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Charles Dickens (1812–70)

Bleak House

DEDICATED,
AS A REMEMBRANCE OF OUR FRIENDLY UNION,
TO MY COMPANIONS
IN THE
GUILD OF LITERATURE AND ART

Preface

A FEW MONTHS AGO, on a public occasion, a Chancery* judge had the kindness to inform me, as one of a company of some hundred and fifty men and women not labouring under any suspicions of lunacy, that the Court of Chancery, though the shining subject of much popular prejudice (at which point I thought the judge's eye had a cast in my direction), was almost immaculate. There had been, he admitted, a trivial blemish or so in its rate of progress, but this was exaggerated, and had been entirely owing to the "parsimony of the public"; which guilty public, it appeared, had been until lately bent in the most determined manner on by no means enlarging the number of Chancery judges appointed – I believe by Richard the Second, but any other king will do as well.

This seemed to me too profound a joke to be inserted in the body of this book, or I should have restored it to Conversation Kenge or to Mr Vholes, with one or other of whom I think it must have originated. In such mouths I might have coupled it with an apt quotation from one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

My nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer's hand:
Pity me then, and wish I were renew'd!*

But as it is wholesome that the parsimonious public should know what has been doing, and still is doing, in this connection, I mention here that everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true, and within the truth. The case of Gridley is in no essential altered from one of actual occurrence, made public by a disinterested person who was professionally acquainted with the whole of the monstrous wrong from beginning to end. At the present moment there is a suit before the court which was commenced nearly twenty years ago; in which from thirty to forty counsel have been known to appear at one time; in which costs have been incurred to the amount of seventy thousand pounds; which is *a friendly suit*; and which is (I am assured) no nearer to its termination now than when it was begun. There is another well-known suit in Chancery, not yet decided, which was

commenced before the close of the last century, and in which more than double the amount of seventy thousand pounds has been swallowed up in costs. If I wanted other authorities for JARNDYCE AND JARNDYCE, I could rain them on these pages, to the shame of... a parsimonious public.

There is only one other point on which I offer a word of remark. The possibility of what is called spontaneous combustion has been denied since the death of Mr Krook, and my good friend Mr Lewes (quite mistaken, as he soon found, in supposing the thing to have been abandoned by all authorities) published some ingenious letters to me at the time when that event was chronicled, arguing that spontaneous combustion could not possibly be.* I have no need to observe that I do not wilfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject. There are about thirty cases on record,* of which the most famous, that of the Countess Cornelia de Bandi Cesenate, was minutely investigated and described by Giuseppe Bianchini, a prebendary of Verona, otherwise distinguished in letters, who published an account of it at Verona, in 1731, which he afterwards republished at Rome. The appearances beyond all rational doubt observed in that case are the appearances observed in Mr Krook's case. The next most famous instance happened at Rheims, six years earlier, and the historian in that case is Le Cat, one of the most renowned surgeons produced by France. The subject was a woman whose husband was ignorantly convicted of having murdered her, but, on solemn appeal to a higher court, he was acquitted, because it was shown upon the evidence that she had died the death to which this name of spontaneous combustion is given. I do not think it necessary to add to these notable facts, and that general reference to the authorities which will be found at page 399, the recorded opinions and experiences of distinguished medical professors, French, English and Scotch, in more modern days, contenting myself with observing that I shall not abandon the facts until there shall have been a considerable spontaneous combustion of the testimony on which human occurrences are usually received.

In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things. I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book. May we meet again!

LONDON
AUGUST 1853

I

IN CHANCERY

LONDON. Michaelmas term* lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall.* Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill.* Smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foothold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits* and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier brigs;* fog lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners,* wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time – as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar.* And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds this day in the sight of heaven and earth.

On such an afternoon, if ever, the Lord High Chancellor ought to be sitting here – as here he is – with a foggy glory round his head, softly fenced in with crimson cloth and curtains, addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog. On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be – as here they are – mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair- and horsehair-warded heads against walls of words, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon, the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be – as are they not? – ranged in a line, in a long matted well (but you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it), between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters' reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them. Well may the court be dim, with wasting candles here and there; well may the fog hang heavy in it, as if it would never get out; well may the stained-glass windows lose their colour, and admit no light of day into the place; well may the uninitiated from the streets, who peep in through the glass panes in the door, be deterred from entrance by its owlish aspect, and by the drawl languidly echoing to the roof from the padded dais where the Lord High Chancellor looks into the lantern that has no light in it, and where the attendant wigs are all stuck in a fog bank! 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 honourable 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!”

