

Nameless

Had my Author favoured me with a name from the start, my life might have turned out differently. I might have been a heroine, with my own romance and adventures; but as things are, Mr Dickens pushes me on stage like a pantomime figure, ruddy-faced, in a burlap apron stuck with needles and pins, sawing away at a loaf clutched to my bosom - no chance of Romance for me after that! - and pulls me off sharpish with the hook, when the leading actor, the Boy - he has a name of course, he has two in fact, with an explanation of how he came by them - must pursue his Destiny.

I had my Dreams too! But nobody is interested in me, or my dreams. I dream of flashing my black eyes and tossing my raven locks - a seductress, a villainess, hard-hearted Proprietress of a commercial enterprise, Mistress of a criminal gang, Pirate captain! - what might I not have achieved, if I had been named!

I was brought up like Miss Estella, to hate and despise men: I was as fit to break hearts as she, for mine was broken already. But no, I must be married off to the blacksmith, my feelings set at naught, made into a figure of fun, I must not even be named by my own name, though I assure you I had one. The proof of which is, that after I am dead and buried and the tale almost at an end, the Author has the kindness to let my true name be appended to the tale, an afterthought, a loose end being tied up neatly. Do you wonder at my anger?

When I lived, I was 'Mrs Joe Gargery', 'Mother Gargery', though in reality I was mother to none but the brother who came into existence late, and ruined my life. The ungrateful brat never did me the honour of addressing me by my name, mentioning me only as 'my sister.' Do you wonder that I could not like him? Even my own husband, who ought, if anyone ought, to have addressed me respectfully and lovingly by my name, would only mutter against me in the corner with Pip. To have no-one in the world (not even your Author) who calls you by your own name, is to be neglected indeed.

Of those who read my tale (or at least, the tale in which I feature, for Mr Dickens does not choose to tell *my* tale) not every reader comes to it of his own free will. Some are reluctant students, many from America, sadly put upon, forced by heartless teachers to write character studies, but having little time or inclination to read the whole. They have watched Mr Lean's fine film. They plead for help on internet forums. Why, they want to know, do I and my husband have the same name? Is this what has made me so violent? I am Mrs Joe Gargery, from which they assume that my given name is Joe, perhaps like Jo in 'Little Women'. With no heads for detail, and no hearts for ploughing through fifty-nine chapters (or even fifty-eight, for that is the one where my name is at last revealed) they theorise that my quickness of temper stems from jealousy, from having to share a name with my husband!

Here I lie, escaping from reality and a swollen brain in a broken skull, drifting off in misty dreams. My anger has melted away. Is there a future for me? Alas, no, I am merely an inconvenience, to be dispatched finally, when cow-eyed Biddy appears on the scene to usurp my place. Oh, where did I go wrong?

I was born, a girl, my first mistake. Had I known what lay in store for me, I should have jumped out of life at once, and started that line of little lozenges in the graveyard, who were my brothers. What sort of parents, dear Reader, do you suppose mine were? Where do you think I learned my hectoring and violent ways? My parents brought me up 'by hand', just as I brought up Pip: how should I know another way of going on? I survived at home by giving back as good as I got, scream for scream, insult for insult; and where by reason of size I could not return blow for blow, I learned the satisfaction of hair-raising rages and tantrums.

You wish to know why, at the age of twenty, I should remain in my home in such uncongenial circumstances, why no young men paid attentions to me, or why, at the very least, I had not escaped to drudge for pay, for others?

My Ma forbade it.

Like many an elder daughter, I was my Ma's unpaid skivvy, looking after the younger children and keeping house for a Mother who spent her days in bed (where in truth I preferred her to be, since she rose only to berate me and scream at me for what I had done or left undone) and a Pa, liberal with blows and curses, but a perfect miser when it came to providing for his family.

I longed to escape, into service, or to work behind a counter in a shop, but my departure would have seriously inconvenienced my Parents. I knew I should be keeping house for them till both were dead, no hope for me of meeting a young man (or an old one, I was not particular) and being married from that house. Do you still wonder at my temper?

Fortunate I was then, that when I was twenty my Pa succumbed to the drink, meeting a violent end outside a tavern; fortunate too that my Ma lingered only to give birth to yet another brother, though I did not appreciate at first how unfortunate for me this one's living was to be; had I been more quick-witted, I would have solved that problem for myself, and Mr Dickens might have made me the Tragic heroine of a dark and horrible story.

On my Ma's death, my first impulse was to throw off my pinny, let my hair down, and run laughing down the street, to celebrate my freedom - as I imagined. But in the days which followed, it was made plain to me, by the neighbours and relatives who appeared from nowhere, to gorge themselves on my food and discuss my situation, that my new brother - whom I had omitted to take account of in my celebrations - was the responsibility - of Me! Far from being fancy free, I had merely stepped from one prison into another. I was in the position of some wicked girl who has disgraced her family and must carry her shame, except that my burden was no shame of mine, merely part of the trap that had clanged shut on my hopes.

It was clear to me that none of those solemn black crows, my upright and god-fearing Aunts and Cousins, had any intention of contributing to my income, or offering me and the baby a home. I was on my own. Or rather, not on my own. If I had been, I might have sought work in any number of households. But burdened with my Ma's baby, with no means of providing for us both, the future was looking uncertain. Did not my parents leave provision for us? No? Leave him at the foundling hospital, they said. Oh, that I had done so! I have been ill rewarded for my duty.

The rent was paid for the next fortnight. After that, we were on the street, I must sell all our belongings; the workhouse beckoned. Our few sticks of furniture were just that, sticks - those that had survived my father's propensity, when the house was cold through lack of coals, for siezing the nearest chair or small table, breaking it apart with his bare hands, and fueling the fire with it. There were no savings - how could there be, when my mother was kept so short of money she had to plead and make promises to the collectors to keep a roof over our heads, and she and I often went hungry to bed.

At the funeral, the other mourners entertained themselves by discussing my predicament. Each family had good reasons why they could not take us in (I would not have gone with any of them) and could not spare any money for our upkeep (I would have flung it in their faces). Though they did raise a small collection for us, 'to tide us over' as they put it. My Aunt Warne thought I might get work, as I was a competent housekeeper and kept a clean parlour - if a place could be found for the

boy. My Aunt Pirrip thought I should look around and fix on some widower or bachelor, who might take me with the child. They went through all the unmarried men of the village, who might be supposed to be wanting a wife, and who by virtue of poverty or age could not afford to be particular. Among them, the blacksmith's son, a soft, stupid boy, but a hard worker who had kept his mother and his idle drunken father, till his parents too passed away. It seemed the only possibility. I resolved to put myself in his way.

To be brief, he was biddable; he offered to keep company with me, and was willing to take the child when we were married, and thereby my prospects of true love, of a husband I might respect, of children of my own, were all snuffed out forever.

We might yet have lived in happiness of a sort. Unlucky for me then, that Mr Dickens interested himself in the tale of my brother, and I was doomed to serve out my days as a comic figure, providing light relief in the intervals of my brother's adventures, and to die, unmourned, of no further interest, my own name unknown by such as you, Reader, until you finally reach the book's end.