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Bleak Expectations

Written by Mark Evans

Published by Corsair

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BLEAK EXPECTATIONS

Sir Philip Bin

Edited with an introduction and notes by
Mark Evans



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INTRODUCTION

In my experience, many introductions to classic novels do one thing very well: they ruin the story you're about to read. If an introduction is going to discuss the plot, it should really be an afterword or appendix, but your typical academic has to stick it at the front just to boast that they've actually read the massive book, even if it does ruin it for everyone else.

This introduction will not do that.

Though I have read the book.

Honestly.

First, a word on the author. Sir Philip Bin is almost unknown outside academic circles these days, yet he was the best-selling author of the nineteenth century, selling more than Eliot, Trollope or even Dickens. Sadly, after the Victorian era his fame dwindled until he actually became the worst-selling author of the twentieth century, selling less even than some very

bad writers who should never have had books published in the first place.

Indeed, by the start of the twenty-first century he was a forgotten man, and his books were thought lost to the world – until that fateful afternoon in the British Library when, full of intellectual curiosity, I was ferreting around in the book stacks, eager for a new area of study.

All right, I was actually full of a big lunch and eager for somewhere to have a nap.

Eventually I found a comfortable-looking corner in which there was a handy manuscript I could use as a makeshift pillow. The instant my head settled on it, I knew I had made a colossal literary discovery. In truth, the realization came only when I visited the lavatory after waking, washed my hands and glanced in the mirror to see imprinted on my face the inky impression of a title page: '*Bleak Expectations* Sir Philip Bin'.

I rushed back to seize the precious manuscript and decided it must be immediately reprinted. The fact that the author was long-dead and therefore the royalties would entirely come to me barely even crossed my mind.

And here it is: *Bleak Expectations*, Sir Philip's most autobiographical work, a book that, in its original 1872 printing, sold 40,000 copies – one for every person who could read in Britain at that time.

The harrowing yet ultimately triumphant story of how— Ah, no. I said I wasn't going to do that. So I won't.

But I really, really have read it, even the massively long, complicated paragraphs with words we don't really use any more and stupid Victorian syntax.

I have added explanatory footnotes throughout.[1] They appear at the bottom of each relevant page, not like some books where the notes are all at the end and you have to keep different fingers jammed in different bits of book to read it properly, usually resulting in a sprained finger or angrily thrown-away book.

If you want to tweet your thoughts while reading, don't. You're supposed to be reading. Get off the Internet.

For the same reason, you can't find me on Facebook.

Though, if you want, you can find a short clip of me on YouTube shouting, 'Get off the Internet and keep reading!'

Finally, I hope you enjoy Sir Philip's tale as much as I did.

Because, for the last time, I really have read it.

Mark Evans
The British Library
About to have a nap, 2012

[1] Look! A footnote!

CHAPTER THE FIRST

In Which I Am Birthified And Acquire A Family

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life or whether that station will be held by anybody else should be perfectly obvious. After all, what manner of a man would set down the story of his own life if at the end of it he came out looking like an idiot, buffoon or wally-chops?[1] Only an idiot, buffoon or wally-chops would do thusly and, barring one incident involving a lack of trousers and an unnaturally curious horse, I have never been one of those.

You, the malodorous public, know me as Sir Philip Bin: best-selling novelist, Member of Parliament, accidental yet still best-ever prime minister, scourge of the French, hammer of the Belgians and adjustable

[1] Derived from the Olde Englisheee 'wolly', a fool, twit or sillyton, and 'cheps', face, head or, in the north-east, deep-fried potatoes. See Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, 'The Loss Adjuster's Tale' '. . . he weir an wally-chops of sight, all blethy and tistawint'.

spanner of the Italians, discoverer of the West Pole, hider of the source of the Nile, inventor of the Scotch egg, the Welsh roll and the Irish bun, adventurer, explorer, philanthropist, misanthropist, xenophobe and nine-time all-England foreigner-baiting gold medallist.

But I was not always so.

Indeed, regarding my not-always-so-ness, there has recently been much speculation in the press as to my true origins: both the *Expressington Times* and the *Daily Standagraphian* have run scurrilous, fib-filled stories that have made my blood run hotter than a boiled kettle in an angry volcano. Hence this tome, my attempt to stop that speculation in its tracks like a shot elephant or a lazy train. With this book I shall set the rumour mill at rest and stop it grinding the flour of gossip, from which cometh the bread of scandal and thence the sandwich of despair, filled with the beef of misery and the mustard of grrrr.

