Charles Dickens'

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

A retelling by

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For Ailsa.
With thanks for everything.

My story is a long one. There are many twists and turns in my tale. Many people. Many events. All of these will slot together in the end like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

But time is short.

I will be brief.

In this slim volume, I will focus on five people.

Two men. One honest; one a criminal.

Two women. One heartbroken; one who had no heart to break.

And myself: Philip Pirrip, known as Pip, who loved them all.



THE FIRST STAGE OF PIP'S GREAT EXPECTATIONS



1

My story begins on a bleak, cold Christmas Eve.

Picture this: it's late afternoon. A flat area of marshland lies beside the great grey river Thames. A chill wind is blowing across it from the distant sea. A church stands all alone in that vast wilderness. And in the graveyard, also standing all alone, is a small boy. He is reading the headstones of his mother, father and five little brothers.

The boy starts to cry.

And then a terrible shout rips the air: "Stop your noise or I'll cut your throat!"

A man rises from the ground. He is soaked to the skin, his grey clothes covered in mud. His flesh is torn and bleeding. Iron chains bind his legs.

The man grabs the boy, turns him upside down and shakes the child until his pockets have emptied. One small chunk of bread falls out, which the man eats as if he is starving.

He asks, "Where's your mother, boy?"

The boy points to the gravestone.

"Dead, eh?" the man says. "And your father too? Who do you live with?"

"My sister, sir – Mrs Joe," the boy replies. "She's the wife of Joe Gargery, the blacksmith, sir."

"Blacksmith, eh?"

The man looks at his chains.

He tells the boy to bring him food and an iron file from the blacksmith's forge first thing in the morning. He says there's a second man out on the marshes, who will eat the little boy alive if he fails to return with the goods. Then he disappears into the dark, and the terrified boy runs home.



2

That small, terrified boy was me.

I ran all the way home that Christmas Eve, but more terror lay in wait.

As I burst through the door, Joe warned me that my sister was on the rampage. She had gone out looking for me. When she returned, I was beaten with "Tickler" – the stick my sister saved for such occasions.

Joe was as strong as Hercules, but he would never stand up to my sister when she was in a rage. I later learned that Joe's father had been a violent man. Joe had seen the damage a strong man could do to his wife, and Joe was a dear, gentle soul. He had no wish to follow in his father's footsteps. Joe did his best to shield me from my sister, but both of us endured her tantrums, and it gave us a kind of bond. Joe and I were the best of friends.

And now I had to steal an iron file from him. The thought felt like a gravestone weighing me down.

*

That same night we heard the great guns firing in the marshes.

"That's another convict off," said Joe. "There was one last night too."

I asked what he meant, but my sister answered.

"They've escaped," she said. "From the hulks. The prison ships."

"Who's put into prison ships? And why?" I asked.

"People who murder," my sister said. "People who rob and do all sorts of bad things. And they always begin by asking too many questions. Get along to bed!"

I was never allowed a candle. I climbed the stairs in the dark and spent the night in terror. When I slept, I dreamt that I was drifting downriver, passing the gibbet where they hanged robbers like myself.

As soon as the black sky began to lighten, I crept down the stairs. Every floorboard seemed to scream "Stop, thief!"

I stole bread from the pantry. Cheese. Brandy. A large pork pie.

I stole a file from Joe's tools in the forge.

Then I ran for the marshes.