

BLEAK HOUSE

by Charles Dickens



THE AUTHOR

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was the second of eight children in a family plagued by debt. When he was twelve, his father was thrown into debtors' prison, and Charles was forced to quit school and work in a shoe-dye factory. These early experiences gave him a sympathy for the poor and downtrodden, along with an acute sense of social justice. At the age of fifteen, he became a clerk in a law firm, and later worked as a newspaper reporter. He published his first fiction in 1836 - a series of character sketches called *Sketches by Boz*. The work was well-received, but its reception was nothing compared to the international acclaim he received with the publication of *The Pickwick Papers* in the following year.

After this early blush of success, Dickens took on the job as editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a literary magazine in which a number of his early works were serialized, including *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) and *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). He left to begin his own literary magazine, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, in 1840, and over the next ten years published many of his most famous novels in serial form, including *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1), *A Christmas Carol* (1844), and *David Copperfield* (1849-50), perhaps the most autobiographical of all his novels. Other works were serialized in *Household Words* between 1850 and 1859, including *Bleak House* (1852-3), which was then succeeded by *All the Year Round*, which he edited until his death in 1870, publishing such novels as *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860-1), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5). A workaholic to the end, Dickens died of a stroke in 1870 after having penned a chapter of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, his final (and unfinished) novel, the previous day.

As far as his personal life was concerned, Dickens was a tireless writer and speaker, but his own personal insecurities made him very difficult to live with. He married Catherine Hogarth in 1836 and, though they had ten children together, their relationship grew increasingly strained until they finally divorced in 1859. He traveled extensively, including making several trips to America (he never much liked the country or its people), and was frequently called upon to read from his own writings, drawing large and enthusiastic crowds. Dickens also spoke out on a variety of social issues, including American slavery and the lack of copyright laws that made it far too easy for unscrupulous people to steal his writings, as well as the abuses of industrial society that play such a prominent role in his novels.

Like many of his novels, *Bleak House* reflects the personal experience of the author, particularly the time he spent as a law clerk in his youth. Chancery Court is here the object of bitter satire, though his picture of it is uncomfortably close to the truth of the matter. As usual, the class structure of England provides considerable ammunition for the social criticism presented by Dickens in the story, and his wide variety of colorful characters draw the reader into the dark streets and alleys of nineteenth-century London as well as taking him behind the doors of the estates of the wealthy.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story begins with a description of London, a great city of mud and fog, and takes the reader behind the doors of the High Court of Chancery, where great injustices are done to petitioners who wait years and squander their fortunes, only to find that their petitions are denied or their estates have been eaten up by the legal machinery. One such case, which has been in Chancery for so long that no one really remembers what it is about, is the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

The scene then shifts to the country estate of Sir Leicester Dedlock and his wife. They are wealthy and influential among people of fashion, but lead a boring life. Lady Dedlock is twenty years younger than her husband and brought no fortune into this love match, though she has some obscure interest in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The Dedlocks receive a visit from their lawyer, Mr. Tulkinghorn, a taciturn, proper, but utterly ruthless barrister, who comes to tell her that nothing is happening in the case, as usual. While Tulkinghorn is there, Lady Dedlock happens to see a piece of paper and recognize the handwriting; she turns pale, though she tries to conceal her reaction, and goes to her room to recover.

The narrative now shifts into the hands of Esther Summerson, a young woman who knows neither of her parents and assumes them to be dead, since she has been raised by her godmother, Miss Barbary, who is cold and distant. Esther confides all her feelings to her doll. When Esther is fourteen, her godmother dies suddenly, and the family lawyer, Conversation Kenge, sends her to a school run by the twin Donny sisters. Here she is treated kindly and prospers, training to be a governess. When she is twenty, Kenge again contacts her to tell her that he has found a situation for her as a companion to a young woman. Esther travels to London and meets the girl, seventeen-year-old Ada Clare, and her cousin, Richard Carstone; both are wards of Chancery Court and may potentially benefit from Jarndyce and Jarndyce should the case ever be settled. Esther and Ada immediately become fast friends, and the attraction between the cousins, Ada and Richard, who had never met before, grows daily. The trio spends the first night in the home of Mrs. Jellyby, a noted philanthropist who is deeply concerned with conditions in Africa but is so preoccupied that her own house is a disaster area and her children run about unsupervised. Before their departure from London, Esther and the cousins meet Miss Flite, a peculiar old woman who attends Chancery Court every day and lives above a cluttered warehouse run by one Krook, and a young man named Guppy, who seems overly solicitous. The warehouse is also inhabited by Nemo, a law writer who makes his living by copying documents in a legible hand. The old woman takes them to see her apartment, which contains little but a few birdcages; she tells them she intends to free the birds on the day that Jarndyce and Jarndyce is settled, though many have died in the interval. Ada and Richard find they are to live at Bleak House with John Jarndyce,

who has renounced all interest in the long-running case; Esther is to accompany them as Ada's companion.

When they arrive, they find that John Jarndyce is a kind, generous, but painfully shy elderly man who has been Esther's benefactor, paying for her schooling, and is willing to serve as guardian for Richard and Ada. His home is spacious and rambling, but quite pleasant. There they meet Harold Skimpole, a lovable but totally irresponsible man of about Mr. Jarndyce's age. He has spent his life living off the generosity of others, and has found in John Jarndyce one completely willing to serve as an enabler for his slothful ways. He describes himself as an innocent child, and cares nothing for his own problems, but willingly pushes them onto the shoulders of others. In fact, the evening of their meeting, a debt collector arrives to arrest Skimpole, but he brazenly asks Richard and Esther to pay his debt, and they foolishly do so. Jarndyce later tells them never to do such a thing again, despite the fact that he has often done precisely the same thing.

The anonymous narrator now returns, and we are introduced to the household at Chesney Wold, the Lincolnshire home of the Dedlocks. Mrs. Rouncewell is the housekeeper, with the family for fifty years, and is presently training a young girl from the village, Rosa, to be a maid. Her grandson, Watt, pays her a visit and immediately takes notice of the shy and attractive Rosa. Soon two strangers arrive and ask to see the house; one of them is Guppy, the lawyer from London. Rosa shows them around, and after they leave, Mrs. Rouncewell tells Watt and Rosa the story of the Ghost Walk, in which the mistress of the house during the English Civil War, alienated from her husband because of the differences in their politics, cast herself down on the stones of the walk and died, but first promised that her ghost would walk the stones whenever calamity was ready to visit the house, and would continue to do so until the house of Dedlock was humbled. As the story concludes, they hear the tread of the ghost on the cobblestones.

The narrative again returns to Esther. When she awakes the next morning, she delights at the beauty of the house and grounds of Bleak House. Her guardian, who has already entrusted her with the housekeeping keys, takes her into his Growlery - the room where he goes when he feels the need to complain about something. There he tells her something of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a case that began with a disputed will, but one in which whatever the will contains will most certainly be eaten up by legal costs by the time it is finally resolved. Esther gently expresses her gratitude for his kindness, but he will hear nothing of praise or thanks. Then Mrs. Pardiggle, an obnoxious do-gooder, arrives with her five sons. She is among the many pushy charitable types who constantly badger Jarndyce for contributions. She loudly praises her charitable work and that of her young boys (they are forced by their mother to contribute their allowances to her favorite charities), then insists that Esther and Ada join her in one of her charitable visits. They go to the home of a poor brickmaker; he treats Mrs. Pardiggle very rudely, but after she leaves Esther and Ada remain and comfort a young woman in the house whose baby has just died in her arms; Esther leaves her handkerchief with them to cover the poor little corpse. Later that night Richard accompanies them as they bring small tokens to the bereaved family.

As time passes, Esther becomes more aware of the growing love between Richard and Ada, though she says nothing to anyone about it. John Jarndyce had asked Esther to try to spur Richard on to make some choice of occupation, but the young man appears so careless about money and so unclear about his proclivities that his thoughts cannot stay in one place for very long. Jarndyce writes Sir Leicester Dedlock, who is a distant relative, and asks for his help in getting Richard established, but receives an unencouraging reply. Soon after, Lawrence Boythorn, an old friend

and classmate of Jarndyce, visits Bleak House. He is loud and opinionated, but has a good heart as demonstrated by his kindness to his tiny pet canary. We find that he is in the midst of a boundary dispute with his neighbor back in Lincolnshire - none other than Sir Leicester. He is waiting for a letter from his lawyers, Kenge and Carboy (the same lawyers that serve John Jarndyce), and soon the letter arrives, carried by none other than William Guppy. Guppy maneuvers his visit so he can be alone with Esther, and much to her surprise proposes marriage to her despite the fact that they had only met briefly once before. She turns him down in no uncertain terms, but he leaves his card in case she ever changes her mind.