Many clues as to my early life are to be found in my novels. *A Story of Two Towns*, *Miserable Mansion*, *The Old Shop of Stuff*, *Graham Grambleby*, *Massive Dorritt* – all my books contain hints at the truth. Apart from *Lustful Killer Bees from Mars*, which, I'll grant you, is almost entirely fictional.

But now the time has come to cast away hints, clues and obliqueness and instead present the unadulterated story of my fascinating life, with its endless progression of trials, set-backs and conveniently spaced cliff-hanger endings. For adventure has followed me like a

dog follows a man with bacon trousers and beef-steak underpants; that is to say keenly, and with a good deal of slobbering.

I was born in 1806, having been conceived the year before in celebration of Admiral Nelson's victory at the battle of Trafalgar. Family tradition has it that my father, Thomas Bin, heard the news, exclaimed, 'Hurrah for the King', then immediately donned a three-cornered hat and eye-patch before boarding my mother, Agnes, and giving her a swift broadside amidships. Whatever the truth, some months later my mother was heavy with child or, as the local poor women described it, 'all lumpy with a sex-meringue'.

I am told my birth was easy. But I did not need to be told, for I was there, and remember it as well as I remember anything of importance to me, such as my hat size (nearly clever), my shoe size (exactly one foot, obviously) and my blood group (Proper).[2] At one moment all was amniotic calm, my mother's heartbeat soothing me as I nestled on the placental pillow within her, then the next there was the dread sensation of falling as Nature's cruel but necessary process expelled me into the world. Fortunately, my birth-plummet was arrested by the pair of Dr Helplady's reinforced pregno-bloomers my mother was wearing, otherwise the first acquaintance I should have made in my life would have been with a hard stone floor, and I am quite sure we would not have got along.

[2] Nineteenth-century blood groups were Royal, Aristo, Proper, *Hoi Polloi*, Riff Raff and Eeurgh Negative.

As I birthed out, my mother was in the midst of a harpsichord recital for my father, but being made of stern British stuff, she bravely continued to the end of the piece before presenting me as a baby-shaped encore. Alas, the only music I could provide was a childish wailing in an utterly different key from that of the Purcell my mother had recently completed and, furious at the cacophony, my father immediately left the house to do business abroad.

My father's family name being Bin, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Flip-top Bin. Over the years this was shortened to Ip, then extended once more to the far more name-worthy name of Pip. My mother, however, took my original mispronunciation personally, decided she had given birth to a twitiot and, embarrassmented, retreated to her room for a year to blush.

With my father abroad and my mother upstairs, I was raised by the housekeeper, Maggotty.[3] Ah, Maggotty. Dear Maggotty. Dear, sweet, warm, strange-smelling Maggotty. Her starched apron was my maternal bosom in those early months, her starched cap the boundary of my vision. In fact, my main memory of her is starch. She had a motto: 'If it moves, starch it. If it does not move, starch it. If it seems it has

[3] *Cf* Thackeray's Wormitty in *Vanity Fair II: Judgment Day*. Maggotty and Wormitty are the Biblical twin exotic dancers who slew the Hashemidiaskanite King Zedelshratt with a pair of trained assassin-chickens. Book of Hens, 3: 4–19999999999999999999.9.

enough starch already, it hasn't, so starch it again.'

The kitchen was Maggotty's domain and hence the kitchen was my playroom. And what toys I had! Copper kettles full of boiling water, great pans of bubbling soup, pointed skewers, sharp knives . . . Among my first words were 'Ow', 'That hurts' and 'Can I have some real toys that won't hurt me, please?' Or at least they would have been, if I could talk at that age, which I couldn't. But Maggotty would just smile her strange, starchy smile and encourage me to go exploring in the hot pastry oven.

Actually, now I come to think of it, I despised Maggotty.

Fortunately, my mother eventually emerged from her room, and Maggotty was given notice to leave. She took the news as well as would any person taking news incredibly badly, viciously attacking my young self with a meat cleaver. Alas for her vengeance but un-alas for my safety, the repeated massive starchings she had applied to my clothing had left me encased in an impenetrably hard shell and I suffered no injury. Poor Maggotty – hoist by her own starchy petard.

