



## Mr. Pip, Gent.

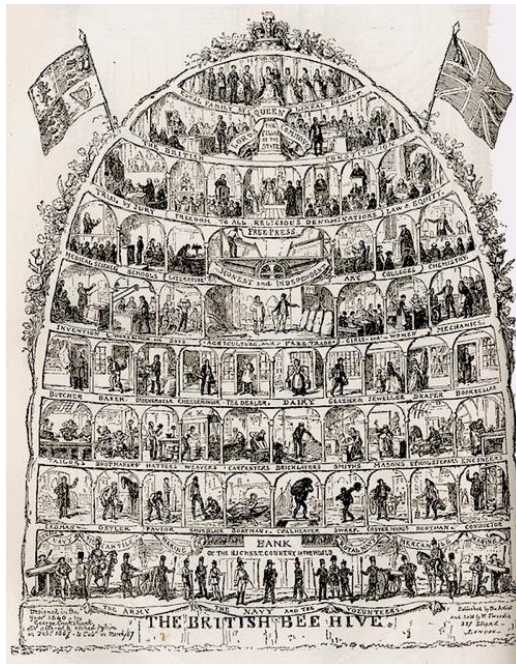
Becoming a Gentlemen in Regency England

By Jerry James

“Biddy,” said I [Pip], after binding her to secrecy, “I want to be a gentleman.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t, if I was you!” she returned. “I don’t think it would answer.”

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



“The British Bee Hive,” George Cruickshank (1840)

In Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, Pip, our 18-year-old hero, is plucked from his rural obscurity as a blacksmith’s apprentice and abruptly thrust into 1823 London. There, a mysterious benefactor has decreed, he is to become a gentleman. Pip is ecstatic. Now he can hope to win Estella, the ward of the mad aristocrat Miss Havisham—Estella, who has mocked him as coarse and common. Pip knows one thing about a gentleman: He does not work.

Dickens created Pip (10 years older than he) from the vantage point of 1860, 23 years into the Victorian era. Pip comes to London, however, early in the reign of George IV, the former Prince Regent. Jane Austen’s stories are set a few years earlier, but Pip’s London is still Regency London, a rigid society of unwritten rules, through which he must somehow navigate.

How did one become a gentleman? What did it mean to *be* one? What were the social mores that made this pyramid-based social hierarchy—like the British Bee Hive—function? And how can Pip best fulfill his great expectations and become a gentleman worthy of Estella?

## The Gentleman



*“The Cloak-Room, Clifton Assembly Rooms,” Rolinda Sharples (1817)*

As with many things in English history, the class system of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century can be (gleefully) blamed on the French. It was the Normans, after all, who had created the entire scheme of lords of the manor, the gentry, the nobility. Others took their place as dictated by the Order of Precedence, running through over 100 titles. At the very end came “gentleman,” created as a separate title with the Statute of Additions of 1413. Gentlemen might be last, but as well-educated men of good families, they were in the game. Blacksmiths were not.

Pip has money, but even a few years before 1823, that would not have been enough. A gentleman was a man of property, deriving his wealth from rents paid by his tenants. He would keep a London house for the social season, but he was a man of the landed gentry, only 1.5% of the population but holding 16% of the wealth.

During the Regency Era, things began to change, as men of trade began to amass immense fortunes. But by law, a gentleman was defined as someone with *no* trade. How then could a man of trade progress? Maria Grace explains. “In order to join the ranks of the gentry, a man had to buy a country house and estate lands. That done, all

financial ties with the business which had made him wealthy had to be severed to remove the stain of trade from his family.” This required an insane amount of money, for an estate that cost £30,000 would only provide an income of £1,000/year.

The merry nonsense of needing to have no trade to be a gentleman continued into other professions. For example, solicitors took fees, while barristers received honorariums. Both were lawyers, but a barrister could be a gentleman, while a solicitor could not.

A gentleman was, above all else, respectable—and it was necessary that he be *seen* as such. Pip can certainly aspire to respectability. But first, money.

## The Money



*“The March of Roguery,” C. J. Grant (1830)*

Although money was not everything in Regency England, it was no accident that the British Bee Hive rested on the “Bank of the Richest Country in the World.” Nor that in Grant’s caricature above, the Devil takes the King, the Bishop, the Farmer, the Merchant, the Lawyer and the Doctor, all of whom are out to cheat the others.

