” he said to himself.

“I wonder you shouldn’t have been sure of that,” I returned, “for we heard it up at home, and that’s further away, and we were shut in besides.”
“Why, see now!” said he. “When a man’s alone on these flats, with a light head and a light stomach, perishing of cold and want, he hears nothin’ all night but guns firing and voices calling. Hears? He sees the soldiers, with their red coats lit up by the torches carried afore, closing in round him. Hears his number called, hears himself challenged, hears the rattle of the muskets, hears the orders ‘Make ready! Present! Cover him steady, men!’ and is laid hands on – and there’s nothin’! Why, if I see one pursuing party last night – coming up in order, damn ’em, with their tramp, tramp – I see a hundred. And as to firing! Why, I see the mist shake with the cannon, arter it was broad day. But this man” – he had said all the rest, as if he had forgotten my being there – “did you notice anything in him?”

“He had a badly bruised face,” said I, recalling what I hardly knew I knew.

“Not here?” exclaimed the man, striking his left cheek mercilessly with the flat of his hand.

“Yes, there!”

“Where is he?” He crammed what little food was left into the breast of his grey jacket. “Show me the way he went. I’ll pull him down, like a bloodhound. Curse this iron on my sore leg! Give us hold of the file, boy.”

I indicated in what direction the mist had shrouded the other man, and he looked up at it for an instant. But he was down on the rank wet grass, filing at his iron like a madman, and not minding me or minding his own leg, which had an old chafe upon it and was bloody, but which he handled as roughly as if it had no more feeling in it than the file. I was very much afraid of him again, now that he had worked himself into this fierce hurry, and I was likewise very much afraid of keeping away from home any longer. I told him I must go, but he took no notice, so I thought the best thing I could do was to slip off. The last I saw of him, his head was bent over his knee and he was working hard at his fetter, muttering impatient imprecations at it and at his leg. The last I heard of him, I stopped in the mist to listen, and the file was still going.
I fully expected to find a constable in the kitchen, waiting to take me up. But not only was there no constable there, but no discovery had yet been made of the robbery. Mrs Joe was prodigiously busy in getting the house ready for the festivities of the day, and Joe had been put upon the kitchen doorstep to keep him out of the dustpan — an article into which his destiny always led him sooner or later, when my sister was vigorously reaping the floors of her establishment.

“And where the deuce ha’ you been?” was Mrs Joe’s Christmas salutation, when I and my conscience showed ourselves.

I said I had been down to hear the carols. “Ah! Well!” observed Mrs Joe. “You might ha’ done worse.” Not a doubt of that, I thought.

“Perhaps if I warn’t a blacksmith’s wife, and — what’s the same thing — a slave with her apron never off, I should have been to hear the carols,” said Mrs Joe. “I’m rather partial to carols, myself, and that’s the best of reasons for my never hearing any.”

Joe, who had ventured into the kitchen after me as the dustpan had retired before us, drew the back of his hand across his nose with a conciliatory air when Mrs Joe darted a look at him, and when her eyes were withdrawn, secretly crossed his two forefingers, and exhibited them to me as our token that Mrs Joe was in a cross temper. This was so much her normal state that Joe and I would often for weeks together be, as to our fingers, like monumental crusaders as to their legs.*

We were to have a superb dinner, consisting of a leg of pickled pork and greens, and a pair of roast stuffed fowls. A handsome mince pie had been made yesterday morning (which accounted for the mincemeat not being missed), and the pudding was already on the boil. These extensive arrangements occasioned us to be cut off unceremoniously in respect of breakfast, “for I an’t,” said Mrs Joe, “I an’t a-going to have no formal cramming and busting and washing up now, with what I’ve got before me, I promise you!”

So we had our slices served out, as if we were two thousand troops on a forced march instead of a man and boy at home, and we took gulps of milk and water, with apologetic countenances, from a jug on the dresser. In the meantime, Mrs Joe put clean white curtains up, and tacked a new flowered flounce across the wide chimney to replace
the old one, and uncovered the little state parlour across the passage, which was never uncovered at any other time, but passed the rest of the year in a cool haze of silver paper, which even extended to the four little white crockery poodles on the mantelshelf, each with a black nose and a basket of flowers in his mouth, and each the counterpart of the other. Mrs Joe was a very clean housekeeper, but had an exquisite art of making her cleanliness more uncomfortable and unacceptable than dirt itself. Cleanliness is next to godliness, and some people do the same by their religion.