Actually, I don't mean poor Maggotty, I mean eeurgh horrid Maggotty, good riddance, yuk.

To my delight, after Maggotty left, my mother introduced me to the newest member of the household. It was a sister, and not just any old sister, it was my sister. Her name was Pippa, a name not dissimilar to my own name, which was Pip. In fact, it differed only in as much as it had an extra *p* at the end, as well

as an additional *a* and, at the front, a silent and invisible *g*.

There were many things I wanted to know about this new sister of mine. Where had she come from? Was she from Mrs Sellstuff's village shop, like an apple, a sack of flour or a portable oik-poker? Or had she come from London like a letter, a Cockney or diphtheria? My mother shook her head, no, and told me that Pippa was the product of prayer and stern application by herself and my father. My young head cared not what 'stern application' meant, but surely my parents practised it assiduously, for some short time later a second sister joined us.

This sister, too, was mine, and her name was Poppy, again a name not dissimilar to my own, differing only enough that if, at some future point, Poppy was perhaps to be summoned by my mother, I should not make the mistake of thinking she was in fact summoning me, Pip, a mistake which, if made, might result in me inadvertently responding and consequently attending a girlish occasion such as a dress-fitting or embroidery class, despite being a boy and not a girl like Poppy, though with regard to my other sister, Pippa, at certain times when my mother summoned her the wind would blow away the final syllable of her name turning it, in its new, wind-created brevity, into my name Pip, thereby resulting in me attending an event intended for her, namely the aforementioned dress-fitting or embroidery class, thus indicating that my parents had never properly

thought through the whole almost homonymous name thing, though, that said, even if the Pip and Pippa confusion did happen occasionally, there never was a Pip and Poppy confusion except once during a thunderstorm.[4]

With their desired number of children achieved, alongside his foreign businessing my father now took up the twin hobbies of cold showers and botany and my mother took up never touching him that way again. But at least my family was complete: my parents Agnes and Thomas, my sisters Pippa and Poppy, and me, Pip Bin.

[4] See? One of those long paragraphs with silly Victorian syntax I mentioned in the introduction. This was in fact the author's attempt on the world's-longest-sentence record, though at 185 words it falls lamentably short. Even in 1874 the record was well over 20,000 words, held by a sentence in Laurence Sterne's almost unreadable first novel *Tristram Brandy*, which he later re-worked into the now famous work *Barry Brandy*.

CHAPTER THE SECOND

Of Growth And Fun And
Meetings Of Future Import

My family may have been complete in as much as I now had as many mothers and fathers and sisters as I was ever to have in the world, but at times it seemed incomplete, due to the absence of my father. For he was a distant man in a very physical sense, his place of business being some four thousand miles away in the recently discovered North Indies, where he was a partner in the famed North India Company, bravely exploiting indigent populations for the greater good of God, King and Country.

I and my sisters missed our father; my mother missed her husband; and as father and husband were one and the same to some or the other, it meant a deal full of wistfulness tinged with saddingtons.

Nevertheless, he regularly sent us parcels of money and rare jewels and, though they were not he, they were a more than adequate substitute, proving that

old adage 'An absent father is easily replaced by lots of money.'[1]

We lived in a large house, Bin Manor, set in several snectares[2] of grounds. The grounds offered plentiful enjoyment for spirited young children, and we were spirited indeed. There were ponds, lakes and tiny oceans, trees and other trees and great manicured lawns on which we played games such as shuffle-hoop, bashy-bat and spong.[3]

When the weather was too ill-tempered for outside activities, we retreated inside, where there were great rooms and corridors in which we played other games, such as pointy-throw, clicky-ball and spang.[4]

Life was splendid. In a time when others less fortunate than ourselves struggled for the most basic amenities, our home brimmed with plenty. Where most folk bathed but once a year, in a festering stream or a puddle, we bathed daily – and not in disease-bearing water, but in healthy, hygienic jam. Oh, the sybaritic delight of wallowing in warm preserves! The soothing feel of the fruity goo sluicing through one's hair! The jammy delight of my mother letting me lick the bath deliciously clean afterwards!

