



# Bleak House (Illustrated, complete and with the original illustrations)

Charles Dickens

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Bleak House is a novel by Charles Dickens, published in 20 monthly instalments between March 1852 and September 1853. It is held to be one of Dickens' finest novels, containing one of the most vast, complex and engaging arrays of minor characters and sub-plots in his entire canon. The story is told partly by the novel's heroine, Esther Summerson, and partly by a mostly omniscient narrator. Memorable characters include the menacing lawyer Tulkinghorn, the friendly but depressive John Jarndyce, and the childish and disingenuous Harold Skimpole, as well as the likeable but imprudent Richard Carstone.

Sir Leicester Dedlock and Honoria, Lady Dedlock (his junior by more than 20 years) live at his estate of Chesney Wold. Unknown to Sir Leicester, Lady Dedlock had a lover, Captain Hawdon, before she married Sir Leicester – and had a child by him, Esther Summerson. Lady Dedlock, believing her daughter is dead, has chosen to live out her days 'bored to death' as a fashionable lady of the world.

Esther is raised by Miss Barbary, Lady Dedlock's spartan sister, who instills a sense of worthlessness in her that Esther will battle throughout the novel. Esther doesn't know that Miss Barbary is her aunt, thinking of her only as her godmother. When Miss Barbary dies, the Chancery lawyer Conversation Kenge takes charge of Esther's future on the instruction of his client, John Jarndyce. Jarndyce becomes Esther's guardian, and after attending school in Reading for six years, Esther moves in with him at Bleak House, along with his wards, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare. Esther is to be Ada's companion.

Esther soon befriends both Ada and Richard, who are cousins. They are beneficiaries in one of the wills at issue in Jarndyce and Jarndyce; their guardian is a beneficiary under another will, and in some undefined way the two wills conflict. Richard and Ada soon fall in love, but though Mr. Jarndyce doesn't oppose the match, he stipulates that Richard (who is inconstant) must first choose a profession. Richard first tries the medical profession, and Esther first meets the newly-qualified Dr. Allan Woodcourt at the house of Richard's prospective tutor, Mr. Baynham Badger. When Richard mentions the prospect of gaining from the resolution of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, John Jarndyce beseeches him never to put faith in what he calls "the family curse". Meanwhile, Lady Dedlock is also a beneficiary under one of the wills in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Early in the book, while listening to her solicitor, the close-mouthed but shrewd Mr. Tulkinghorn, read an affidavit aloud, she recognises the handwriting on the copy. The sight affects her so much that she almost faints, which Tulkinghorn notes and thinks should be investigated. He traces the copyist who turns out to be a pauper known only as "Nemo" who has recently died. The only person to identify him is a street-sweeper, a poor homeless boy named Jo.

Lady Dedlock also investigates the matter disguised as her French maid, Mademoiselle Hortense. She pays Jo to take her to Nemo's grave. Meanwhile, Tulkinghorn is convinced that Lady Dedlock's secret might threaten the interests of his client, Sir Leicester Dedlock, and watches her constantly, even enlisting the maid, who detests her....

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