Who happen to be in the Lord Chancellor’s court this murky afternoon besides the Lord Chancellor, the counsel in the cause, two or three counsel who are never in any cause and the well of solicitors before mentioned? There is the registrar below the judge, in wig and gown, and there are two or three maces, or petty bags, or privy purses,* or whatever they may be, in legal court suits. These are all yawning, for no crumb of amusement ever falls from JARNDYCE AND JARNDYCE (the cause in hand), which was squeezed dry years upon years ago. The shorthand writers, the reporters of the court and the reporters of the newspapers invariably decamp with the rest of the regulars when Jarndyce and Jarndyce comes on. Their places are a blank. Standing on a seat at the side of the hall, the better to peer into the curtained sanctuary, is a little mad old woman in a squeezed bonnet, who is always in court, from its sitting to its rising, and always expecting some incomprehensible judgement to be given in her favour. Some say she really is, or was, a party to a suit, but no one knows for certain because no one cares. She carries some small litter in a reticule which she calls her documents, principally consisting of paper matches and dry lavender. A sallow prisoner has come up, in custody, for the half-dozenth time, to make a personal application “to purge himself of his contempt”, which, being a solitary surviving executor who has fallen into a state of conglomeration about accounts of which it is not pretended that he had ever any knowledge, he is not at all likely ever to do. In the meantime his prospects in life are ended. Another ruined suitor, who periodically appears from Shropshire, and breaks out into efforts to address the Chancellor at the close of the day’s business, and who can by no means be made to understand that the Chancellor is legally ignorant of his existence after making it desolate for a quarter of a century, plants himself in a good place and keeps an eye on the judge, ready to call out “My Lord!” in a voice of sonorous complaint on the instant of his rising. A few lawyers’ clerks and others who know this suitor by sight linger on the chance of his furnishing some fun, and enlivening the dismal weather a little.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on. This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least, but it has been observed that no two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes without coming to a total disagreement as to all the premises. Innumerable children have been born into the cause; innumerable young people have married into it; innumerable old

people have died out of it. Scores of persons have deliriously found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce without knowing how or why; whole families have inherited legendary hatreds with the suit. The little plaintiff or defendant, who was promised a new rocking horse when Jarndyce and Jarndyce should be settled, has grown up, possessed himself of a real horse, and trotted away into the other world. Fair wards of court have faded into mothers and grandmothers; a long procession of Chancellors has come in and gone out; the legion of bills in the suit have been transformed into mere bills of mortality; there are not three Jarndyces left upon the earth perhaps, since old Tom Jarndyce in despair blew his brains out at a coffee house in Chancery Lane – but Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the court, perennially hopeless.

Jarndyce and Jarndyce has passed into a joke. That is the only good that has ever come of it. It has been death to many, but it is a joke in the profession. Every master in Chancery has had a reference out of it. Every Chancellor was “in it”, for somebody or other, when he was counsel at the bar. Good things have been said about it by blue-nosed, bulbous-shoed old benchers in select port-wine committee after dinner in hall. Articled clerks have been in the habit of fleshing their legal wit upon it. The last Lord Chancellor handled it neatly when, correcting Mr Blowers the eminent silk gown who said that such a thing might happen when the sky rained potatoes, he observed, “Or when we get through Jarndyce and Jarndyce, Mr Blowers” – a pleasantry that particularly tickled the maces, bags and purses.

How many people out of the suit Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt would be a very wide question. From the master, upon whose impaling files reams of dusty warrants in Jarndyce and Jarndyce have grimly writhed into many shapes, down to the copying clerk in the Six Clerks’ Office, who has copied his tens of thousands of Chancery folio pages under that eternal heading, no man’s nature has been made the better by it. In trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, both-eration, under false pretences of all sorts, there are influences that can never come to good. The very solicitors’ boys who have kept the wretched suitors at bay by protesting time out of mind that Mr Chizzle, Mizzle or otherwise was particularly engaged and had appointments until dinner, may have got an extra moral twist and shuffle into themselves out of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The receiver in the cause has acquired a goodly sum of money by it, but has acquired too a distrust of his own mother and a contempt for his own kind. Chizzle, Mizzle and otherwise have lapsed into a habit of vaguely promising themselves that they will look into that outstanding little matter, and see

what can be done for Drizzle – who was not well used – when Jarndyce and Jarndyce shall be got out of the office. Shirking and sharking, in all their many varieties, have been sown broadcast by the ill-fated cause, and even those who have contemplated its history from the outermost circle of such evil have been insensibly tempted into a loose way of letting bad things alone to take their own bad course, and a loose belief that if the world go wrong, it was, in some offhand manner, never meant to go right.

Thus, in the midst of the mud and at the heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

“Mr Tangle,” says the Lord High Chancellor, latterly something restless under the eloquence of that learned gentleman.

“Mlud,” says Mr Tangle. Mr Tangle knows more of Jarndyce and Jarndyce than anybody. He is famous for it – supposed never to have read anything else since he left school.

“Have you nearly concluded your argument?”

“Mlud, no... variety of points... feel it my duty tsubmit... ludship,” is the reply that slides out of Mr Tangle.

“Several members of the bar are still to be heard, I believe?” says the Chancellor with a slight smile.

Eighteen of Mr Tangle’s learned friends, each armed with a little summary of eighteen hundred sheets, bob up like eighteen hammers in a pianoforte, make eighteen bows and drop into their eighteen places of obscurity.