Then there was the food, all richly rare meats and

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[1] One of a number of nineteenth-century adages we now know to be wrong. Others include 'Men seldom make passes at girls who make vases', 'In the Kingdom of the Blind the one-eyed man has the best-looking wife' and 'Money can't buy you gloves'.

[2] In modern terms equivalent to several hundred snacres.

[3] More familiar to us as croquet, cricket and spling.

[4] More familiar to us as darts, snooker and splung.

delicacies. We ate swan, otter, pig, heron, ox and natives from the colonies. For pudding there would be candied fruits, caramelized horse or hen brûlée, often a sparrow trifle or tree cake, sometimes even mouse crumble with chicken custard.

And after these splendid feasts, we would repair to our soft, goose-down beds, beds so luxurious that the goose-down was still attached to the geese. Once, during a particularly fierce winter that bit like an angry, ice-toothed alligator, I accidentally left a window open, and before we could stop it Poppy's entire mattress migrated south to warmer climes. How we laughed! Until she turned blue with cold, at which point we stopped laughing and started crying. Little did I know then that I had just witnessed a precursor to Poppy's eventual— But no, for this is the happy part of my story, and pain and misery must wait until properly invited into the narrative.[5]

We were frolicsome children, Pippa, Poppy and I, constantly joyous and never sad. And whenever Father returned on one of his visits, his cases chock full of gifts, our joy was unrestrained as we bounced and bollibled[6] with happification.

I remember one particular paternal visit well. I had

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[5] Chapter 3 is pretty wretched. Or for truly harrowing stuff, why not try a modern-day misery memoir, like the series of horrible-relative books: *Ow, Daddy, Ow, Keep Your Hands to Yourself Uncle Lionel* and *There Were Three in the Bed and the Little One Said, 'Stop Hitting Me, Mummy'*.

[6] *Cf* nineteenth-century redcoat song: 'Oh, the sight of blown-out guts was horrible, but they were French so we did bollible'.

attained what seemed to me the grand old age of twelve years. Pippa was a year younger, which was a relief to me as a while back she had somehow been older than me for a year or two, and Poppy was a year younger than her, namely ten years old, which was a relief to everyone as she had spent the past few years refusing to grow any older than two and had only recently put on a growth spurt of eight years in four months. It was a bright summer's day, and I and my sisters were returning from a morning's hard fun clodding mud at poor folk, when we saw our mother standing outside the house balanced on one leg and waving her arms like a crazed windmill, a pose she adopted whenever she was excited. To make matters more intriguing yet, she was wearing the special hat she donned only on occasions of great import: bright ribbons attached a whole hollowed-out badger to her head.

'Children! I have news!' she exclaimed exclamatorily.

'What news, Mama?' I asked askatorily.

'Your father has returned home and awaits you in the drawing room!'

We three siblings looked at each other in delight. Could it be true? We immediately ran to the drawing room that we might better ascertain the veracity of our mother's statement.

My nostrils were the first to tell me that Mother had not lied as they swiftly detected that distinctive paternal mix of tobacco, colonial sweat and repressed

emotion. My eyes provided the next sensory confirmation as I entered the room and beheld . . .

'Papa!'

He turned towards us and a smile broke over his face, like a happy egg.

'Children! How good it is to see you! It has been so many years! Ah, Pip . . .' This he addressed to me.

'Papa,' I replied.

'Pippa . . .' Papa said to Pippa.

'Papa!' Pippa replied.

'And Poppy . . .' Papa said to Poppy.

'Papa!' Poppy, too, replied.

'Ah, my Pip and Pippa!' This from Papa to me, Pip, and Pippa.

'Papa.' This from Pippa and me, Pip, to Papa.

'Poppy and Pippa!' This also from Papa, but to Poppy and Pippa.

'Papa!' This from Poppy and Pippa to Papa.

'Pip and Poppy!' This from Papa to me, Pip, and Poppy.

'Papa!' This from Pip and Poppy to Papa.

'My Pip, Pippa and Poppy!' This from Papa to Pip, Pippa and Poppy.

'Papa,' we parroted to Papa, our paternal parent. Were the greetings now finished? They were. But Papa was not.

