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PENGUIN ACTIVE READING

LEVEL 4

Bleak House

Charles Dickens



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What's the book about?

- 1 *Bleak House* was written in 1853. Which of the following subjects would you expect to read about in a nineteenth-century story? Tick (✓) your answers.
 - a the pleasure of controlling the lives of other people
 - b the high cost of taking problems to a law court
 - c the importance of social class and money
 - d the problem of falling in love with the wrong person
 - e the value of giving money to people in poor countries
 - f the difficulty of finding the right profession
 - g unhappiness caused by living with terrible secrets
 - h the effects of growing up without parents



- 2 Discuss the reasons for your answers with other students.

1.2 What happens first?

- 1 Read the titles of Chapters 1 and 2 on pages 1 and 6, and the words in *italics* below them. Which of the subjects in 1.1 above do you think you are going to read about?
- 2 Discuss these relationships. What are the responsibilities of the people listed first? How should they help the people listed second? How might the relationships between them go wrong? Find unfamiliar words in the notes at the bottom of pages 1–9.

a guardian and ward	d lawyer and client
b godmother and goddaughter	e homeowner and tenant
c rich man and heirs	

Life in the Court of Chancery

*Wise men say, 'Whatever harm is done to you, do not think of coming here!'
But isn't this a court of justice?*

LONDON. A cold, grey November day with thick fog and mud everywhere. Smoke from the dark chimneys produces a soft black rain and the sun hides somewhere in the fog. Dogs, horses, men and women – everything and everyone is lost in the fog.

The **bleak** afternoon is bleakest, and the thick fog is thickest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near the Court of Chancery*. This is often described as the most dangerous, the most **destructive**, the most awful place in heaven or on earth. Wise men say, 'Whatever harm is done to you, do not think of coming here!'

But isn't this a court of **justice**? Yes, but justice is rarely found here and never quickly. The Lord High Chancellor* sits above the noisy crowd and stares out of the window, seeing only fog. The **lawyers** arrive with their endless arguments. A crowd of **suitors** comes every day, waiting for a judgement in their **cases**, which continue for another day, another month, another year. The lawyers grow rich; the suitors die and leave their troubles for their children and grandchildren. Be warned: Chancery destroys lives!

On this typically dull, bleak afternoon, the Court is listening to the most recent arguments in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the most famous case in Chancery. There is more than one **will**, but which is the legal one? Who is the true **heir** to the Jarndyce fortune? The court has not been able to decide, and the lawyers continue to find more and more points to argue about. The fortune grows

* Court of Chancery: a court in which a judge was, in the past, supposed to make fair decisions about property

* Lord High Chancellor: the highest official in the Court of Chancery

bleak /bli:k/ (adj) cold and unpleasant; bad and unlikely to improve

destructive /di'strʌktɪv/ (adj) damaging people or things so badly that they cannot be repaired

justice /'dʒʌstɪs/ (n) the method by which people are judged in courts of law and criminals are punished

lawyer /'lɔ:jə/ (n) someone whose job is to advise people about the law and speak for them in court

suitor /'su:tə, 'sju:tə/ (n) a person who is waiting for a judgement in a legal question. This legal problem is a *suit*.

case /keɪs/ (n) a problem that must be decided in a court of law

will /wɪl/ (n) a legal document in which you say who you want to give your money and property to after you die

heir /eə/ (n) someone who can legally receive the money, property or title of a person after their death

smaller as the costs continue to climb. The last Lord Chancellor said there would be a decision in Jarndyce and Jarndyce when potatoes rained from the sky – an opinion that amused everyone.

The present Chancellor is bored; he looks out into the fog and speaks to one of the regular lawyers. ‘Have you finished your argument, Mr Tangle?’

‘No, my lord. There are several more points that need to be made and several more of my brother lawyers who will speak.’

Hearing Tangle’s words, eighteen more lawyers stand and wave their papers in the direction of the Lord High Chancellor.

‘We will continue in two weeks,’ the Chancellor commands sleepily, before leaving the courtroom without a backward look. As usual, nothing has happened in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, but behind the scenes, in the great man’s private office, something is going to happen that is connected to this case.

Mr Tulkinghorn, a lawyer who is known across the land, leaves Chancery and goes straight to the London house of Sir Leicester Dedlock, one of his many rich and important **clients**. The lawyer wears old-fashioned knee-length trousers, a long coat and a tall hat – all in a dull, dusty black.

The clothes are like the man himself. He is very formal and not at all friendly, although he is often a guest in stylish London apartments and great country houses. He listens and learns, safely locking information away for future use. He speaks only when there is a professional reason for doing so. His secretive methods work well, and by them he has grown very rich and powerful. His clients would be surprised by the amount of knowledge he has of their lives and by the power he holds over them.

Mr Tulkinghorn is the type of man that Sir Leicester has a good opinion of. He is completely British: honest, rich and traditional. And no one knows more about Britishness than Sir Leicester. He is proud of the fact that his family is as old as the hills; the world might continue without hills, but would break down completely without Dedlocks. Mr Tulkinghorn understands Sir Leicester perfectly, and their professional relationship could not be better.

At the age of sixty-six Sir Leicester is at least twenty years older than his very beautiful, very fashionable wife, Lady Honoria Dedlock, but he is energetic in body and mind. In addition to keeping a watchful eye on conditions around the country and knowing which politicians to believe, Sir Leicester, more than anything else, loves his home and his wife. In fact, unlike many men of his class, he married for love, and his love for his wife has never decreased, although she did not bring money or position to her marriage, and she and her husband have no children.

client /ˈklaɪənt/ (n) someone who pays a person or organisation for services or advice

My Lady finds most people and places painfully boring as she moves between the Dedlock country house and London or Paris, searching for something to make her days brighter. She is often sad, but she never speaks of her feelings. She is a good wife, and the public agrees with her husband's very high opinion of her character.

Tulkinghorn is among the many people who greatly admire Lady Dedlock, but he wisely keeps a polite distance between himself and the great lady. On this occasion, though, as on many others, he has a professional reason to speak to her about Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Lady Dedlock has some interest in the case and could receive a small piece of property if it is decided soon.

'My Lady's argument has been heard by the Chancellor again, has it, Mr Tulkinghorn?' asks Sir Leicester as he shakes his lawyer's hand.

'Yes, although as usual nothing important has been done. But because you are leaving soon for Paris, I have brought the most recent papers connected to the case,' says Mr Tulkinghorn, placing some legal documents on a table near Lady Dedlock.



My Lady moves away from the hot fire and looks down at the papers. One sheet catches her attention, and she takes a second look.

'Who copied that piece?' she asks, not stopping to think.

Mr Tulkinghorn, surprised by Lady Dedlock's sudden interest, replies, 'Someone from Mr Snagsby's shop. Why do you ask?'

'No reason. It is so boring, isn't it?' She has turned away from the table, not wanting to appear interested in the document. But then she suddenly turns pale and says, 'I'm afraid I'm not well. The heat ... don't speak to me ... I must go to my room.'

Back in London, the great judge greets three young people who are waiting in his private rooms. The

Charles Dickens

British English

Classic

The legal case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce has become a joke to some. People are born, marry and die, and still the case continues. But will the lives of Ada and Richard be ruined, like the lives of others before them, by the expectation of money? And how will their friend Esther be affected by secrets from her past?

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