The story again passes to the anonymous narrator, who tells us about Snagsby's stationer's shop, which is located across the street from Krook's rag and bottle shop. Snagsby is under the thumb of his wife, but makes a decent living selling stationery and contracting for law writing. One of his more important clients is the lawyer Tulkinghorn, who lives alone except for one servant; he need not hire help or solicit clients because his clients come to him, and his knowledge of their affairs makes him powerful indeed. On this night he is interested in a document from Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and goes to Snagsby to find the name of the copyist. Snagsby identifies the man as one Nemo (obviously a pseudonym, since the name means *nobody* in Latin), who boards across the street with Krook. Tulkinghorn then pays Nemo a visit, but find him dead from an overdose of opium. A young surgeon accompanies the local doctor and confirms the diagnosis. A search of Nemo's room and the coroner's inquest the next day uncover no new information, though a young street-sweeper named Jo claims to know the dead man. He is not allowed to testify, but Tulkinghorn speaks to him afterwards and finds that Nemo had been kind to him and had given him money when he had any. After the inquest Nemo is buried in a pauper's churchyard; Jo follows at a distance and sweeps the archway before the entrance to the graveyard.

The scene now moves to Chesney Wold, where the Dedlocks are expected imminently from their trip to Paris. Lady Dedlock has, as usual, found Paris boring; in fact, she finds everything boring. Tulkinghorn has sent her a message indicating that he had traced the identity of the unknown law-writer whose handwriting Lady Dedlock had recognized. When the Dedlocks return, they throw a huge party for the fashionable set (which Dickens spends several pages skewering). We are introduced to Lady Dedlock's French maid Hortense, who is large and somehow appears disreputable; she also quickly becomes jealous when Lady Dedlock begins to pay compliments to the pretty Rosa, Mrs. Rouncewell's assistant. When Tulkinghorn finally arrives, Lady Dedlock asks him to explain his letter, and he tells her that he found the law-writer dead of an opium overdose. She shows little interest, but it is obvious that both of them know more than they are willing to reveal.

Esther again assumes the narrative, and speaks of the difficulty of choosing a profession for Richard. He seems unable to make up his mind about anything, and when he impulsively decides to pursue medicine, Esther doubts his firmness of purpose. He insists that he is serious, however, so the lawyer Kenge is brought in to make the necessary arrangements. Jarndyce takes the young people on a visit to London, where they see the sights and often attend the theater. Distressingly for Esther, Guppy appears at every performance they attend, keeping his eyes on her the whole time with a mournful look on his face, and often follows them through the streets, which makes her very uncomfortable. Kenge arranges for his cousin, Bayham Badger, to take Richard under his wing and teach him medicine. Badger invites them to dinner, where he and his wife spend the whole evening waxing effusive about her previous two husbands, a ship's captain and a professor, both of whom had come to untimely ends. A quiet young surgeon also joins them for

dinner - the same man who had been present when Nemo's body had been discovered. Later, Ada confesses to Esther that she and Richard love one another and asks her to break the news to her guardian. Jarndyce is pleased for them, but warns them that because of their youth they must wait for marriage, and that meanwhile Richard must work very hard at his chosen profession.

Soon Richard leaves to begin his medical studies Esther and Ada are left to miss him. They begin to spend more time with Caddy Jellyby and her young brother Peepy, much to the delight of all. Caddy confides in Esther that she has become secretly engaged to a young dancing instructor, Prince Turveydrop, and that they have been meeting without the knowledge of either one's parents in the apartment of Miss Flite. Both have been mistreated by their selfish parents, and revel in the freedom their new relationship gives them. Esther visits the dancing school, meets old Mr. Turveydrop, and immediately understands why young Prince wants to get out of the house. Esther, Ada, Caddy, and Mr. Jarndyce then visit Miss Flite, where they see her landlord, Krook, and again encounter the young surgeon Woodcourt, who receives a dinner invitation from Mr. Jarndyce and is by now beginning to exchange glances with Esther. We also find that Mr. Jarndyce has been secretly sending money to Miss Flite to help the old woman out. They later encounter Skimpole, as irresponsible as ever, who is now trying to convince his doctor that he should consider his bill paid because Skimpole *intended* to pay the money despite the fact that he had no money to give. Skimpole tells them that Neckett, the debt collector whose visit had been the occasion for him begging money from Esther and Richard, had died. Jarndyce, Esther, and Ada seek out his family and find that he left behind him three orphaned children, the oldest of whom is thirteen years old, and that young Charley (short of Charlotte) has been working to support her younger brother and sister. In the same apartment is an angry man named Gridley; he is angry because his entire inheritance was eaten up by a case in Chancery that was based on an undisputed will where the only question was whether his younger brother should have his room and board counted against the amount of his share. Despite his consistently angry countenance, he is very kind to the orphans who live above him.

The anonymous narrator picks up again and we are taken to Tom-all-Alone's, a disreputable London slum when the street sweeper Jo makes his miserable lodgings (this, too, is the fault of Chancery, since the neighborhood has been allowed to go to ruin while a dispute concerning its ownership has dragged on and on in court). Lady Dedlock has left Sir Leicester alone and suffering from the gout at Chesney Wold while she goes into town. We find her in disguise, veiled and dressed as a servant, seeking out Jo and paying him handsomely to show her all the places associated with the late Nemo, including his place of burial. She then attends several balls in town, while at Chesney Wold Mrs. Rouncewell distinctly hears the footsteps of the ghost on the Ghost Walk.

Esther again takes up her pen, and we find the Badgers voicing their doubts about the wisdom of Richard pursuing medicine. They say he has no inclination for the work and seems terribly restless. Esther is determined to confront Richard about the matter, and he readily admits that he has no interest in medical work, but is merely biding his time until the settlement of the court case. When asked what he would rather do, he asserts that he would like to work at Kenge and Carboy and learn to become a lawyer, meanwhile being able to keep his eye on Jarndyce and Jarndyce and guard his and Ada's interests. John Jarndyce agrees, though both he and Esther are concerned at Richard's lack of any kind of work ethic. That night, Jarndyce takes Esther aside and tells her all he knows of her background - that when she was twelve years old he received an unsigned letter telling him of her circumstances, and that through Kenge's mediation he arranged

for Esther to receive an education. He knows nothing of her parentage, though the woman who raised her described herself as her aunt. The next day Allan Woodcourt comes to visit and announces that he is taking a position as a ship's doctor and, since the ship is traveling to China and India, he will likely be gone for several years. His mother, who is with him, speaks at great length about the glorious heritage of her family, insisting that her son could only marry someone of suitably high birth. After his departure, Caddy Jellyby arrives with a lovely bunch of flowers left for Esther by Woodcourt.

Arranging a place for Richard at Kenge and Carboy turns out to be more difficult than expected because Richard himself cannot make up his mind; he decides to try medicine again, but after several months gives up and determines to take up law, to which he promises to give his full effort this time. Jarndyce and the girls return to Bleak House, and soon take a trip to visit Boythorn in Lincolnshire, accompanied by Skimpole. After Boythorn meets them they must travel by a roundabout route in order to avoid passing through Chesney Wold because of the feud between Boythorn and Lord Leicester Dedlock. That Sunday they attend church and see Lord Leicester and Lady Dedlock, along with Hortense, the French maid, Rosa, and her beau Watt Rouncewell. Esther feels an unaccountable tension when she first sees Lady Dedlock, but is at a loss to explain it - some faint resemblance to her godmother, perhaps. One day Jarndyce and the girls take a walk on the grounds of Chesney Wold (after all, Dedlock has nothing against *them*) and are caught in a thunderstorm. They take shelter in a keeper's lodge and find that Lady Dedlock is already there. She introduces herself to them and speaks civilly but distantly, showing respect for Jarndyce but hardly giving any attention to Esther at all. When she leaves in her carriage, she takes Rosa with her and leaves Hortense behind to walk home in the rain; the French maid is clearly angry at the obvious preference shown to the new servant.

The anonymous narrator assumes control of the story once again, this time to describe the dead and quiet atmosphere in the legal district of London during summer recess. We then go to the Snagsby residence, where the Snagsbys are hosting a local pastor and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Chadband. The former is a tiresome windbag, while the latter turns out to be the woman who ran the institution where Esther received her education. A police constable comes to the door with a ragged little boy - our friend Jo - in tow, apprehended for loitering. Soon Guppy appears and begins to question Jo, finding out from him about the visit from the mysterious veiled woman who asked him to show her the places frequented by the late Nemo. Though the constable refuses to believe that the woman had actually given the boy a sovereign as a reward, Guppy files away in his mind both the information about the woman and his new knowledge of Esther's past history. Back at the office, Guppy becomes jealous of Richard, fearing that he intends to displace him. One day Guppy and his friends Bart Smallweed and Tony Jobling have lunch together, and Guppy recommends that Jobling, who has recently been fired from Kenge and Carboy, apply for a post as a law writer at Snagsby's and take a room at Krook's, for which Guppy offers to pay. He hopes that Jobling, who takes the name Weevle, can spy for him and perhaps discover something of value among the jumble of papers at Krook's place.