'Presents! I bring presents for my Pip, Pippa and Poppy! For Poppy a puppy!' At which point he presented a puppy to Poppy. 'For Pip a pipe!' Presently he produced a pipe for me, Pip. 'And for Pippa . . .'

here he paused poignantly '. . . an anvil.'

The sudden lack of the letter *p* was like a punch in the perineum.

'Oh,' was all Pippa could say, as Papa handed her an anvil. Her girlish strength could not bear its weight and she instantly collapsed in a heap on the floor. I would have helped, but was keen to try my new pipe, which I lit immediately. Alas, it was a wooden pipe and burned to cinders within a minute. Meanwhile Poppy's puppy scampered and frolicked like a young dog, which was what it was.

'And now you must come and meet my two business partners, also recently returned from the North Indies.'

Father led us to the house's formal receiving room, the snobatorium, where my still badger-behatted mother was entertaining two gentlemen, and not in a lewd or music-hall-dancery way, but in a proper lady-like manner, which included scones and no touching.

'Gentlemen . . . may I introduce my progeny? This is Pip, Poppy and . . .'

A tortured metallic scraping sound betrayed Pippa's late arrival as she dragged her anvil into the room.

'. . . dear Pippa. Children, this is Mr Skinflint Parsimonious.'

Mr Parsimonious was a man of some height and no little depth and breadth, a man who seemed soft at the edges, like a melting cheese or velvet jigsaw. He wore a brightly striped waistcoat and pantaloons, and

sported mutton-chop whiskers with a veal-cutlet moustache.

'How do you do, sir?' the three of us chimed together, like a greeting-clock. We followed it with a deep curtsy.[7]

'Dear children, how wonderful it is finally to meet you!' His voice was a deep rumble, as of approaching thunder, but warm, friendly thunder portending only good things. 'Now,' he continued, 'I understand,' he went on, 'that your father has already given you gifts,' he verbally proceeded, 'yet I insist you have more for being such delightful children.'

So saying, he reached into his pocket and produced from within a handful of treats. 'See! I have toffees for Pip and Poppy and Pippa! And you must have these gaudy native baubles! And these cushions! And this painting of a lovely sunset!' He produced all these gifts from a large trunk beside him.

'Why, thank you, sir . . .' I began; but he was not yet finished.

'No! No thanks yet, thank you! For there is more to give! Money! Who wants some money? Have a sixpence, Pip. No, dash it all, have a guinea. Five guineas! And gin! All must have gin!'

He instantly produced a flask of gin and filled several pewter cups. 'Drink up! Drink up!'

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[7] Note that even though a boy, Pip also curtsies. Child–adult greeting etiquette was thus: if more girls were present than boys, the curtsy took precedence; if more boys than girls, the formal bow and handshake. If equal numbers of both were present, the ugliest child was sent to its room and the previous rules applied.

The fiery liquid burned a scorching trail right down to my stomach – and yet simultaneously all was smooth and warm and good. My mind was also suddenly clear – what I believe some people call intelli-gin-ce – as I was struck with a thought that seemed terribly clever to my twelve-year-old self.

'Mr Parsimonious, I have realized something. Your name is ironic . . . for you being called Skinflint Parsimonious would imply great meanness, and yet you seem to be the most generous of men.'

He looked at me for a few seconds, with eyes like those of an inquisitive owl or curious herring, then suddenly burst into a peal of rumblesome laughings. 'Why, the boy is quite right! And to think I had never noticed! How clever he is! And as a reward for such cleverness, young Pip, you simply must have this miniature horse!'

A small equine whinny betrayed a horse in the corner, lightly chewing the corner of a long chair.[8] It was no more than the height of a small dog or a large cat, but a horse it was, correct in every proportion save its tail, which was the length of a great shire horse's and therefore flowed out behind it like a hairy stream.[9] Poppy's new puppy immediately ran towards

[8] What we know as a *chaise-longue*. With the Napoleonic Wars still in progress, it was illegal to use French at this time.

[9] Bonsai horses had been popular since their arrival from Japan in the seventeenth century. They were bred from normal-sized horses, which, when pregnant, were housed in stables thirty times larger than normal. This change of scale made the horse think it was much, much smaller than it really was, leading to the birth of a tiny foal. Owners then often grew the

it with a yap of friendship and, sure enough, this small dog was exactly as high as the miniature horse, thereby proving my recent size comparisoning.