At this time, the poverty level was about £50/year. A shopkeeper could expect £150; a middle-class income was £250; and a physician might make £300. Pip has an

income of £500 at a time when only the top 1% or so made more than £800! But it is not enough. It is just income, not capital.

Gentlemen invested their capital in “the Funds,” government bonds that paid about 5%. An investment of £5,000 meant a very prudent gentleman might live on the interest. (Austen’s Mr. Darcy has £10,000/year.) But Pip could invest his entire yearly income and still make almost nothing.

The younger sons of a nobleman, having no title, might use what small capital they had to purchase a commission in the Army or Navy, or a position as a clergyman. They would still be gentlemen—another route closed to Pip.

Pip holds to his goal. But it will take more than money to make him feel like the man he thinks Estella wants him to be.

### **The Niceties**

John Bowen writes, “When Pip becomes wealthy... he has to learn to perform a whole new identity, learning how to speak, dress, and even eat in ways that will be recognized by others as genteel... Herbert Pocket gently advises Pip that ‘in London it is not the custom to put the knife in the mouth, – for fear of accidents...’”

Pip has no land and no pedigree. He cannot, like Tess Durbeyfield’s father in Hardy’s novel, claim Norman heritage by changing their name to d’Urberville. His education at the local dame school is laughable. He has no connections. Furthermore, Pip’s purpose will not allow him the single-minded ambition of Stendhal’s Julien Sorel. And in any era, devoting too much effort to social climbing leaves one looking like a high school student, vainly striving to be considered cool.



*A Fine Figure of a Gentleman*

Pip does spend money on half-hearted gestures, hiring a page boy instead of a manservant and joining a club to make connections. But the Finches of the Grove are a flock of fools. Pip never, thank heaven, sets himself up with an expensive carriage.

And really, how is one expected to master rules of etiquette that dictate, for example, that one should precede a lady going upstairs but allow her to precede you going downstairs? What if the lady should fall? Was this rule designed wholly to reveal to the world that, like a proper lady, she does not wear drawers?

Which brings us to clothes. Pip’s Bond St. tailor would begin with cotton drawers and a linen shirt (of a finer grade than a bed sheet but less than a handkerchief). Stockings and tight buckskin pants demanded a vest and coat of a fashionable cut, all topped with a beaver hat, made of felt from the finest beaver fur. The proper cravat, muslin and lightly starched, was vital. The haircut would be Roman, perhaps the Titus or the Brutus. And the boots had to be tall, to protect against the 100 tons of horse manure deposited daily on the streets of London.



Like almost everything else in the world of the Regency gentleman, the clothing was purchased on credit. Pip will discover what comes next. Dickens already knew.

### The Debt



*“Mr. Pickwick in Debtor’s Prison,” Phiz (1837)*

When Dickens was 12, his father was thrown into debtor’s prison, leaving the boy to work in a shoe polish warehouse for a year, gluing on labels. Dickens never forgot this—and he kept it from the public.

If you were an aristocrat and in debt, all was well, because what shopkeeper would dare ask for payment from such a person? But if you were not, you might one day find yourself arrested in the streets by bailiffs, agents of the sheriff come in response to a creditor’s having paid a shilling to lodge a complaint against you. They would take you to a Sponging House, usually the home of a bailiff. There, every farthing would be squeezed from you, as if you were a sponge.

If this proved insufficient to settle the matter at hand, you would be taken to court. You would not be declared a bankrupt, whose assets would be seized and sold to satisfy your creditors, but a debtor, whose assets

were not. Unluckily for you, however, your creditor could now have you imprisoned until you paid up.

Patricia Rice notes, “Worse yet, prisons... were privately operated, leased out by the royals to profiteers, and the prisoners lived at the mercy of their gaolers. The prison charged for rent, food, clothing.”

If, after spending 3 months in prison, you had had enough, you could agree to give all you owned to your creditors and be freed by the Court of Insolvent Debtors. Pip’s experience as a gentleman is almost this grim. But has it made him worthy?

### The Outcome



In 1871, Dickens’ secret was revealed. As the son of an imprisoned debtor, his respectability was besmirched, his status as a gentleman called into question. (Of course, his earlier affair with an actress didn’t help.)

Pip discovers a secret: Estella, his beau ideal, is illegitimate—and she doesn’t know. Perhaps the sign that Pip has become a true gentleman—and a more worthy man than he ever thought he was—is that he never tells her. As Sir Richard Steele wrote, “The appellation of Gentleman is never to be affixed to a man’s circumstances, but to his Behaviour in them.”

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