The narrator now introduces the reader to the Smallweed family, a mean and greedy lot whose children for generations have known nothing of pleasure. The family consists of the grandparents - a father who maintains his tight-fisted grip on his accounting business despite being confined to a wheelchair; his wife, who is fully overtaken by dementia and rambles about nothing all day; and their two grandchildren - Bart, who works at Kenge and Carboy, and Judy, who attends to her grandparents and is constantly being commanded to shake her grandfather and right

him in his chair, often after he has angrily thrown a cushion at his mad wife. The young orphan Charley Neckett is their servant, and is treated badly. They receive a visit from Mr. George, who is in debt to them. He is obviously a military man, but has fallen on hard times. Grandfather Smallweed threatens him with dire consequences if he doesn't meet his payments. George then returns to the small and decrepit shooting gallery that he operates along with an old and disabled wartime friend named Phil.

Tulkinghorn summons Snagsby to his home, where he asks him for information about the latter's conversation with Jo. Snagsby obliges, but is surprised to find a third man in the room - a police detective named Bucket. Bucket then accompanies Snagsby to Tom-all-Along's to find Jo. When they locate him, they bring him back to Tulkinghorn's, where they see a veiled woman. Jo immediately identifies her as the woman who came to him and asked about Nemo, but then changes his mind when he sees her hands, which are those of a servant rather than a lady. The woman turns out to be Hortense, who has quit Lady Dedlock's service out of jealousy over the preferential treatment given to Rosa. Tulkinghorn now realizes that the woman who visited Jo was wearing Hortense's clothing, and suspects it must have been Lady Dedlock. Tulkinghorn and Bucket both warn Snagsby not to utter a word of what he has seen to anyone.

Esther now picks up the narrative again. We find that in the six weeks they spent at Boythorn's she had had no more direct contact with Lady Dedlock, but still could not shake thoughts of her childhood whenever she saw her at church. Before they leave for Bleak House, Hortense comes to Esther and begs to be taken on as her maid. Esther refuses, both because she has no need of a maid and because she distrusts Hortense. Meanwhile, Richard is showing no evidence of taking to the law any more than he took to medicine, but is becoming dangerously obsessed with Jarndyce and Jarndyce; he is increasingly convinced that the case will be settled soon, and in their favor, so that he has no need to pursue a settled occupation. He speaks of going into the army, but Esther discovers that he has gotten into a serious amount of debt, again because he expects a settlement in his favor any day. Esther then goes to London and meets Caddy Jellyby, who announces that she and Prince wish to inform their parents of their engagement, as Esther has encouraged them to do, and begs Esther to accompany them when they break the news. Esther graciously agrees, but neither visit goes well. Old Turveydrop gives his vague consent, but clearly is thinking of no one but himself since he does so only after the couple agree to support him and care for him for the rest of his life. Mrs. Jellyby, on the other hand, hardly listens to a word her daughter is saying because she is too busy dealing with correspondence about Africa, even though her husband has just declared bankruptcy because of her charities and the house and all it contains is about to be sold from under them. When Esther returns home she finds Charley, who announces that she is Mr. Jarndyce's gift to his beloved ward - she is to be Esther's maid, having been purchased from service to the abominable Smallweeds. Jarndyce has also seen to the care and education of Charley's younger brother and sister.

When Richard tells Jarndyce of his desire to enter the military, his guardian is not surprised, but is mightily disturbed by his inability to keep his mind at anything for very long. Jarndyce has a serious talk with Richard and Ada in which he tells them that Richard has now exhausted his financial resources, and may no longer change occupations no matter what his desires may be. If he enters the army, then the army it must be. Furthermore, because of Richard's instability and the fact that he must now be away from Ada for several years, Jarndyce insists that they break their engagement, which may be reformed only when Richard has gotten on his feet and settled down. Ada is compliant, but Richard is angry because he believes the

fortune he will soon get from the court case will allow him to support Ada no matter what his occupation, if any. When Jarndyce, Richard, and Esther go to London to prepare for his departure, they meet George, with whom Richard has been taking fencing lessons, though not with any great energy or application. George, Richard and Esther visit Chancery, though of course nothing happens with the case, but there they meet Guppy and Mrs. Chadband, who had known Esther when she was a child. They then go to the shooting gallery, where George has been hiding Gridley from the authorities. They are met there by Inspector Bucket, who has a warrant for Gridley's arrest. They enter to find Gridley very weak, and though all, including Bucket, try to revive his spirits and even spark a little anger to bring him out of his despair, he soon dies - another victim of Chancery.

Meanwhile, Snagsby's attempt to keep his little secret is weighing heavily on his nosy wife. Despite her prying she is unable to solve the mystery, and eventually becomes convinced that her husband has been carrying on a secret affair, and that in fact Jo is his illegitimate son. She brings Jo to the house to subject him to an "improving" lecture by the fatuous Chadband, but is unable to pry any information out of him, for which Snagsby rewards him with a half-crown on his way out the door - an exchange that Mrs. Snagsby observes. Mr. George and Phil receive a visit from Grandfather Smallweed and his granddaughter. The money-grubbing accountant is acting as Tulkinghorn's agent to discover if George has in his possession any documents written by his former commanding officer, Captain Hawdon, whom Tulkinghorn suspects of being the mysterious and recently-deceased Nemo about whom Lady Dedlock has shown so much interest. George refuses to do anything of the sort without knowing why the document is wanted, and he asks to speak to Tulkinghorn directly, which he does. Tulkinghorn also refuses to answer his questions, and George tells him he needs to consult a friend of his for advice first. He then visits his old comrade Matthew Bagnet and his wife, who advise him to do nothing without understanding why the document is wanted, especially considering the nature of the people with whom he is dealing. George then returns to Tulkinghorn's house and tells him that he will not share such a document even if he happens to have such a thing - but Tulkinghorn knows from Smallweed that George tucked a letter in his pocket before leaving his shooting range to visit the lawyer for the first time.

Back at Chesney Wold, Sir Leicester is hosting a bevy of impoverished relations and can't wait until they leave the premises. While they are there, Sir Leicester receives a visit from Mr Rouncewell, his housekeeper's son. He comes to ask permission for his son Watt to court Lady Dedlock's maid Rosa. Sir Leicester considers that such a match would be an unacceptable one for the young lady - after all, how could a lady's maid in a great house stoop to marry the son of a mere tradesman? Mr. Rouncewell leaves convinced that his son should abandon hope for the relationship, but that night Lady Dedlock speaks to Rosa and assures her that she will do whatever is necessary to bring about her happiness.

When the Dedlocks go to London they receive a surprise visit from Guppy. He asks to speak to Lady Dedlock alone and shares with her some of his findings - that Esther Summerson bears a remarkable facial resemblance to Lady Dedlock, that the circumstances of her birth are mysterious, that she was raised by a certain Barbary who had once let slip to her servant, now Mrs. Chadband, that Esther's real last name was Hawdon, that the law-writer known as Nemo had in reality been Captain Hawdon, and that a veiled lady had sought out Jo to learn as much as possible about him. Guppy claims to possess letters written by the Captain and offers to bring them to Lady Dedlock. His purpose is not blackmail - in fact, he begs Lady Dedlock to keep his

visit secret - but to prove that Esther is highborn, and thus earn her affection. Lady Dedlock agrees to receive the letters when Guppy comes into possession of them, but after he leaves she bursts into tears; she had always believed her illegitimate child by Captain Hawdon to have died shortly after birth as her sister "Barbary" had cruelly told her, but now knows that Esther is that child.

Esther again takes up the story and speaks first of Mrs. Woodcourt's visit to Bleak House. The woman could do nothing but speak of her highborn Welsh heritage and tell anyone who would listen (though she seemed to confide particularly in Esther) that her son could only marry a woman of his high station in life. She tells Esther of Allan's penchant for meaningless flirtations with young ladies, and says she expects that he will find a wife during his travels abroad, where he doubtless will meet many ladies of high standing. She also predicts that Esther will marry a man much older than herself and be deeply loved and very happy. For some reason, the expression of these sentiments makes Esther uneasy. After Mrs. Woodcourt leaves, Caddy Jellyby comes for a visit and announces that she is to marry Prince Turveydrop within the month. Though her father has resolved his bankruptcy, he has no money to give her. Esther and Ada, who are to be bridesmaids, band together with the help of little Charley to sew the necessary dresses and clean the hopelessly messy Jellyby house in London for the wedding breakfast. The wedding takes place, though most of the guests are Mrs. Jellyby's charitable friends and none can talk of anything but his or her favorite cause. The newlyweds head off on their week-long honeymoon fully aware that old Mr. Turveydrop intends to live with them for the rest of his life and take the best of everything for himself without contributing anything to the housekeeping arrangements.