'They are to be friends! As are you and I, young Pip!' Mr Parsimonious announced. He seemed a splendid fellow or splellow.

My father clapped his hands with delight. 'Well, now that you two have met and done so handsomely, I shall introduce my other business partner. Children, this is Mr Gently Benevolent.'

This Mr Benevolent stood in stark contrast to Mr Parsimonious. Where the latter was soft and melty-edged, it was as if this other man had been precisely carved into being with a chisel, then honed on a whetstone to a fine edge. He was dressed in black from head to toe and back again, and from beneath a fury-clenched brow, his eyes glinted with obsidian malice.

'How do you do, sir?' We three children repeated our curtsied greeting.

'I do all the better for not having to listen to your childish prattle. Speak to me again and you will find yourselves horse-whipped. With a real horse.' But we did not need a horse-whipping, for his words were simultaneously both sharp and blunt enough to cut and clout in equal quantity. He spun on his heel, not gleefully as would a dancer or giddy schoolgirl but

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tails to incredible lengths and used the animals as rudimentary equine brooms.

angrily as would a thwarted cad or disgruntled navvy, then stalked to the corner of the room where he kicked Poppy's puppy and stood brooding like a sulky, eggless hen.

Alas, despite his obvious violent grumpiness, and because I was probably still a bit drunk from the gin, another clever thought struck me and I sought to impress it upon him.

'Ah, your name, too, is ironic. For Mr Gently Benevolent would imply a loving nature, and yet you appear to be absolutely horrible.'

My regret at my boldness was instant, for he whirled around, hand raised to strike me a blow that doubtless would have felled me, like a small, boy-shaped tree.

'No, Benevolent!' It was my father, leaping to my rescue. 'If there is any hitting of my children to be done, I shall do it!'

In truth, my father was not a keen advocate of corporal punishment, having beaten me only once in my young life after I had broken a vase during a vigorous game of spang. He was abroad at the time, and rather than actually beating me he had sent a long letter from the North Indies describing how he would in theory have beaten me had he been there, an experience in some ways more painful than any physical assault, but in most ways not.

Yet at my father's son-defending words, Mr Benevolent did not immediately set his hand down. Instead, he held it high and tense, a palsy of fury shaking his arm. His face reddened, purpled and

puced, then finally flashed a vivid multi-coloured rainbow of rage. Veins twitched and pulsed in splenetic syncopation. Finally, he lowered his hand and emitted a tremendous snort of anger and disdain, which seemed to say, 'I loathe you Thomas Bin for preventing me from hitting your son and, in addition, your actions have enraged me more than the original infraction, which had already made me pretty damned angry, and you and your family will pay for it many times over indeed, yes, you will, you will, you will, yes, you will.'

Or it might just have been a sneeze.

'Besides,' my father eventually continued, 'we must hurry if we are to catch our boat.'

'You are returning to the North Indies so soon?' This from my mother, who had been quiet thus far due to her badger hat having slipped down to cover her entire head; she had only recently fought free of it.

'No, dear Agnes. For the North Indies no longer exist. We have completely dug them up and sold them for the greater glory of business and the Empire. Hence we go now to . . . the South Indies. And we must hurry if I am to get there, exploit them and return in time for Pip's eighteenth birthday in six years' time. Come, gentlemen!'

My father ushered his business partners from the room. As the still seething Mr Benevolent passed, he tried to flick me on the ear and administer a Chinese burn, but he saw my father watching and, at the last

second, tried to pretend he was going to shake my hand, missed, stumbled and tripped awkwardly over a previously unseen footstool.

'I meant to do that,' he muttered, as he left the room, pausing only to take a glass water-jug from its stand and dash it shatteringly to the floor. 'Whoops.'

I did not feel his actions were entirely accidental, but further reflection was denied me as my father knelt to bid us farewell. 'I go now, dear Pip, Pippa and Poppy . . .'

My sisters immediately blubbed with emotion; I malely held my feelings inside, though I think I heard my left kidney stifle a sniffle.

'But do not be sad! For soon my business shall be complete, and I shall return for good.'

'When, Papa?' asked Poppy.

