

“This is a very exciting story. I can really imagine what London was like so many years ago.” Luke, 11



BLEAK HOUSE

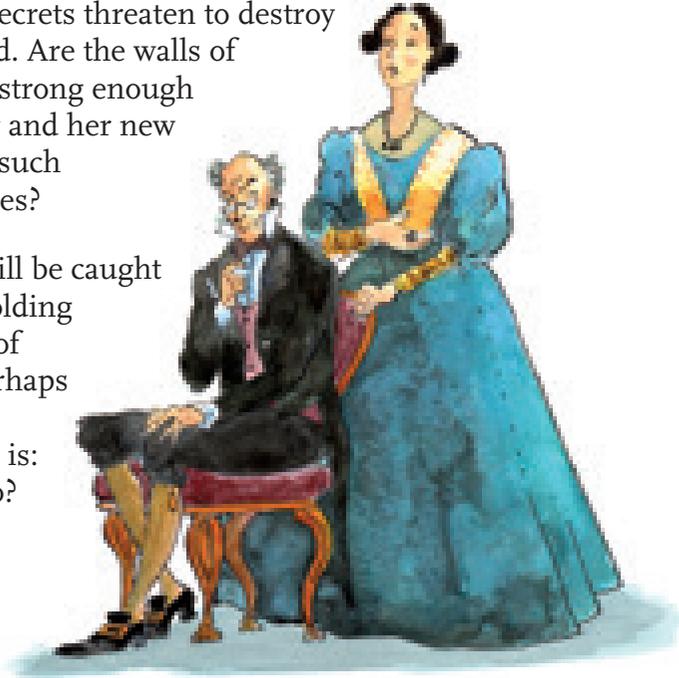
CHARLES DICKENS

‘It would have been far better if you had never been born.’

Esther, at fourteen, has never known love. Determined to live well, earn some love and overcome the shadow of her birth, she takes her first steps into an unknown world.

A family curse, a manipulating lawyer, poverty and secrets threaten to destroy Esther’s world. Are the walls of Bleak House strong enough to protect her and her new friends from such powerful forces?

The reader will be caught up in an unfolding mystery, full of surprises. Perhaps the biggest mystery of all is: Who is Nemo?



BLEAK HOUSE

Charles Dickens



Retold by Gill Tavner
Illustrated by Karen Donnelly

ISBN: 978-1-906230-04-3



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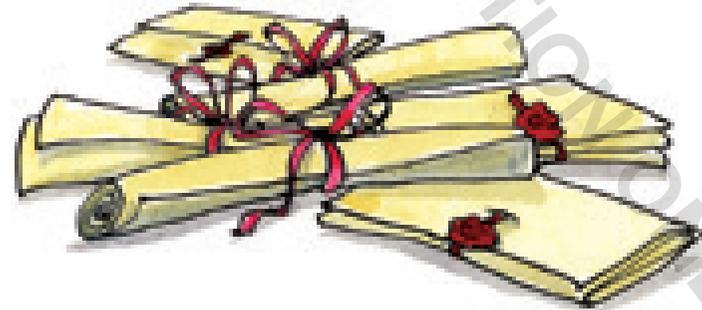
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THE CHARACTERS



Mr Jarndyce

Mr Jarndyce becomes Esther's legal guardian. Can he keep her safe and happy in his home at Bleak House?

Can he protect his young friends from the family curse?

Lady Dedlock

The proud and dignified wife of Sir Leicester Dedlock. Why does she make Esther's heart beat so violently?

What secrets is she hiding?

Why is she afraid of Tulkinghorn?



Esther Summerson

As a child, Esther lived with her strict godmother. She has never experienced love or happiness.

Will she find either at Bleak House?



Richard Carstone

Richard is a handsome, optimistic young man.

Will he escape the grip of the Jarndyce curse?

Ada Clare

Ada is beautiful and trusting.

Can she find happiness in spite of the Jarndyce curse?

Mr Tulkinghorn

Tulkinghorn is a cold, calculating lawyer who knows no mercy or pity. Can he gain power over Lady Dedlock by discovering her secrets?



Jo

Poor, orphaned Jo struggles to survive on the streets of London. What will happen to him when he becomes entangled in mysteries he doesn't understand?





BLEAK HOUSE

‘It would have been far better, Esther, if you had never been born; far better if you had never had a birthday.’

Many children have happy birthdays, but not Esther. This was her twelfth, and they had always been like this. Esther knew that other children celebrated their birthdays, but as her godmother had never allowed her to accept a party invitation she wasn’t sure how. She suspected it wasn’t like this.

Poor Esther looked across the silent table at her godmother’s stern face. ‘Please tell me why I shouldn’t have been born,’ she asked, close to tears. ‘Did my mother die giving birth to me? Did I do something to her?’

‘Your mother, Esther, did not die. She is your disgrace, and you are hers. You must forget your mother. Now go to your room, and pray that you can be good enough to overcome the shadow of your birth.’

That was all Esther ever heard about her mother. She crept into bed and held her only friend, Little Dolly, close to her wet cheek. 'I do try to be kind, Dolly. I do try to be good-hearted. Why doesn't anyone love me?'



Two more birthdays passed before anything changed in Esther's lonely life. Shortly after her fourteenth birthday, her godmother fell seriously ill and died. Esther found herself being packed into a stagecoach by her godmother's witch-like servant, Mrs Rachael. Full of sadness for her loveless childhood and fear of an unknown future, Esther at first failed to notice the gentleman with whom she shared the coach.

'Come, come, little Esther. Why weep?'

Looking up, she took in his iron-grey hair and pleasant, gentle smile.

'Why couldn't they love me?' she sobbed.



'Why was Mrs Rachael so pleased to see me go?'

'Confound Mrs Rachael!' said the gentleman with a hint of anger. 'Let her fly away in a high wind on her broomstick.' This brought a smile to Esther's face.

'That's better,' the gentleman smiled back.

'Forgive me for asking, sir', she asked him, 'but who are you, and where are we going?'

- Esther and her maid nurse Jo through smallpox before both catching it themselves.
- The process by which secrets are gradually revealed is simplified in this version. Dickens allows a young lawyer called Guppy and a private detective called Mr Bucket to discover much of the truth.
- Lady Dedlock dies unaware that her husband has forgiven her, and that she has been cleared of Tulkinghorn's murder.
- The process by which Nemo is identified is considerably more complex than in this version.
- Mr Jarndyce proposes to Esther and she accepts. He releases her from the engagement so that she can marry Woodcourt. Mr Jarndyce buys them a house called Little Bleak House. They live happily and have two children. Ada and her child live happily in Bleak House with Mr Jarndyce.

Back in time

Victorian England was a period of great transition. Many people left their traditional rural lives to seek work and wealth in London. The population of Victorian London therefore increased rapidly. Many, like Jo, were living in terrible poverty. This was a cause of great concern to many people.

The legal profession had great responsibilities, but faced much criticism. In *Bleak House* Dickens shows greedy lawyers becoming rich whilst ruining other people's lives. Dickens based 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce' on a real legal case, which lasted for fifty-three years. As his own father had been imprisoned for debt, Dickens was particularly critical of the legal system.

Queen Victoria represented all that the ideal Victorian woman should be. Women's responsibility was to maintain domestic stability through marriage, family values and motherhood. Having children outside marriage – as Lady Dedlock had Esther – brought great disgrace upon both mother and child.