Back at Bleak House, Esther keeps trying to teach Charley to write without a great deal of success. Charley seems troubled, and after inquiry tells Esther that the brickmaker's wife she had seen in London while accompanying Mrs. Pardiggle had returned and was seeking Esther about a sick boy. Esther and Charley go to her cottage, where they find Jo, ill with smallpox and nearly hysterical; when he sees Esther veiled he mistakes her for Lady Dedlock, and continues to do so when she removes the veil because they look so much alike. Esther and Charley convince Jo to come home with them, where they put him to bed comfortably after Charley spends the evening nursing him. In the night he runs away and cannot be found, but soon Charley comes down with the smallpox. Esther nurses her through it, but just about the time Charley begins to recover Esther herself contracts the disease, in such a severe form that she is stricken blind.

The anonymous narrator again takes over and we return to Lincoln's Inn, where Weevle (Jobling) is waiting for a late-night visit from Guppy. After a pointless conversation with Snagsby, who is being shadowed by his suspicious wife, Guppy arrives and the two of them go to Jobling's room to wait for the promised delivery of the documents Guppy had offered to Lady Dedlock from Krook at midnight. As they wait they complain about an awful stench, and when they go downstairs at midnight they find Krook dead - the victim of spontaneous combustion (Dickens swore there were confirmed cases of such deaths on record when his critics complained about this incident). Guppy tries to convince Jobling to continue to live in his apartment in Krook's building, hoping that he might find interesting documents among the junk, but Jobling has no interest in doing so. Soon afterward Smallweed arrives and announces that his insane wife was Krook's sister, and that therefore he is heir to all in the building; Tulkinghorn then supports his claim. Guppy then has the unpleasant task of telling Lady Dedlock that the letters she wants have presumably been burned by Krook. Soon after, George receives a letter from Smallweed demanding immediate repayment of his loan. Since Bagnet has given security for the loan and

neither has the necessary funds, both are in danger of debtors' prison. They go to Smallweed to try to get him to continue the present arrangement, but he refuses and threatens to crush both of them. They then turn to Tulkinghorn, the lawyer in the case, who at first refuses to see them. He finally admits them, then offers to continue the present arrangement and free Bagnet of any future danger if George will turn over to him a certain document - the one containing the sample of Captain Hawdon's handwriting. George, over a barrel and wanting to protect his friend Bagnet and his family, reluctantly agrees and gives Tulkinghorn the document.

Esther then resumes the narrative. She is beginning to recover from her illness, but is still unwilling to allow anyone near her except Charley. Even though she is getting stronger and is beginning to recover her eyesight, her face is badly disfigured from the disease. Finally she agrees to let Jarndyce in to see her, and he showers her with affection, caring nothing for her appearance. Miss Flite also visits her and tells her that Richard is being ruined by Jarndyce and Jarndyce, which his stiff and barely civil letters to Esther's guardian confirm. She also tells her something of her own sad family history and how her family was destroyed by Chancery. Finally, Miss Flite informs Esther that Woodcourt was involved in a shipwreck off the coast of India and came out a hero. Esther, admitting to herself her love of Woodcourt, is happy that they never declared their affection, since he is now an important man and she is so disfigured. She then arranges to go to Boythorn's house for a week, which he has vacated for her use, to regain her strength to the point where she is ready to see Ada again. Soon after arriving she works up the courage to look in a mirror for the first time and finds her face greatly changed, though she can mourn little for the loss of beauty she never possessed in the first place. She begins to exercise in order to build up her strength, both by walking and by riding a small pony provided for her use by Boythorn. In the process she becomes a great favorite in the village. One day while she is out walking she is approached by Lady Dedlock, who confesses that she is her mother (something she had only recently discovered), begs Esther's forgiveness, and sadly insists, for Esther's protection, that they not see one another again. Esther is shocked to say the least, though she is glad finally to know her history to some extent. A few days later she is joyfully reunited with Ada. Shortly thereafter she is summoned to the Dedlock Arms tavern to meet Richard. She tries to convince him to leave Jarndyce and Jarndyce alone, but he is not to be swayed from his self-destructive course. Worse yet, he has fallen under the influence of the moocher Skimpole and an avaricious lawyer by the name of Vholes, who are taking his money and dragging him deeper into debt without the slightest qualm. Richard, meanwhile, continues to mistrust John Jarndyce, claiming that he is pursuing his own interests to Richard's detriment. After returning to Bleak House and assuming her duties there once again, Esther takes a short trip to London to visit Caddy, who is doing well and is happy despite working herself into the ground while the elder Mr. Turveydrop does no work and takes the best of everything. While in London she stops by to see Guppy, who absurdly believes she has returned to accept his earlier proposal of marriage. Instead, she asks him to stop looking into her past and requests that he keep silent about anything he may have already discovered.

The anonymous narrator again takes over, and we learn of Richard's visit to the basement office of the lawyer Vholes. The lawyer assures Richard that he is working tirelessly for his interests, though he has produced as yet no tangible results; his words also confirm Richard in his belief that Jarndyce is responsible for all his setbacks as he pursues his fortune. Meanwhile, Guppy and his friend Weevle return to Krook's place to retrieve Weevle's belongings. There they find the entire Smallweed family rooting through the junk in the shop in hopes of finding valuable

papers. Surprisingly, they also find Tulkinghorn there. He approaches Guppy, who refuses to say anything to him about his conversation with Lady Dedlock. Guppy also tells Weevle that he should remain silent because of the promises he gave, both to Lady Dedlock and to Esther. The scene then shifts to Chesney Wold, where the Dedlocks are again surrounded by their poor relations. They are discussing politics and Sir Leicester's latest run for a seat in Parliament when Tulkinghorn arrives. He informs Sir Leicester that he has lost the election to Mrs. Rouncewell's son. He then tells a story, no names given, which is in fact Lady Dedlock's story. Later that night she summons him and begs him not to reveal what he knows because of the harm it would do to her husband and the family name. She also says she intends to run away, but Tulkinghorn talks her out of it, arguing that such a move would make her guilt obvious to all. He then promises to keep the secret he knows, at least for the time being, though she hates being in his power. Tulkinghorn then returns to London, where he meets Snagsby, who complains that he has been being followed by Hortense, which is making his wife even more jealous than she had been previously. Hortense then meets with Tulkinghorn and demands that he find her a new position in return for the information she gave him. She expresses her hatred for Lady Dedlock and her willingness to do anything that might hurt her because of her favoritism for Rosa, but Tulkinghorn threatens her with prison if she ever bothers him or Snagsby again.

The narrative now returns to Esther, who wants to avoid any contact with, or even mention of, the Dedlocks lest she betray her mother's secret. She and Ada are still trying to reconcile Richard to Jarndyce, but without success. When Esther tells Jarndyce that Skimpole has been living off Richard's charity, Jarndyce decides to put a stop to it. He talks to Skimpole and insists that, if he needs money, he will come to him rather than getting it from Richard. Sir Leicester then unexpectedly arrives and apologizes if his feud with Boythorn in any way kept Jarndyce and his young wards from enjoying the hospitality of Chesney Wold. After Sir Leicester leaves, Esther and Jarndyce talk, and Esther discovers that the woman who brought her up - Lady Dedlock's estranged sister - had once been engaged to marry Boythorn, and Esther tells Jarndyce that Lady Dedlock is her real mother. Jarndyce comforts her, and the love and gratitude she feels for him is deeper than ever. The next morning Esther and Jarndyce discuss her secret, and conclude that the only ones who could pose a danger to it are Tulkinghorn, over whom they had no control, Guppy, who had promised Esther to say nothing, and the French maid Hortense. Jarndyce promises to keep an eye on the situation and do what he can to preserve the secret. He then changes the subject and asks Esther if he may communicate to her something of a serious nature that he is unable to put into words, and therefore wishes to convey in writing. Esther agrees, and a week later he sends her a letter proposing marriage. She is not altogether surprised, and, overwhelmed by gratitude, accepts his proposal. At this point, they say nothing about it to anyone.

One morning Vholes visits Bleak House and informs Jarndyce that Richard is in a bad way financially. Jarndyce feels bad for him, but realizes that the young man is so biased against him that an offer of help is out of the question. Esther therefore determines to see Richard once again and try to sway his mind, and carries for him a letter from Ada. She and Charley go to Deal, where Richard's regiment is stationed. There they find him in a very bad state indeed. He has determined to give up his commission and devote his entire time and energy to Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Ada's letter contains an offer of her small inheritance to allow him to remain in the army, but he has no intention of accepting her generous gift; instead, he blames Jarndyce for somehow working behind the scenes to keep him away from the Chancery case. Thus Esther's

words do no good, but only make matters worse. While they are in Deal, a ship from India lands bearing Woodcourt, now a returning hero. Esther determines to see him. He is very kind to her, though she mistakes his kindness for pity. She encourages him to do anything in his power to move Richard from his determined course when the two go to London, and Woodcourt promises to do whatever he can, viewing it as “a sacred trust.”