My sister, having so much to do, was going to church vicariously; that is to say, Joe and I were going. In his working clothes, Joe was a well-knit characteristic-looking blacksmith; in his holiday clothes, he was more like a scarecrow in good circumstances than anything else. Nothing that he wore then fitted him or seemed to belong to him – and everything that he wore then grazed him. On the present festive occasion he emerged from his room, when the blithe bells were going, the picture of misery, in a full suit of Sunday penitentials. As to me, I think my sister must have had some general idea that I was a young offender whom an accoucheur policeman had taken up (on my birthday) and delivered over to her, to be dealt with according to the outraged majesty of the law. I was always treated as if I had insisted on being born, in opposition to the dictates of reason, religion and morality, and against the dissuading arguments of my best friends. Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes, the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs.

Joe and I going to church, therefore, must have been a moving spectacle for compassionate minds. Yet what I suffered outside was nothing to what I underwent within. The terrors that had assailed me whenever Mrs Joe had gone near the pantry, or out of the room, were only to be equalled by the remorse with which my mind dwelt on what my hands had done. Under the weight of my wicked secret, I pondered whether the Church would be powerful enough to shield me from the vengeance of the terrible young man, if I divulged to that establishment. I conceived the idea that the time when the banns were read and when the clergyman said, “Ye are now to declare it!” would be the time for me to rise and propose a private conference in the vestry. I am far from being sure that I might not have astonished our small congregation by
resorting to this extreme measure, but for its being Christmas Day and no Sunday."

Mr Wopsle, the clerk at church, was to dine with us; and Mr Hubble the wheelwright and Mrs Hubble; and Uncle Pumblechook (Joe’s uncle, but Mrs Joe appropriated him), who was a well-to-do corn-chandler in the nearest town, and drove his own chaise cart. The dinner hour was half-past one. When Joe and I got home, we found the table laid, and Mrs Joe dressed, and the dinner dressing, and the front door unlocked (it never was at any other time) for the company to enter by, and everything most splendid. And still not a word of the robbery.

The time came, without bringing with it any relief to my feelings, and the company came. Mr Wopsle, united to a Roman nose and a large shining bald forehead, had a deep voice which he was uncommonly proud of; indeed it was understood among his acquaintance that if you could only give him his head, he would read the clergyman into fits; he himself confessed that if the Church was “thrown open”, meaning to competition, he would not despair of making his mark in it. The Church not being “thrown open”, he was, as I have said, our clerk. But he punished the “amens” tremendously, and when he gave out the psalm – always giving the whole verse – he looked all round the congregation first, as much as to say, “You have heard my friend overhead; oblige me with your opinion of this style!”

I opened the door to the company – making believe that it was a habit of ours to open that door – and I opened it first to Mr Wopsle, next to Mr and Mrs Hubble, and last of all to Uncle Pumblechook. NB: I was not allowed to call him Uncle, under the severest penalties.

“Mrs Joe,” said Uncle Pumblechook (a large hard-breathing middle-aged slow man, with a mouth like a fish, dull staring eyes and sandy hair standing upright on his head, so that he looked as if he had just been all but choked, and had that moment come to), “I have brought you, as the compliments of the season – I have brought you, mum, a bottle of sherry wine – and I have brought you, mum, a bottle of port wine.”

Every Christmas Day he presented himself as a profound novelty, with exactly the same words, and carrying the two bottles like dumb-bells. Every Christmas Day, Mrs Joe replied, as she now replied, “Oh, Un-cle Pum-ble-chook! This is kind!” Every Christmas Day, he retorted,
as he now retorted, “It’s no more than your merits. And now are you all bobbish, and how’s Sixpennorth of halfpence?” – meaning me.

We dined on these occasions in the kitchen, and adjourned, for the nuts and oranges and apples, to the parlour, which was a change very like Joe’s change from his working clothes to his Sunday dress. My sister was uncommonly lively on the present occasion, and indeed was generally more gracious in the society of Mrs Hubble than in other company. I remember Mrs Hubble as a little curly sharp-edged person in sky blue, who held a conventionally juvenile position, because she had married Mr Hubble – I don’t know at what remote period – when she was much younger than he. I remember Mr Hubble as a tough high-shouldered stooping old man, of a sawdusty fragrance, with his legs extraordinarily wide apart: so that in my short days I always saw some miles of open country between them when I met him coming up the lane.

Among this good company I should have felt myself, even if I hadn’t robbed the pantry, in a false position. Not because I was squeezed in at an acute angle of the tablecloth, with the table in my chest and the Pumblechookian elbow in my eye, nor because I was not allowed to speak (I didn’t want to speak), nor because I was regaled with the scaly tips of the drumsticks of the fowls, and with those obscure corners of pork of which the pig, when living, had had the least reason to be vain. No, I should not have minded that, if they would only have left me alone. But they wouldn’t leave me alone. They seemed to think the opportunity lost if they failed to point the conversation at me, every now and then, and stick the point into me. I might have been an unfortunate little bull in a Spanish arena, I got so smartingly touched up by these moral goads.

