

Penguin



Readers

CHARLES DICKENS



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CHAPTER ONE

The prison ships

My father's family name was Pirrip, and my first name was Philip. When I was young, I couldn't say long words, so I called myself Pip. Soon, everybody was calling me Pip.

I never saw my father or my mother – all I had ever seen were their names on the **tombstone** near the church by the wide river. The church was a mile from the village, in flat fields where the wind blew in across the **marshes**. One cold late afternoon, when I was seven, I was visiting the tombstone – and the five little tombstones of my brothers – when I heard a deep, rough voice.

“Don't move, or I'll cut your throat!”

It was a terrible man, with wet, grey clothes and an **iron shackle** on his ankle. He had no hat, and wore broken shoes. I could feel him **shaking** with cold as his hands went around my neck.

“Oh! Don't cut my throat, please.” I was **terrified** and could hardly speak.

“What's your name?” asked the man. “Quick!”

“Pip.”

“Where do you live?”

I pointed across the **lonely** marshes to the village. The man stared at me for a moment and then picked me up, turned me over, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them except

a piece of dry bread which he ate hungrily. He put me down on a tombstone.

“Where’s your mother?” he asked.

“There,” I said, and pointed at her tombstone.

“And that’s your father next to her?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“So, who do you live with?” he asked. “If I let you live, which I haven’t decided yet.”

“My sister,” I said. “Mrs Joe Gargery. She’s the wife of Joe Gargery, the **blacksmith**.”

The man thought for a moment and looked down at his ankle. “Do you know what a **file** is?” he asked, his hands still tight around my neck.

“Yes.”

“Bring me a file and some food early tomorrow morning,” he said, “or I’ll cut your heart out. I’m not alone, you know. There’s a **cruel** young man with me. If you don’t come back, he’ll find you, cut out your heart, and eat it.”

I agreed to bring him some food and a file, if I could, and he lifted me down from the tombstone.

“Good night, sir,” I said and ran off across the empty marshes as fast as I could. As I ran, I looked around me for the cruel young heart-eating man, but I could not see anybody.

My sister was twenty years older than me and had looked after me all of my life. Everyone in the village called her Mrs Joe. She

was a tall woman with black eyes and rough, red skin. I had often felt her heavy hand or her stick across my back, and so had her husband, Joe. Joe was a strong man, with blue eyes and fair hair, and he was kind and happy, but not very intelligent. Mrs Joe was usually angry with Joe, or with me, and Joe often tried to protect me from his wife.

Joe's **forge** was next door to our house. When I got home, the forge was closed, and Joe was sitting alone in the kitchen.

"Mrs Joe's out looking for you," warned Joe. "She's got her stick, she'll be back in a minute, and you'll be in trouble. Hide behind the door."

I took Joe's advice, but when Mrs Joe came in she found me at once and hit me several times. I ran to Joe and hid behind his huge leg.

"Where have you been, you naughty boy?" she cried.

"To the church, to look at the tombstones," I answered.

"If it wasn't for me," said Mrs Joe, "you'd have been there yourself a long time ago. Who looked after you when your parents died?"

"You did," I answered.

"I don't know why!" she said. "I would never do it again. It's bad enough being a blacksmith's wife without being your mother, too!"

It was Christmas Eve, and I had to help Mrs Joe get the dinner ready for the next day. While I helped, I wondered how to get food to the man in the marshes. Since it was Christmas, there

was a lot of food in the house. I could take some if I was careful. If Mrs Joe caught me, she would beat me. But then I thought about the young man who would cut out my heart and eat it.

Just before I went to bed, I heard the noise of a gun.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s a gun on the prison ships out in the river,” said Joe.

“Why are they **firing** it?”

“A prisoner has escaped, again,” said Mrs Joe. “One escaped yesterday, too. Now that’s enough questions.”

“Who do they put on the prison ships?” I asked.

“I said no more questions!” shouted my sister, standing up. “People are put on the prison ships because they’re **criminals**. They steal and murder and do lots of bad things. And they begin their lives of crime by asking too many questions. Now, go to bed!”

I went upstairs in the dark, terrified of what I had to do. If I did not steal the food, the young man would cut out my heart and eat it. But if I did, would I go to the prison ships for stealing from my sister? I slept little that night, and when I did, I had terrible dreams about cruel young men and prison ships.

CHAPTER TWO

Christmas dinner

Very early the next morning, I went silently down to the kitchen. It was still dark, so I could not see very well, and I had little time. I took some bread and a piece of cheese. Then I found a big pie on a **shelf**, and I took that, too. I also took some **brandy** from a stone bottle. The brandy bottle was full, and I did not want Mrs Joe to see that some of it had gone, so I poured some water from another bottle to fill the brandy bottle again. There was a door from the kitchen into Joe's forge, so I went and found a file there. Then I ran out of the house. The fog was thick on the marshes and I was shaking with cold and fear as I ran to the church.

I was nearly there when I saw him. He was sitting, asleep, with his back to me, so I went up to him and touched him on the shoulder. He jumped up, but it was not the same man. He was dressed in grey and he had an iron shackle on his ankle, but this man was younger and wearing a hat. He ran off into the dark.

"It's the cruel young man!" I thought, my heart beating with fear.

I reached the church and my man was waiting there. I gave him the food and he ate quickly and hungrily, like a dog.

"Did you tell anyone about me?" he asked. "Has anyone followed you?"

"No," I said. "Are you going to leave anything for your friend?"

“Who?”

“The young man,” I said. “He looked hungry.”

“Looked? When?”

“Just now.”

“Where?”

“Over there,” I pointed. “I thought it was you. He was dressed like you, but he had a hat.”

“I heard a gun last night,” said the man. “Another prisoner has escaped. It must be him. I’ll kill him if I find him!”

Then he picked up the file and started to work like a madman on the iron shackle around his ankle. I ran back home worrying about my terrible crime. Would Mrs Joe have discovered the missing pie? Would the police come to arrest me?

Christmas dinner was at half past one. Mr Wopsle, an important man in the village, came to eat with us, and Uncle Pumblechook, a rich man who lived in the nearest town. Uncle Pumblechook came in his **carriage** and always brought two bottles of wine. I sat at a **corner** of the table, was not allowed to speak, and was given the worst pieces of food. But I was next to Joe and he gave me some better meat from his plate.

“This boy has been a lot of trouble to you,” Uncle Pumblechook said to my sister. “Is he **grateful**?”

Mrs Joe shook her head.

“Why,” Uncle Pumblechook continued, “are the young never grateful?”