The anonymous narrator again picks up the story and takes us to Tom-all-Alone’s, where Woodcourt is walking at night to see if he might do some good to its pitiful inhabitants. He encounters Jenny, the brickmaker’s wife. She has a bruise on her head, obviously the result of being struck by a brick, and he ministers to her. Soon a young boy skulks nearby, and Jenny recognizes him as Jo. She and Woodcourt give chase and finally catch him. Jenny identifies him as the boy who had given smallpox to Esther then run away, and Woodcourt remembers him from the coroner’s inquest for Nemo. They finally convince him to explain himself, and he says he did not leave Bleak House voluntarily, but was kidnaped by Bucket at Tulkinghorn’s instigation, taken to a hospital, then given money and told to leave London forever. He has just now come back to die, as his illness is far advanced. Woodcourt offers to find him a comfortable place to rest, and Jo agrees to go with him. They walk to Krook’s old place and find that Miss Flite is no longer there, but Judy Smallweed directs them to her new abode. She is delighted to see Woodcourt again and suggests that George might be willing to find a place for the boy. They go to the shooting gallery and find that George and Phil are more than happy to put Jo up in one of their rooms. George, like Woodcourt, is motivated to care for Jo largely because of his respect for Esther. In the days that follow, George and Phil watch over Jo, Woodcourt gives him medicines, Jarndyce and Esther visit him, but all to no avail. The poor boy breathes his last, asking to be buried next to Nemo, the only real friend he ever had in the world.

The scene now shifts to the Dedlock house in London, where Lady Dedlock confides in Rosa that she is prepared to dismiss her in order to secure her happiness with Watt Rouncewell. Rosa is grieved to have to leave her beloved mistress, but Lady Dedlock assures her that all is for the best and swears her to silence as to the real reason for her dismissal. She then summons Mr. Rouncewell and tells him that because Watt and Rosa have not been able to give up their infatuation with each other, Rosa must leave her employ. Sir Leicester is completely taken in by the reason she gives, and Rouncewell is happy for the young couple. Tulkinghorn, however, is angry because Lady Dedlock is acting in an unusual way that is sure to rouse suspicion among those who are truly observant; he is convinced she is getting rid of Rosa to spare her any taint from her impending disgrace. Because Lady Dedlock has violated their agreement, by which she was to act as if nothing had changed, he declares the agreement null and void and tells her that he will soon inform Sir Leicester of her scandalous secret. He then goes home. Lady Dedlock goes out for a walk in the middle of the night. Shortly thereafter, a shot rings out in Tulkinghorn’s home, where he is found dead the next morning with a bullet in his heart. Later that day the Bagnet family gathers to celebrate Mrs. Bagnet’s birthday. After husband and children prepare a fairly wretched meal in honor of the woman of the house, George arrives to join in the festivities. Surprisingly, Inspector Bucket also appears and is introduced by George as a dear friend. He makes a big hit with the Bagnet family, especially the children, but after the party ends he arrests George, who had been skulking around the man’s home for weeks and had been heard to exchange angry words with him, for the murder of Tulkinghorn.

Esther again takes up the story. She gets a note indicating that Caddy is ill, so she arranges to spend most of her days for the next several months attending to her friend, since Prince is busy

with the dancing school and old Turveydrop is no help whatsoever. Jarndyce is concerned that Esther will wear herself out, but she assures him that she feels no fatigue whatsoever. Woodcourt is soon called in to meet Caddy's medical needs, which he does with great skill and kindness. Ada seems disturbed about something, however, and Esther can't pry the problem out of her. Woodcourt meanwhile is trying to look after Richard, but finds him increasingly ill and depressed as he devotes all his time to the court case. Besides, his indebtedness is getting worse every day. Esther and Ada visit Richard and find him very ill indeed. When the time comes to leave, Ada announces that she is staying - that from now on she will live with her husband. The secret that had been bearing her down was that she and Richard had married without telling anyone two months earlier. Esther is happy for them but also fearful for their future - sentiments Jarndyce shares when she tells him of the marriage. The next day Woodcourt tells them of Tulkinghorn's murder and George's arrest. Esther thinks immediately of her mother's fear and hatred of the old lawyer, but says nothing. They go to visit George in prison and ask him if he needs anything, but he seems perfectly content. When Jarndyce broaches the subject of a lawyer, George becomes obstinate. He detests lawyers and will not have one represent him; if the unvarnished truth is not enough to save him, he would rather hang than have a lawyer use tricks on his behalf. Mr. and Mrs. Bagnet arrive and have no better success in persuading him to accept legal representation. As they leave, George remarks that on the night of the murder he saw a woman who looked very much like Esther, though in a heavy cloak, coming down the stairs from Tulkinghorn's office. After they leave the prison, Mrs. Bagnet tells the others that George's mother is still living and that she intends to find her and bring her to try to persuade George to come to his senses and mount a decent defense.

The anonymous narrator next tells the reader of the progress of Bucket's investigation. Sir Leicester has put up a handsome reward; Bucket has gone through George's quarters with a fine-toothed comb and has found many recently-fired pistols (no surprise in a shooting gallery); most strangely, Bucket has received a series of anonymous letters containing only two words - "Lady Dedlock." In the process of questioning one of the household servants, he discovers that Lady Dedlock likes to take long walks when her headaches come upon her, and that she had taken one on the night of the murder, and was wearing a heavy black cloak at the time. Bucket then asks for a private interview with Sir Leicester. He tells him all that he has discovered, including the truth about Lady Dedlock's past and her illegitimate child. Grandfather Smallweed then arrives with the Chadbands and Mrs. Snagsby in tow. The purpose of their visit is to extort money from Sir Leicester to keep them revealing what they think they know about his wife. Bucket makes short work of their pleas and send them away with a promise to give thought to what they have said. He then brings in Hortense and reveals that she is the one who murdered Tulkinghorn and had been attempting to frame Lady Dedlock by sending the incriminating letters. Apparently the arrest of George had been nothing more than a smokescreen to put the real murderer off guard. He indicates the nature of his evidence against her and places her under arrest. His newfound knowledge about his wife stuns Sir Leicester; contrary to her fears, he has no intention of disowning her, but loves her still and has compassion for her in her troubles.

Mrs. Bagnet has succeeded in her quest, and we discover that George's mother is none other than Mrs. Rouncewell, the housekeeper at Chesney Wold. They have been estranged for years, and she joyfully and tearfully accompanies Mrs. Bagnet to visit her son in prison. There they are reconciled and she convinces him to obtain legal counsel. She then goes to the townhouse of the Dedlocks and informs Lady Dedlock that she had received an anonymous letter denouncing

her mistress as the murderer of Tulkinghorn. Though she does not believe the letter, she begs Lady Dedlock to reveal anything she knows about the incident in order to help clear George. After Mrs. Rouncewell leaves, Guppy enters, awkward as always, but desiring to warn Lady Dedlock that the papers she had requested of him may not have been lost at all, but may have been discovered by Smallweed, who was seen earlier entering her residence. She now realizes that all is lost - her secret has been discovered by unscrupulous people and undoubtedly revealed to her husband, and she is not only in disgrace but is suspected of the murder of Tulkinghorn. She leaves her husband a note thanking him for his goodness to her, asserting her innocence in the death of Tulkinghorn, but admitting that whatever else he has heard is true. Leaving everything behind, she then runs away into the cold and snowy evening. Upon reading the note, Sir Leicester has a stroke. He is discovered by a curious relative and the servants take him to his bed, where Mrs. Rouncewell brings him a slate so he can communicate. He calls for Bucket, shows him the letter, and tells him to find Lady Dedlock and communicate to her his full forgiveness. Bucket tells Mrs. Rouncewell that George has been completely exonerated and released, and then searches Lady Dedlock's room, in the process finding the handkerchief bearing Esther's name. He then finds George to ask where Esther may be found, and goes to the Jarndyce residence, where Jarndyce wakes Esther, who is more than willing to accompany Bucket in an attempt to find her mother before she does something desperate.

Esther now takes up the narrative. Bucket takes them first to a London police station where descriptions of Lady Dedlock are written up and circulated. They then check the crew charged with dragging the river and discover, much to Esther's relief, that her body has not been discovered. They then head for St. Albans, stopping at every pub and turnpike station along the way. They soon pick up Lady Dedlock's track - she has been seen walking on foot. At St. Albans no sign of her is to be found. As they search, Bucket tells Esther the story of the removal of Jo from Bleak House, and particularly warns her against Skimpole, who had betrayed the lad for five pounds. When they visit the brickmaker's house, they find that Lady Dedlock had stopped there to rest. Though getting information from the sullen men there is like pulling teeth, they finally discover that Jenny, the woman to whom Esther had been so kind, had left for London while Lady Dedlock had continued along the road. Bucket and Esther continue the pursuit, but soon lose the trail. With a flash of insight, Bucket realizes that Lady Dedlock and Jenny had changed clothing, and that Esther's mother was in reality on her way back to London disguised in the garments of a poor woman. They turn around and head for London as fast as the coach can carry them.