'Why, in a mere thirty or fifty[10] years. So, you see, not long at all!' With this he kissed us all goodbye, and attempted to do the same for my mother but – alas – her hat chose that precise moment to slip down again, leaving poor Papa with a mouthful of badger snout.

Oh, cruel Fate! For little did we know how much that failed kiss would haunt our mother in the future. Oh, wretched Destiny! For meetings made that day would resonate through the years ahead and not with an uplifting, cathedral-like echo but with a sinister, fearsome echo, such as that in a miserable underground cavern of pain. Oh, dismal Providence! For

[10] The number forty had yet to be invented.

magnificent munificence was soon to be replaced with malicious malevolence – but no, I must restrain my tremulous pen for, as I wrote before, this is the happy part of the story, and pain and misery must wait until properly invited into the narrative.

CHAPTER THE THIRD

Pain And Misery Are Invited
Into The Narrative

A year passed. Then another, then two more, quickly followed by another seven, and I was twenty-three years old. No, wait, the events of this book take place between the ages of birth and twenty-one years old, so that can't be right.

Imagine if some of those years I have just mentioned have not yet passed, that they are fresh and gleaming with hope in an undetermined future. Imagine you have recovered some seven or so of them, and I am but sixteen years old, part man, part boy, rigid with potential and humming with possibility.

Actually, nothing much happened when I was sixteen, so forward one more year and I am seventeen, striving towards manhood with head held high and arms held low for balance. Pippa is but sixteen, blooming like a lady-rose, only without the thorns as she is a kind and generous soul. Poppy is fifteen years

old, curious and questioning, all girlish enthusiasm and frills. Our mother is still our mother, our father is still abroad, having visited once in the intervening years for a period of some eight minutes, Bin Manor is still a happy house, and Britain is still great, mighty and Imperially delicious.

Now, picture a drawing room. In it is a pianoforte at which sits Poppy. She is repeatedly striking a single key: under instruction from her teacher Mr Humswell, she is learning the noble instrument one note at a time. On a sofa sits Pippa, completing her tapestry of the battle of Waterloo, a noble scene of gory patriotism. And who is that on a chair opposite her? Why, it is me, Pip Bin. And what is that I am reading? Why, it is a book entitled *Manliness for Boys*, for I am working hard towards my future man-dom. I have recently bathed, but have not dried myself properly and hence there is a small blob of jam on my ear. Not a man yet, Pip Bin! Because men do not have jam on their ears, they have hair.

You have pictured the room, imagined the people within? Good. Then we may continue.

'That note you are playing is a jolly one, Poppy,' I commented.

'Thank you, dear brother Pip. Mr Humswell insists on starting with the happiest notes.'

'Then he is a capital chap.'[1]

[1] One of a series of popular terms of acclamation ranging from 'capital chap' through 'provincial-city chap', 'market-town chap' and 'really-rather pleasant village chap', all the way down to the frankly insulting 'couple-of-cottages-on-a-bend-in-the-road chap' and 'That man is a total hamlet'.

'Finished!' Pippa laid aside her tapestry and took up her anvil. In the years since Father had given it to her, she had ceased resenting the heavy impracticality of the gift and had instead embraced its purpose. She struck it with her hammer and the sharp tinking sound it made echoed round the room in counterpoint to Poppy's piano playing.

I read on in my book, studying how men shaved their manly beards and stubbles: coarse, common folk used a simple table-knife, scraping at their faces between bites of food; gentlemen used a badger-hair brush and cold steel razor; and nobility used a badger-hair brush where the hair was still attached to a live badger and a hot steel razor, which seared the top three layers of skin off simultaneously. This was to be followed by a manly splash of sulphuric acid Cologne and a spell administering a colony. I could not wait to be a man if such delightments awaited!

Pippa's metallic tinking stopped and she held up the fruits of her anvilly labour.

'Why, Pippa, you have made a tiny horseshoe!' I said, for that was indeed what she appeared to have made.

'You are wrong, dear brother Pip,' she rebutted. 'For it is not a tiny horseshoe, it is a normal sized dog-shoe. For Poppy's puppy.'

