

CHAPTER 1

A meat pie

I never saw my mother, father or five little brothers. I only knew their names from their gravestones behind our little church.

We lived in a small village on the edge of the marshes, where the river joins the sea. One evening, I sat on the grass next to my dead family and looked across the wet, grey land. It was the night before Christmas. A cold wind came from the sea. It seemed to call my name: 'Pip, Pip!'

'Don't say a word!' a terrible voice shouted suddenly. 'Or I'll cook your heart and eat it!'

A large man appeared from behind the gravestones. His clothes were dirty and he had a heavy piece of iron around his leg.



'Please don't eat my heart, sir*,' I said.

'What's your name?' said the man. 'Tell me – quick!'

'Pip, sir.'

'Where are your mother and father?' he asked.

'There, sir,' I said.

He jumped and quickly turned around.

* In Dickens' time, people called strangers 'sir' or 'madam'.

'There, sir,' I said again, pointing at the gravestones. 'Oh,' he said. 'Who do you live with?'

'My sister, sir. She's married to Joe Gargery, the blacksmith.'

'Blacksmith, eh?' he said. He looked down at the iron around his leg. Then he put his face close to mine.

'I want food and a file,' he said. 'Do you know what a file is?'

'Yes, sir,' I said. 'Joe uses files.'

'You bring food and a file to me, tomorrow morning, early. You see that tree on the marshes? I'll wait there.'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'Don't say a word about me to anyone.'

'No, sir,' I said.

'When a boy breaks his word,' he said, 'I find him in his warm bed at midnight. Then I eat his heart.'

His nose was touching mine.

'Yes, sir. Can I go now?'

I ran home without stopping.

My sister was twenty years older than me. She did not like children and was not kind to me. Her husband, Joe Gargery, was the kindest man in the world.

'Where have you been?' she said when I came in to the kitchen. She hit my head. Joe was sitting by the fire.

'To the gravestones,' I said.

'Gravestones!' she said. 'You can thank me that *you're* not under a gravestone.'

I wasn't frightened of my sister, but I was frightened of the man on the marshes. Did he really eat boys' hearts? My hair stood up on my head.

Later, we heard guns across the marshes.

'What's that?' I asked Joe.

'It's the prison ship,' said Joe. 'On the sea over the marshes.'

'Why are they firing guns?' I asked.

'The guns mean a prisoner has escaped from the ship,' said Joe. 'Sometimes they jump off and swim to the marshes. One prisoner escaped last night, and now there's a second one. Don't worry, Pip – you're safe here.'

I didn't feel safe.

'Stop asking questions and get to bed,' said my sister, and she hit the back of my head.

I did not sleep that night. Early the next morning, I went quietly downstairs. I fetched a file from outside the house and took a meat pie from the kitchen cupboard.



It was cold and grey on the marshes. Before I reached the tree, I saw the man. I called to him, but when he turned around, it was a different man! This man was also dirty and he had iron around his leg, but he looked like a gentleman. He tried to catch me so I ran quickly past him.

I found my prisoner at the tree. He said nothing when I gave him the pie and the file. He ate like a hungry dog and he looked half-dead.

'I think you're ill,' I said.

'I think you're right, boy,' he said. He looked around him. 'Have you brought anyone with you?'

'No, sir!' I said.

'I believe you,' he said and ate some more. 'You're a good boy.'

'You're not saving any food for the other prisoner,' I said.

He stopped eating. 'What other prisoner?'

'I saw him – over there,' I said, pointing. 'I thought it was you.'

He took hold of my arm.

'Didn't you hear the guns last night?' I asked. 'Another prisoner escaped from the ship – after you.'

He looked towards the sea. 'There are so many strange sounds on these marshes,' he said.

'He looked like a gentleman,' I said.

'A gentleman!' The look on the prisoner's face was terrible. 'I know him.'

He pushed the rest of the pie into his pocket. Then he looked at the iron on his leg.

'Give me the file, boy.'

He started to file the iron on his leg. He worked hard and fast, talking angrily to himself.

'I have to go now,' I said, but he didn't hear me.

When I got back to the house, Joe and my sister were in the kitchen.

'Happy Christmas, Pip!' said Joe.

'And where have you been this time?' said my sister.

Luckily she was cooking the dinner so she couldn't hit me. But every time she went near the kitchen cupboard, my heart stopped. The pie!

Joe and I put on our best Sunday clothes. Joe's uncle, Mr Pumblechook, was coming for Christmas dinner. My sister was always very nice to him because he was an important man in the town with his own shop.

'Mrs Gargery!' said Mr Pumblechook when he arrived. 'I have brought you two bottles of wine.'



'Oh, you are so kind, Uncle,' said my sister. 'And I have made your favourite pie!'

I felt ill.

'And how is this child?' said Mr Pumblechook, pulling me towards him by my ear.

'Trouble,' answered my sister. 'Always trouble.'

At dinner, they would not leave me alone.

'You are lucky to be at this table,' Mr Pumblechook told me.

'He is,' agreed my sister.

Joe put a piece of meat on my plate.

'You are lucky to have meat for your dinner,' said my sister.

'He is,' agreed Mr Pumblechook.

When we finished eating, Mr Pumblechook's face was red. 'That was a wonderful dinner,' he said, 'but I think I can eat just a little bit more.'

'Of course, Uncle,' said my sister. 'I will get the pie!'

Trouble was coming. I waited. My sister shouted something from the other room. I got up from the table and ran to the front door. At the same moment, there was a loud bang on the door. I opened it. A group of soldiers stood there. They were holding a pair of handcuffs.

'We want to speak to you,' they said.