“We will proceed with the hearing on Wednesday fortnight,” says the Chancellor. For the question at issue is only a question of costs, a mere bud on the forest tree of the parent suit, and really will come to a settlement one of these days.

The Chancellor rises; the bar rises; the prisoner is brought forward in a hurry; the man from Shropshire cries, “My Lord!” Maces, bags and purses indignantly proclaim silence and frown at the man from Shropshire.

“In reference,” proceeds the Chancellor, still on Jarndyce and Jarndyce, “to the young girl—”

“Begludship’s pardon... boy,” says Mr Tangle, prematurely.

“In reference,” proceeds the Chancellor with extra distinctness, “to the young girl and boy, the two young people...”

(Mr Tangle crushed.)

“...whom I directed to be in attendance today, and who are now in my private room, I will see them and satisfy myself as to the expediency of making the order for their residing with their uncle.”

Mr Tangle on his legs again.

“Begludship’s pardon... dead.”

“With their” – Chancellor looking through his double eyeglass at the papers on his desk – “grandfather.”

“Begludship’s pardon... victim of rash action... brains.”

Suddenly a very little counsel, with a terrific bass voice, arises, fully inflated, in the back settlements of the fog, and says, “Will Your Lordship allow me? I appear for him. He is a cousin, several times removed. I am not at the moment prepared to inform the court in what exact remove he is a cousin, but he *is* a cousin.”

Leaving this address (delivered like a sepulchral message) ringing in the rafters of the roof, the very little counsel drops, and the fog knows him no more. Everybody looks for him. Nobody can see him.

“I will speak with both the young people,” says the Chancellor anew, “and satisfy myself on the subject of their residing with their cousin. I will mention the matter tomorrow morning when I take my seat.”

The Chancellor is about to bow to the bar when the prisoner is presented. Nothing can possibly come of the prisoner’s conglomeration but his being sent back to prison, which is soon done. The man from Shropshire ventures another remonstrative “My Lord!” but the Chancellor, being aware of him, has dexterously vanished. Everybody else quickly vanishes too. A battery of blue bags is loaded with heavy charges of papers and carried off by clerks; the little mad old woman marches off with her documents; the empty court is locked up. If all the injustice it has committed and all the misery it has caused could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre – why, so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce!

2

IN FASHION

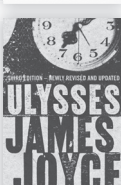
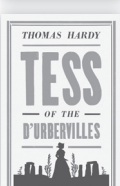
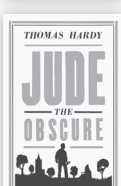
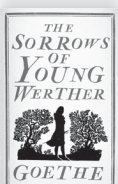
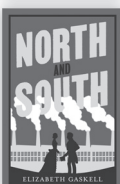
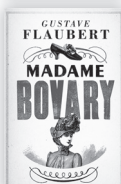
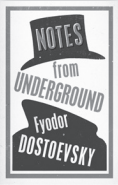
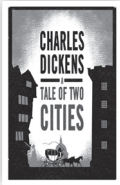
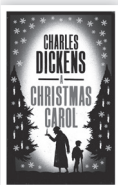
IT IS BUT A GLIMPSE OF THE WORLD OF FASHION that we want on this same miry afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery but that we may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies. Both the world of fashion and the Court of Chancery are things of precedent and usage: oversleeping Rip Van Winkles,* who have played at strange games through a deal of thundery weather; sleeping beauties, whom the knight will wake one day, when all the stopped spits in the kitchen shall begin to turn prodigiously!

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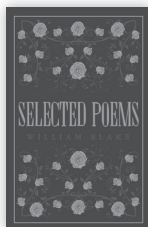
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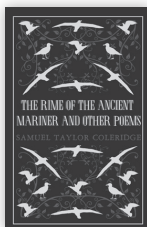
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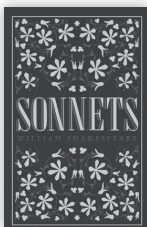
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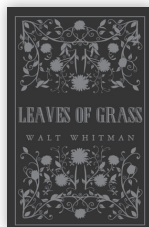
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449. E. Nesbit, *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*
450. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*
451. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *With the Flow*
452. Ivan Goncharov, *Malinovka Heights*
453. William Blake, *Selected Poetical Works*
454. H. Rider Haggard, *King Solomon's Mines*
455. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*
456. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
457. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*
458. D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*
459. Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*
460. Théophile Gautier, *Jettatura*
461. George Eliot, *Silas Marner*
462. Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*
463. George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion*
464. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone with the Wind*
465. Heinrich von Kleist, *The Marquise of O—*
466. George Orwell, *Keep the Aspидistra Flying*
467. Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*
468. Henry James, *Daisy Miller*
469. Virginia Woolf, *The Years*
470. Louisa May Alcott, *Good Wives*
471. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems*
472. Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*