As if it had heard mention of itself, Poppy's puppy chose that moment to enter the room with a high-pitched yap. Though it was now five years old, it was no bigger than it had been on first arrival and, indeed,

was actually somewhat smaller and more puppyish. For it was that rarest of breeds of dog, the Austrian Shrinking Spaniel, an animal that, over time, grew smaller and smaller until it finally dwindled to an infinitesimal tininess and ceased to exist.[2]

'Oh, a shoe! For my puppy. How kind of you, dear Pippa'.

'Dear sister Poppy, it is kindness that comes from a higher moral authority. For why should the horse be the only animal to have shoes? It is barbaric that other creatures go barefoot and therefore at risk of pain from small stones, thorns and sharp grass.' She paused, panting slightly: her commitment to goodness often left her breathless.

'Thanks to you and your anvil, one day all the creatures of the world will be properly shod.'

'That is my intention. Now, come here, Wellesley.'

Poppy's puppy eagerly reacted to its name and ran to her. She took him upon her knee, and proceeded to affix his new shoe to one of his old feet. All it took was five red-hot nails being driven through the shoe and into his soft puppyish paw, and he barked and yelped with absolute delight as it was fitted. Indeed, he was so overjoyed that he fainted with doggy delight and lay in a happy, bleeding heap.

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[2] There is no evidence that such an animal ever existed. The most likely explanation is that over the years Poppy's puppy was repeatedly kidnapped and replaced with a smaller dog as some kind of elaborate practical joke. In those days rural British life was incredibly dull and people would do anything to break up the tedium.

'You are so kind to the animals, Pippa. And to their feet.'

'Why, thank you, dear brother Pip. But kindness must not tarry. Could you fetch me that pile of unfinished horseshoes from the corner?'

'Of course, dear sister.'

Pippa's horseshoes were piled between a ladder and a large mirror. On top of them rested the other family pet, Bonaparte, a black cat. Alas, at that moment, dear puppy Wellesley chose to awaken from his post-shodding slumber. He instantly spied Bonaparte and, as if their human namesakes had spotted each other, battle ensued.

The black cat raced across my path, causing me to stumble. I slid along the highly polished wooden floor, passing under the ladder and arresting my progress only by crashing into the pile of horseshoes at great speed. In a storm of clinking they plunged into the mirror behind them, instantly shattering it. I fortunately remained uninjured, though I had broken the rabbit's foot I habitually carried with me, and also pulled one leaf from the four-leaved clover I wore as a buttonhole.

'Oh, Pip, what have you done? Surely now our luck will run out and things will turn horrid!'

I had no truck with Pippa's superstitious fears. 'Nonsense,' I riposted. 'We shall remain as lucky as ever.'

At which point there were footsteps in the corridor, the door to the room burst open and there was my

mother, hair wild with panic, eyes wide with shock and ears flapping with anxiety. 'Children! I have terrible news! Your father is dead!' She slumped to the floor, weeping.

My sisters looked at me accusatorily.

'Ah . . .' I began, but no more words would come. My recent acts had produced omens of terrible luck, and now this. Was it merely a coincidence?

Yes.

And yet . . . was it more than happenstance?

No.

Although . . . could it all be connected?

Definitely not.

And then I realized that nothing mattered other than the dread news my mother had brought: my father was dead. Cold shock and hot tears fought for control of my young body, then shook hands, called it a draw, and I began to both shiver and cry.

My sisters wept, too, great gusty sobs of grief echoing round the room, the floor slickening with salty tears. But there was another sound as well, a sound not in character with the moment: it was the sound of laughter.

I looked up and there, framed in the doorway like a malicious painting, stood Mr Gently Benevolent. It was his laughter. How could he find this funny? Perhaps he did not: perhaps this was merely a gentleman repressing his emotions so deeply that they came out the other side in an opposite fashion. His words, however, dispelled that idea, like fog in a furnace.

'I do enjoy being the bearer of bad news. Pain is so . . . nourishing. Weep, Bin family, weep. For Thomas Bin is dead and today is a glorious day!'

Now my shivering and crying ebbed as rage engulfed me, hot and red like a cross tomato. My young fists clenched and I rose to my feet . . . but grief had weakened my heart and immediately the dizzy reality of the situation made my vision go grey and my legs buckle. I collapsed into unconsciousness, the last sounds I heard being Benevolent's mocking laughter and my own voice repeating over and over again, 'Father . . . Father . . . Father . . .'[3]

[3] Sad, isn't it?