
MACMILLAN READERS
UPPER LEVEL

CHARLES DICKENS

Bleak House

Retold by Margaret Tarner



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1

The Court Of Chancery

London in November. The Lord Chancellor is in his High Court of Chancery. Ada Clare, Richard Carstone and Esther Summerson meet the Lord Chancellor. He tells the three young people that they are going to live at Bleak House.

London, 1852. London in November. It was cold winter weather. There was mud in the streets. Dogs were covered in mud, almost drowned in it. Horses, pulling carriages³ through the city streets, were splashed up to their eyes. Shivering crossing-sweepers³ tried hard to sweep back the mud and dirt on the busy roads.

There was fog too. The fog was everywhere. It came up the river and down the river. Fog covered the boats on the river and filled the boatmen's eyes. Street lamps sent a pale, yellow light through the thick, foggy air.

Cold, mud and fog filled the streets of London. And the fog was thickest and the mud was deepest near Lincoln's Inn, the very heart of London. The Lord High Chancellor was there, sitting in his High Court of Chancery¹.

Some of the fog and the mud had got into the courtroom too. Perhaps a little fog and mud had got into the minds of the people in the High Court of Chancery.

Chancery had ruined⁵ many men and driven others to madness. Whole families had been destroyed by Chancery and Chancery had brought great houses to decay and destruction. The streets of London were dark that day and in the Court of Chancery



London. London in November. It was cold winter weather.

it was darker.

The case before the Court was the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and that case had never done anyone any good. The lawyers had lost all interest in Jarndyce and Jarndyce many years before. Whole families had been born and died during the history of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Pretty young wards of court¹ had grown old and sad; strong young men had lost hope, and still the case had not ended. Over the years, Jarndyce and Jarndyce had slowly ruined the lives of many innocent people.

No decision was reached on that foggy afternoon. The Lord Chancellor moved a little on his high seat.

'We will continue the case on Wednesday fortnight,' said the Lord Chancellor. He stood up. The court stood up. But the Lord Chancellor had something more to say. He looked down at a paper in his hand. Then he spoke.

'The young girl, Ada Clare, and the young man, Richard Carstone, are claimants¹ in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. I am making them wards of court. They will stay at Bleak House with John Jarndyce. I believe he is their cousin. I shall see them in my private room now.'

The Lord Chancellor left the court. The lawyers left too. A little old woman, seated in the front of the court, left last of all. The lights were put out and the doors were locked.

How much better for the wards of court if those doors had never opened again. How much better if Richard Carstone and Ada Clare had never heard of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and had never seen the High Court of Chancery.

Richard and Ada were in the Chancellor's private room standing by the smoky fire trying to keep warm. There was a quiet girl with a calm face and smooth, dark hair standing close to Ada. This was Esther Summerson. Esther was not a ward of court, but the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce was going to darken her life too. The three young people looked up as the Lord Chancellor came into the room.

‘Miss Clare?’ said the Lord Chancellor to his clerk. ‘Who is Miss Ada Clare?’

‘This is Miss Clare,’ said the clerk.

Ada was a beautiful young girl with golden hair. What was such a young and beautiful girl doing in that dark place?

‘You are to stay at Bleak House,’ said the Lord Chancellor, looking at his papers, ‘with your cousin, John Jarndyce.’

The Lord Chancellor looked up again. ‘Richard Carstone?’

Richard Carstone was the young man standing by the fire. His face was eager and happy. As yet, Jarndyce and Jarndyce had not darkened it. Richard bowed.

‘And this,’ said the clerk, turning to the other girl, ‘is Miss Esther Summerson. She will be a companion for Miss Clare and live at Bleak House too.’

The Lord Chancellor nodded.

‘Very well. You will all go to stay at Bleak House. But you are to stay in London for tonight.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Richard Carstone answered. ‘We are to stay at the house of Mrs Jellyby.’

‘Ah, yes,’ he said. The Lord Chancellor had heard of Mrs Jellyby. ‘She is a remarkable woman. My clerk will tell you the way to her house.’

The Lord Chancellor left the room and he was soon lost in the fog and darkness. The clerk told the three young people the way to Mrs Jellyby’s house and left them outside the court. As they turned to go, a little old woman came smiling out of the shadows.

‘The wards-in-Jarndyce,’ she said. ‘I am very happy to meet you. I am Miss Flite. Everyone knows me here. I come to the court every day. I am waiting for a judgement¹. It is good to see youth and beauty here.’ And Miss Flite smiled again and bowed.

‘She’s mad,’ whispered Richard to Ada, not thinking that the old woman would hear him. But she did.

‘That’s right, young gentleman,’ said Miss Flite. ‘I’m mad, quite mad. I was once a ward myself, like you. I was not mad

then. I had youth, hope and perhaps a little beauty. But they have all gone. I have come to this court every day for many years. I am waiting for a judgement. But it is a long time. Goodbye, my dears. You will always find me in court.'

The old lady turned and walked quickly away. The fog covered her.

'Poor creature⁵,' said Esther softly and took Ada by the hand.

The three young people moved away from Lincoln's Inn towards Chancery Lane and Mrs Jellyby's house. A poor crossing-sweeper stood with his broom, waiting to make a way for them through the mud and dirt of the road. Dirty and ragged, he shivered with cold and gladly accepted a little money from Richard. Jo was this boy's name and he was one of the poorest of the London poor. Jo looked at the three young people as, laughing and talking together, they walked away into the fog and darkness.