Back at the Dedlock townhouse, Sir Leicester is improved enough so that he can speak, at least well enough to be understood by Mrs. Rouncewell. He longs for his Lady's return and does everything he can to make clear to those around him that nothing has changed between them, and tells them to squelch any gossip to the contrary that they may hear. The gossip, however, is rapidly spreading among the aristocracy and the influential people in London, with many speculating about an impending divorce and wondering about the details of Lady Dedlock's disgrace. George has come to the townhouse to help his mother care for Sir Leicester, and the old man soon comes to trust and depend upon the stalwart trooper. In her heart of hearts, however, Mrs. Rouncewell fears they may never see Lady Dedlock again.

Esther again picks up the story and tells of the terrible conditions they encounter on the trip back to London. When they finally arrive, they begin to narrow the search, during which they meet Woodcourt, who is just returning from visiting Richard, who had been ill. They eventually arrive at the Snagsby residence, where the maid had met Lady Dedlock in the street and had been

given a letter by her, but Mrs. Snagsby had gone into such a jealous rage that the maid became hysterical. Woodcourt calms her and obtains the letter, while Bucket speaks plainly to Mrs. Snagsby to assure her that her suspicions of her husband were completely unfounded. The letter, addressed to Esther, tells of Lady Dedlock's journey to Bleak House in order to get one last glimpse of her, which she failed to do; of her bargain with Jenny to exchange clothes, for which Jenny was not to be blamed; and of her desire to die in obscurity, unidentified, in order to bring the least pain possible to her beloved husband and daughter. Under Esther's gentle questioning, the maid tells them of the place to which Lady Dedlock had asked directions, and they go immediately to the pauper's cemetery in which Nemo had been buried. There they find Lady Dedlock, clinging to the bars of the gate, frozen to death.

The strains of the journey and her grief over the death of her mother make Esther ill for a time, but she finds great solace in the generous care of her friends. Soon Jarndyce tells her that he intends to remain in London for the foreseeable future in order to allow her to stay close to Ada. He also invites Mrs. Woodcourt to live with them so that Woodcourt, who has been attending Richard daily, might be able to visit her more easily (Jarndyce seems also to be enabling him to see Esther more often, though Esther will not even admit to herself such a motive on his part or such a desire on hers). Richard, meanwhile, has been getting worse and worse. Though he has no identifiable physical ailment, the strain of the court case has weighed him down so that he sinks ever more deeply into depression. He spends so much time in Chancery that Miss Flite has made him the executor of her will. The small inheritance brought into the marriage by Ada is almost gone, largely eaten up by the constant expenses of Vholes as he "keeps his shoulder to the wheel" on behalf of his client. One night when Esther visits Richard and Ada for dinner, Vholes is present, and he reminds Esther of a vampire with his blood-sucking ways. After Vholes returns to his office and Woodcourt arrives to take Richard for a walk, Ada confesses to Esther that she is pregnant, and while she hopes that the child will bring Richard to his senses and lead him to assume his responsibilities for his family, she also fears that he will not live long enough to see his child. Since Skimpole is, along with Vholes, one of the chief causes of the young couple's impoverishment, Esther determines to speak to him and try to get him to stop accepting their money. Though Skimpole agrees to comply with her request - for all the wrong reasons - Esther goes away from their meeting with grave doubts; justifiably so, for the clueless and selfish man continues to sponge on the struggling couple. Esther, however, never sees him again, and he dies five years later after starting to pen an autobiography in which he excoriates the generous John Jarndyce as "the Incarnation of Selfishness."

One evening after spending the day with Ada, Esther is accompanied home by Woodcourt, who draws her aside and professes his love for her. Esther hardly knows what to say. On recovering herself, she assures him that knowledge of his love would make her a better person, but that he could have no hope of altering their relationship, since she had promised herself in marriage to her dear guardian. Woodcourt also informs her that he has accepted a medical appointment in a small country town, obtained with Jarndyce's assistance. The next morning, Esther raises the question of their marriage with Jarndyce, and they arrange to be married a month hence. As they speak, they are surprised by the entrance of Inspector Bucket, followed by Grandfather Smallweed, carried in his chair as usual. Smallweed, while going through the junk in Krook's shop, had come upon a copy of a Jarndyce will - one that had been written later than any yet discovered, and thus able to supplant them. Though Smallweed's intention had been to scheme to see how much money he could make from the document, Bucket had heard of its

existence from his jealous grandchildren, who feared they would be cut out of the profits. He used the power of the law to force Smallweed to turn the will over to its rightful owner. Jarndyce, however, refuses even to open it, and takes it immediately to his solicitor, Conversation Kenge, who informs him that the document will have the effect of reducing his won share of the settlement while increasing that of Richard and Ada. Jarndyce is very pleased indeed, insisting that he would be happiest if the entire estate were to go to Richard and Ada and he were to get nothing. Kenge then shows the document to Vholes and tells him it will be introduced into Chancery Court at the nearest possible moment.

Meanwhile, George nervously travels to meet his estranged brother. Fearing rejection, he travels incognito, but when he enters his brother's office in the iron-making factory he owns, he is warmly received, taken home for dinner, and offered a job with the company. George, though he is grateful, refuses the offer and announces that he will continue in an official capacity at Chesney Wold, helping his mother to care for the impaired but improving Sir Leicester. We also discover that preparations are underway for the marriage of Watt Rouncewell and young Rosa, who is to be educated in Europe for a year before being brought into the family. George also writes a letter to Esther in which he confesses his role in turning over to Tulkinghorn under duress a document written by her father, but excuses himself because he believed Captain Hawdon to be dead.

Esther then resumes her story. As she begins to make preparations for her wedding, she confides only in Mrs. Woodcourt and Charley. One day, Jarndyce travels to Yorkshire to make arrangements for Woodcourt's new position. Several days later he sends for Esther, telling her that her housekeeping advice is needed for the preparation of a residence he has purchased for Woodcourt in gratitude for his services. When she arrives, she finds a quaint little cottage, the grounds and interior of which have been arranged and decorated precisely according to her own tastes, and intended to resemble those of Bleak House. In fact, Jarndyce has named the place Bleak House. He then shares his secret with Esther. Since Woodcourt's return, he had become aware of the mutual love he shared with Esther. Since he knew that she would never break her word to him or even hint at wanting to do so, he quietly arranged for Mrs. Woodcourt to live with them so she could observe Esther firsthand and come to love and appreciate her. He also took Woodcourt into his confidence, even to the point of encouraging him to share his love with Esther. He concludes by telling Esther that she is indeed to become the mistress of Bleak House, but that it is to be this cottage on Yorkshire, as the wife of Allan Woodcourt. No longer needing to feel guilty about her hidden love for Woodcourt, she is overjoyed, and loves Jarndyce more than ever for his selfless generosity. After they return home, they find a message from Guppy, who arrives with Jobling and his mother and announces that he has finally passed the bar examination and intends to set up business as a lawyer. He also generously informs them that he is willing to put the past behind him and renew his overtures of marriage to Esther. Jarndyce does not even let Esther speak, but firmly conveys her rejection of Guppy's offer, at which point his mother becomes irate and unthinkingly tries to throw Jarndyce out of his own house.

The new court session begins, but before the new will can even be introduced in evidence all are startled to hear that Jarndyce and Jarndyce has been settled - not as everyone expected, but by a settlement that is no settlement at all. In fact, the entire estate is eaten up by legal costs, and when Esther and Woodcourt arrive at Chancery they find men carrying box after box of documents out to be disposed of, and laughing uproariously as they do so. Jarndyce is relieved, but Richard is devastated. The shock is too much for him to handle. Jarndyce visits him and the

two are reconciled, but Richard dies in his wife's arms that evening. Miss Flite then releases her birds.

At Chesney Wold, a deadening quiet descends. No longer the social hub of the county, few visit the place anymore. Sir Leicester rides occasionally in the company of George, most often to visit the grave of Lady Dedlock, who has been buried in the family mortuary with no one knowing the circumstances of her death. Phil has come to live with George, and the Bagnets visit occasionally, but the only life to disturb the old place is the ongoing feud between Sir Leicester and his neighbor Boythorn (the latter had been willing to cede his right of way to Sir Leicester, but when he realized that the feud itself helped give the old man a reason to keep living, he kindly obliged and pursued it as strongly as before).