It began the moment we sat down to dinner. Mr Wopsle said grace with theatrical declamation – as it now appears to me, something like a religious cross of the ghost in Hamlet with Richard III – and ended with the very proper aspiration that we might be truly grateful. Upon which my sister fixed me with her eye and said, in a low reproachful voice, “Do you hear that? Be grateful.”

“Especially,” said Mr Pumblechook, “be grateful, boy, to them which brought you up by hand.”

Mrs Hubble shook her head and, contemplating me with a mournful presentiment that I should come to no good, asked, “Why is it that the young are never grateful?” This moral mystery seemed too
much for the company until Mr Hubble tersely solved it by saying, “Naterally wicious.” Everybody then murmured “True!” and looked at me in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner.

Joe’s station and influence were something feebler (if possible) when there was company, than when there was none. But he always aided and comforted me when he could, in some way of his own, and he always did so at dinner time by giving me gravy, if there were any. There being plenty of gravy today, Joe spooned into my plate, at this point, about half a pint.

A little later on in the dinner, Mr Wopsle reviewed the sermon with some severity, and intimated – in the usual hypothetical case of the Church being “thrown open” – what kind of sermon he would have given them. After favouring them with some heads of that discourse, he remarked that he considered the subject of the day’s homily ill chosen, which was the less excusable, he added, when there were so many subjects “going about”.

“True again,” said Uncle Pumblechook. “You’ve hit it, sir! Plenty of subjects going about, for them that know how to put salt upon their tails. That’s what’s wanted. A man needn’t go far to find a subject, if he’s ready with his saltbox.” Mr Pumblechook added, after a short interval of reflection, “Look at pork alone. There’s a subject! If you want a subject, look at pork!”

“True, sir. Many a moral for the young,” returned Mr Wopsle, and I knew he was going to lug me in, before he said it, “might be deduced from that text.”

(“You listen to this,” said my sister to me, in a severe parenthesis.)

Joe gave me some more gravy.

“Swine,” pursued Mr Wopsle, in his deepest voice, and pointing his fork at my blushes, as if he were mentioning my Christian name, “Swine were the companions of the prodigal.* The gluttony of swine is put before us as an example to the young.” (I thought this pretty well in him who had been praising up the pork for being so plump and juicy.) “What is detestable in a pig is more detestable in a boy.”

“Or girl,” suggested Mr Hubble.

“Of course, or girl, Mr Hubble,” assented Mr Wopsle, rather irritably, “but there is no girl present.”

“Besides,” said Mr Pumblechook, turning sharp on me, “think what you’ve got to be grateful for. If you’d been born a squeaker—”
“He was, if ever a child was,” said my sister, most emphatically.

Joe gave me some more gravy.

“Well, but I mean a four-footed squeaker,” said Mr Pumblechook. “If you had been born such, would you have been here now? Not you—”

“Unless in that form,” said Mr Wopsle, nodding towards the dish.

“But I don’t mean in that form, sir,” returned Mr Pumblechook, who had an objection to being interrupted, “I mean, enjoying himself with his elders and betters, and improving himself with their conversation, and rolling in the lap of luxury. Would he have been doing that? No, he wouldn’t. And what would have been your destination?” — turning on me again — “You would have been disposed of for so many shillings according to the market price of the article, and Dunstable the butcher would have come up to you as you lay in your straw, and he would have whipped you under his left arm, and with his right he would have tucked up his frock to get a penknife from out of his waistcoat pocket, and he would have shed your blood and had your life. No bringing up by hand then. Not a bit of it!”

Joe offered me more gravy, which I was afraid to take.

“He was a world of trouble to you, ma’am,” said Mrs Hubble, commiserating my sister.

“Trouble?” echoed my sister, “Trouble?” and then entered on a fearful catalogue of all the illnesses I had been guilty of, and all the acts of sleeplessness I had committed, and all the high places I had tumbled from, and all the low places I had tumbled into, and all the injuries I had done myself, and all the times she had wished me in my grave and I had contumaciously refused to go there.

I think the Romans must have aggravated one another very much, with their noses. Perhaps they became the restless people they were in consequence. Anyhow, Mr Wopsle’s Roman nose so aggravated me, during the recital of my misdemeanours, that I should have liked to pull it until he howled. But all I had endured up to this time was nothing in comparison with the awful feelings that took possession of me when the pause was broken which ensued upon my sister’s recital, and in which pause everybody had looked at me (as I felt painfully conscious) with indignation and abhorrence.

“Yet,” said Mr Pumblechook, leading the company gently back to the theme from which they had strayed, “Pork — regarded as biled — is rich too, ain’t it?”