The concluding chapter is written by Esther seven years after the settlement of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Ada and her young son Richard have been taken in by John Jarndyce and live at Bleak House. Charley is married to the local miller and is very happy. Caddy Jellyby Turveydrop works hard as a teacher to support her husband, lamed from too much dancing, and her father-in-law, as presumptuous as ever. Her mother has given up on the mission work in Borrioboola-Gha, since the king of the place has sold the entire population into slavery in exchange for rum, and has turned to the cause of women's suffrage. Caddy's little girl is deaf and dumb, but is the joy of her mother's life. Jarndyce continues to be loved by Ada and young Richard, as well as by Esther, Woodcourt, and their two girls. Woodcourt has become a respected and beloved physician, honored by the poor people among whom he serves. The story ends as he tells Esther that she is even more beautiful than she had been before her disfiguring illness, though she, of course, refuses to believe him.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Esther Summerson - A young woman who believes herself to be an orphan, she is really the illegitimate child of Lady Dedlock and the mysterious man who calls himself Nemo. She narrates much of the story.
- Ada Clare - A beautiful seventeen-year-old girl who becomes a ward of Chancery Court because she has potential interest in Jarndyce and Jarndyce.
- Richard Carstone - Ada's cousin, two years her senior, also involved in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The two go to live at Bleak House, fall in love, and ultimately marry, though Richard brings on his untimely death because he pins all of his hopes on getting rich by means of the court case.
- John Jarndyce - The owner of Bleak House, he is the longtime guardian of Esther and also takes Ada and Richard under his wing. He is shy and generous to a fault. Near the end of the book, he asks Esther to marry him, but yields his right to Allan Woodcourt when he realizes the love he and Esther have for one another.
- Allan Woodcourt - A dedicated young surgeon who falls in love with and eventually marries Esther.

- Mrs. Woodcourt - Allan's mother, she is proud of her family's Welsh heritage and refuses to hear of her son marrying anyone lacking royal blood, but eventually comes to love Esther as much as her son does.
- Conversation Kenge - Lawyer to Jarndyce and Esther, a kindly and competent man.
- Sir Leicester Dedlock - A wealthy country baronet, master of Chesney Wold, he is twenty years older than his wife, whom he married for love.
- Lady Honoria Dedlock - Sir Leicester's wife and Esther's mother, though through most of the story no one realizes the connection. As a young woman she had an affair with Captain Hawdon that resulted in the birth of Esther. She runs away and dies of cold and exposure when she fears her secret will be revealed and her shame brought upon her husband.
- Volumnia - Sir Leicester's poor cousin who loves to spend time at Chesney Wold and put on airs like a great lady.
- Miss Barbary - The assumed name of the woman who raised Esther; she is in reality Lady Dedlock's sister, and at one time was engaged to marry Mr. Boythorn.
- Hortense - Lady Dedlock's large and somewhat disreputable-looking French maid, she eventually murders Tulkinghorn.
- Mrs. Rouncewell - The elderly housekeeper at Chesney Wold, she knows all the family secrets of the Dedlocks.
- Rosa - A young and attractive village girl being trained as a maid by Mrs. Rouncewell.
- Mr. Rouncewell - Mrs. Rouncewell's son and Watt's father, he is a prosperous businessman and owns an iron-making factory.
- Watt Rouncewell - Mrs. Rouncewell's grandson; he falls in love with and marries Rosa.
- Mr. Tulkinghorn - Lawyer to the Dedlocks, he is taciturn, proper, and utterly ruthless. He is murdered near the end of the book.
- Mrs. Jellyby - A wealthy philanthropist who is obsessed with the welfare of Africans in Borrioboola-Gha but allows her own house and children to run riot.
- Caroline (Caddy) Jellyby - Mrs. Jellyby's daughter, she can't wait to escape her family's home. She falls in love with and marries Prince Turveydrop.
- Prince Turveydrop - A young dance instructor with whom Caddy falls in love.

- Mr. Turveydrop - Prince's father, he is noted for his Department, but does nothing but live off the labor of his son and daughter-in-law.
- Mrs. Pardiggle - A forceful woman of charity who presses her attentions on the poor whether they like it or not, taking her five young sons with her; they resent what their mother does to them, especially when she makes them give their allowances to her various charities, then boasts to others about their generosity.
- William Guppy - An oily young law clerk with Kenge and Carboy who falls in love with Esther, though she has no interest in him.
- Joshua Smallweed (Grandfather) - A mean-spirited old accountant who is always looking for ways to get an edge for himself; he is confined to a wheelchair.
- Grandmother Smallweed - His wife, she is out of her senses; he spends his time insulting her and throwing cushions at her. She is also Krook's sister.
- Bart Smallweed - A boy in his young teens who idolizes Guppy and mimics him in whatever way he can.
- Judy Smallweed - Bart's twin sister, she attends to her grandfather and is constantly being called upon to shake him up and reposition him in his chair.
- Tony Jobling - A teenage boy who, after being fired from Kenge and Carboy, takes a job with Snagsby as a law writer and rents the room at Krook's formerly occupied by Nemo, though under the assumed name of Weevle.
- Krook - He runs a rag and bottle shop, and is jokingly called the Lord Chancellor because what goes into his shop never seems to come out again, much like Chancery Court. Nemo and Miss Flite are his boarders. He dies of spontaneous combustion.
- Nemo (Captain Hawdon) - A mysterious law writer who is actually Lady Dedlock's former lover and therefore Esther's father; his name is Latin for *nobody*. He dies of an opium overdose early in the book.
- Jo - A poor vagrant boy who sweeps streets for tips and lives by himself in a slum, he was treated kindly by the mysterious Nemo and, though he is disqualified from giving testimony at the inquest, is later questioned by several principals in the case. He catches smallpox and gives it to Esther, and eventually dies of the hardships of the streets.
- Miss Flite - A kindly but erratic old woman who brings her documents to Chancery every day hoping that her case might be settled; she keeps birds in her spare apartment and vows to release them the day Jarndyce and Jarndyce ends, which she does.

- Snagsby - He runs a stationer's shop in the law district across the street from Krook's rag and bottle shop. He occasionally hires Nemo to do work for his clients. When he is asked to keep a secret, his wife is convinced he is having an affair.
- Chadband - An evangelical minister and general all-around hypocrite under whose spell Mrs. Snagsby has fallen.
- Harold Skimpole - A jolly but totally irresponsible man who is quite willing to live life at the expense of others. The character is modeled on a poet of Dickens' acquaintance, Leigh Hunt.
- Mr. Neckett - A debt collector who pursues Skimpole and later dies, leaving behind him three young orphaned children, who are later cared for by the generous John Jarndyce.
- Charlotte (Charley) Neckett - A thirteen-year-old girl who works to support her two younger siblings after her father dies. She works for Grandfather Smallweed until John Jarndyce rescues her and pays her to be Esther's maid.
- Lawrence Boythorn - An old school friend of John Jarndyce, he is loud and opinionated, but kind of heart; he is engaged in a nasty perpetual boundary dispute with his neighbors, the Dedlocks, and was at one time engaged to Lady Dedlock's sister.
- Bayham Badger - Kenge's cousin, a doctor who agrees to train Richard in medicine.
- Gridley - An angry but good-hearted man who has lost everything he owns to court costs in Chancery, and eventually dies in despair.
- George Rouncewell - Mrs. Rouncewell's estranged son, he is a former army man who now runs a shooting gallery; he is in debt to Smallweed, and is wrongly accused of the murder of Tulkinghorn.
- Phil Squod - George's wartime buddy who, despite his disability, helps run the shooting gallery.
- Matthew Bagnet - A friend of George's who always lets his wise wife do the talking for him.
- Inspector Bucket - A police detective who is hired by Tulkinghorn to look into the case of the deceased Nemo; he is thought to be the first detective in British fiction.
- Wholes - An unscrupulous lawyer who latches onto Richard and bilks him of his money while claiming to advance his cause in Jarndyce and Jarndyce.

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

“This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man’s acquaintance; which gives to moneyed might the means abundantly of wearying out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honorable man among its practitioners who would not give - who does not often give - the warning, ‘Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!’” (ch.1, p.51)

“Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you are hers.” (Miss Barbary, ch.3, p.65)

“All’s fish that comes to my net.” (Krook, ch.5, p.101)

“But, my Ada, we are not going to trust it! We know it better than to trust to it. We only say that if it *should* make us rich, we have no constitutional objection to being rich.” (Richard, ch.14, p.234)

“When my noble and learned brother gives his Judgment, they’re to be let go free. And then, if that ever was to happen - which it won’t - the birds that have never been caged would kill ‘em.” (Krook, ch.14, p.253)

“I will accuse the individual workers of that system against me, face to face, before the eternal bar!” (Gridley, ch.15, p.268)

“This made me think, did Lady Dedlock’s face accidentally resemble my godmother’s? It might be that it did, a little; but the expression was so different, and the stern decision which had worn into my godmother’s face, like weather into rocks, was so completely wanting in the face before me, that it could not be that resemblance which had struck me. Neither did I know the loftiness and haughtiness of Lady Dedlock’s face, at all, in any one. And yet *I - I*, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing - seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, whom I not only entertained no fancy that I had ever seen, but whom I perfectly well knew I had never seen until that hour.” (Esther, ch.18, p.305)

“Mr. Guppy suspects everybody who enters on the occupation of a stool in Kenge and Carboy’s office, of entertaining, as a matter of course, sinister designs upon him.” (ch.20, p.327)

“They said there could be no East wind where Somebody was; they said that wherever Dame Durden [one of their nicknames for Esther] went, there was sunshine and summer air.” (Esther recording words of Jarndyce and Ada, ch.30, p.482)

“I would rather restore to poor Rick his proper nature, than be endowed with all the money that dead suitors, broken, heart and soul, upon the wheel of Chancery, have left unclaimed with

the Accountant-General - and that's money enough, my dear, to be cast into a pyramid, in memory of Chancery's transcendent wickedness." (Jarndyce, ch.35, p.547)

"I then became heavily sorrowful to think I had ever been reared. That I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed. That I had a terror of myself, as the danger and possible disgrace of my own mother, and of a proud family name. That I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should then be alive." (Esther, ch.36, p.569)

"The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself." (ch.39, p.603)

"But he did not hint to me, that when I had been better looking, he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts, and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement, and my inheritance of shame. That the more I stood in need of such fidelity, the more firmly I might trust in him to the last. But *I* knew it, I knew it well now. It came upon me as the close of the benignant history I had been pursuing, and I felt that I had but one thing to do. To devote my life to his happiness was to thank him poorly, and what had I wished for the other night but some new means of thanking him?" (Esther, ch.44, p.667)

"Either the suit must be ended, Esther, or the suitor." (Richard, ch.51, p.751)

"I have done all I could do to be lost. I shall be soon forgotten so, and shall disgrace him least. I have nothing about me by which I can be recognized. This paper I part with now. The place where I shall lie down, if I can get so far, has been often in my mind. Farewell. Forgive." (Lady Dedlock, ch.59, p.865)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the use of foreshadowing in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Why does the author drop hints about important events not yet known to the reader? Choose three specific instances of foreshadowing in the novel and discuss why Dickens would have chosen to make the reader aware of these things before they actually happened. Make sure that the examples you choose are matters of importance to the novel and its thematic structure.
2. Discuss the social criticism found in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Give special attention to the descriptions of Tom-all-Along's. How does Dickens use his descriptions of this London slum to communicate his critique of the society in which he lived?
3. Discuss the social criticism found in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Give special attention to the descriptions of Chancery Court. How does Dickens use his descriptions of the British legal system to communicate his critique of the society in which he lived?

4. Discuss the social criticism found in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Give special attention to the descriptions of the aristocratic social circle surrounding the Dedlocks. How does Dickens use his descriptions of the upper class to communicate his critique of the society in which he lived?
5. Discuss the social criticism found in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Give special attention to the descriptions of philanthropists such as Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle. How does Dickens use his descriptions of these do-gooders to communicate his critique of the society in which he lived?
6. Charles Dickens is sometimes criticized for making his good characters too good to be true. Evaluate this criticism using one of the leading characters in *Bleak House*. Choose either Esther Summerson, John Jarndyce, or Allan Woodcourt as the basis for your essay. Do you find that your chosen character lacks credibility because of his or her goodness? Why or why not?
7. Christians do not fare well in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Neither the Low Church (Chadband) nor the High Church (Mrs. Pardiggle) nor the missionary movement (Mrs. Jellyby) is presented in a favorable light. What aspects of Victorian Christianity is Dickens ridiculing? Are his criticisms justifiable? Use your knowledge of the Anglican church in the nineteenth century to assess the validity of his treatment.
8. Despite the negative portrayal of Christianity in general and the church in particular in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, the author obviously thinks highly of Christian morality. Yet both the Christianity he ridicules and the Christian morality he values are systems of religion and ethics without Christ. To what extent might one argue that one is as bad as the other? Support your argument with details from the novel.
9. Despite the negative portrayal of Christianity in general and the church in particular in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, the author obviously thinks highly of Christian morality. Using your knowledge of liberal theology in general and the characteristics of the Broad Church Movement and Christian Socialism in nineteenth-century Britain in particular, discuss the extent to which the novel indicates Dickens' sympathy with such perversions of Christianity.
10. Discuss the treatment of lawyers in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Dickens himself worked as a law writer early in life, and his experience in the courts was clearly not a positive one, yet his portrayal of lawyers is not completely negative. Choose three lawyers in the novel and use them to discuss what Dickens sees as the strengths and weaknesses of the British legal profession.

11. The narrative structure of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* is an unusual one, primarily because of his decision to alternate between two narrators - an anonymous narrator with a third-person omniscient perspective and Esther Summerson, speaking about events well back in her past, but doing so from the perspective of what she knew and understood at the time. What advantages does Dickens gain from this approach? Discuss the uses Dickens makes of his two narrative voices in the novel, and how his approach benefits the reader.
12. Compare and contrast the two narrative voices in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, both in tone and content. In what ways do Esther and the anonymous narrator differ? In what ways do they agree? Be sure also to consider the differences in their writing styles and the different aspects of the story and of society on which they focus.
13. Discuss the picture of parenting portrayed in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Choose three bad parents and single out the characteristics of bad parenting represented by their behavior, then contrast each with an example of good parenting in the story.
14. Inspector Bucket, the policeman in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, is one of the first detectives in the history of English literature. How good of a detective is he? Evaluate both his techniques and his character in answering the question.
15. Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* was written shortly after the completion of *David Copperfield*. Compare and contrast the heroines of the two stories, Esther Summerson and Agnes Wickfield. Be sure to discuss both their characters and their roles in the plots of the two novels.
16. Several characters in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* have trouble expressing their emotions, most notably John Jarndyce and Lady Dedlock. Compare and contrast the passionless exteriors presented by the two characters. Are they emotionless in the same ways or for the same reasons? Under what circumstances do the walls behind which they hide themselves break down? Are they better off when they hide their passions or when they reveal them?
17. One mark of a good novel is the growth and change experienced by the major characters in the story. Choose one major character from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* and discuss how that character changes from the beginning of the story to its end. What factors bring about the changes you see? Are these changes for the better or the worse? Why?
18. "Knowledge is power." Discuss the validity of this statement in the light of the plot developments and characters in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. What characters seek knowledge as a source of power over their own lives or over others? Are they successful in their searches? Do their efforts bring them happiness or disaster? Choose three characters from the story on which to center your essay.

19. Discuss the role of secrets in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Does the author picture knowing and keeping secrets as a healthy or an unhealthy thing? Choose three characters from the story who try to learn or keep secrets and discuss the consequences for their lives and the lives of others.
20. Discuss the significance of names in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Dickens deliberately chooses names for his characters in order to illuminate who they are, not just for comic effect. Choose three characters in the story and indicate the ways in which their names are fitting and illustrate their personalities.
21. In Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, the central secret belongs to Lady Dedlock, and she is so determined to keep that secret that she is willing to die to protect it. The shame she feels and the scorn she fears seem oddly out of place in contemporary society, when the bearing of children out of wedlock hardly seems to matter at all. Would society today be better off if the bearing of illegitimate children were a cause for guilt and shame, or is Dickens suggesting that Victorian society would have been better off had such behavior been more acceptable? How does the Bible shed light on this question?
22. The anonymous narrator of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* at one point says, "The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself." Is this cynical description of the legal system an accurate one today? Why or why not? Use the commentary contained in the novel and relate it to contemporary legal practice in discussing the extent to which Dickens' social criticism continues to be applicable.
23. Discuss the question of identity as it appears in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Many characters desperately want to find out who they are. What do the characters in the story consider to be necessary in order to define a person's identity? Does Dickens approve or disapprove of such criteria? Choose three characters in the story for whom the discovery of identity is important and answer the questions in the context of their experiences.
24. G.K. Chesterton, in his comments on Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*, says that "Miss Caddy Jellyby is by far the greatest, the most human, and the most really dignified of the heroines of Dickens." Why would Chesterton have made such an assertion? What details in the story might be alleged to support his conclusion? Do you agree or disagree with him? Why?
25. Discuss the theme of selfishness as it appears in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. The author satirizes self-centeredness through his brilliantly-drawn eccentrics. Choose three relatively minor characters and show how Dickens uses their obviously unrealistic qualities to illuminate the serious consequences of focusing on oneself rather than others. Be sure to show how other characters, much more realistically and sympathetically drawn, serve as foils for the eccentrics through their selfless choices and sacrificial lifestyles.

26. In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis argues that little can do more to destroy a person's life than living with an eye constantly on the future. Such an outlook, he maintained, both set one up for disappointment and kept him from appreciating and being involved in life in the present. Evaluate Lewis' assertion by using the character of Richard Carstone in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. In what ways does Richard demonstrate the truth of Lewis' point, and the tragic consequences that flow from a life based on unrealistic expectations?