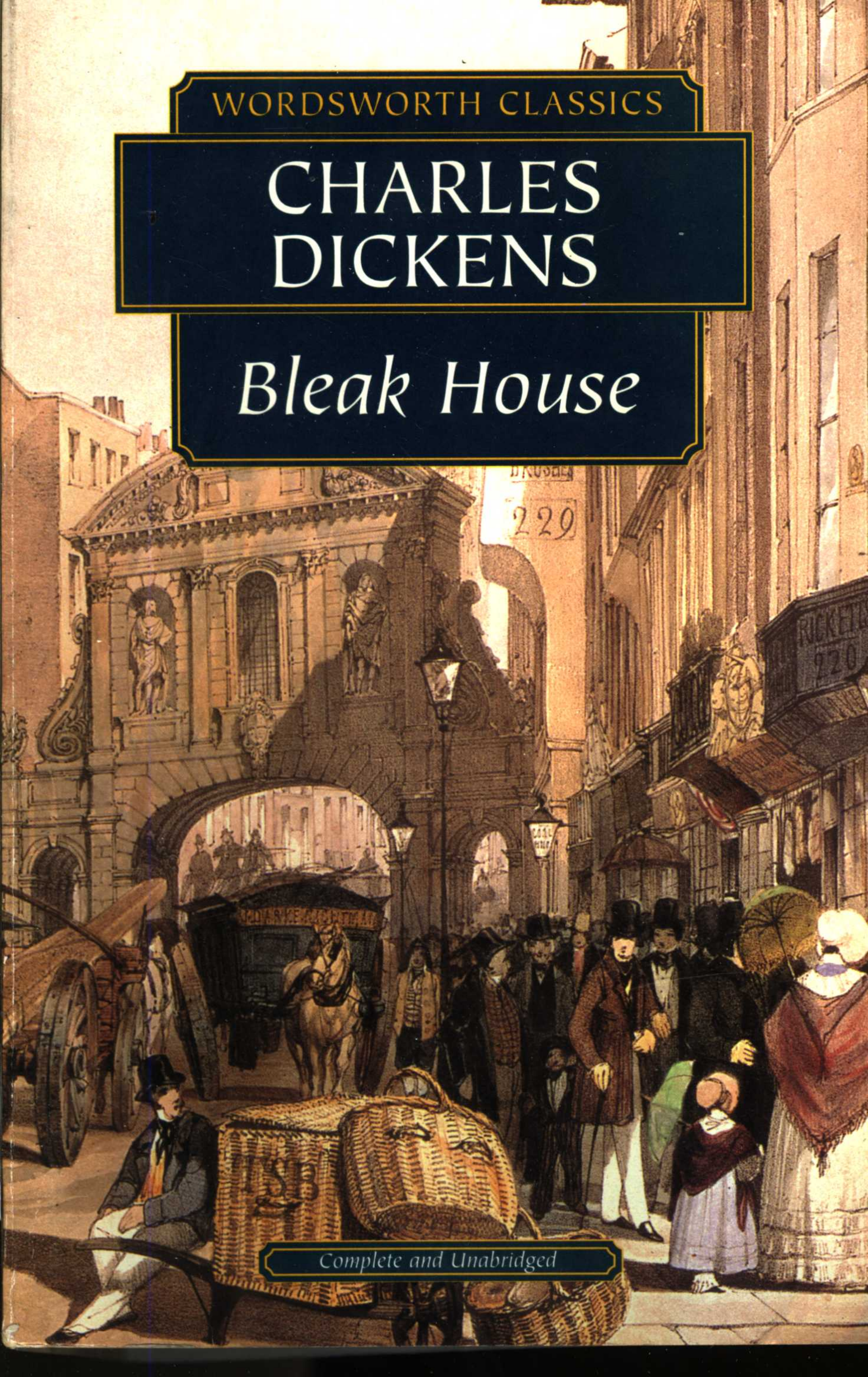
WORDSWORTH CLASSICS
CHARLES DICKENS
Bleak House
Complete and Unabridged

BLEAK HOUSE

Charles Dickens

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

Bleak House is considered by many, including Chesterton, Conrad, Shaw and Trilling, to be among Dickens's finest achievements, and it is a work of his maturity as a writer. It is a story of love and inheritance and is of great relevance to our own times, being the story of a cynically useless law suit in the High Court of Chancery in which the costs and fees involved ultimately exceed the assets under review. The book includes a galaxy of brilliant characters, and the atmosphere and events are covered with Dickens' s usual perceptive eye and love of detail as he seeks to reflect the everyday reality of the London of the early to mid nineteenth century.

The heroine of the story is Esther Summerson, or more properly Esther Hawdon, the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon. However, Esther is oblivious of her origins and Lady Dedlock believes Captain Hawdon to be dead. Esther lives at Bleak House the home of her guardian, Mr Jarndyce. The lawyer, Tulkinghorn, begins to suspect Lady Dedlock's past and his investigations lead to many fatal consequences not least for Tulkinghorn himself. As in so many of Dickens's novels, the tragedy is cathartic and the reader is rewarded with a happy ending for at least some of the characters. The personal tragedy for the two heirs, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, ensuing from the interminable financial wrangling in the suit of Jarndyce versus Jarndyce, will be all too familiar to readers today.

Dickens was himself a reporter of cases in the London courts and was therefore well placed to describe accurately the avarice and wasteful disorder prevailing in the law courts of his day, as well as the wider conditions of society in all its manifestations, from drains and sanitation to slum clearance, schooling for the poor and orphans, the Metropolitan Police with its nascent detective service, and the stirring of female emancipation. The characters, in true Dickensian fashion, are used to portray paradigms of their class and type, and include the well-meaning but incompetent philanthropists Mrs Pardiggle and Mrs Jellyby; the cunning lawyer Tulkinghorn; the solicitor Mr Vholes, living off the victims of the Chancery court; the poor homeless crossing-sweeper Jo; the landed gentleman Sir Leicester Dedlock,

owner of Chesney Wold; his wife, the beautiful and silent Lady Dedlock, possessor of a dark secret; and the kindly philanthropist John Jarndyce. *Bleak House* was begun by Dickens at his London home – Tavistock House – in late 1851, continued at Dover, and finished at Boulogne during August 1853. It was first published in nineteen monthly parts from March 1852 to September 1853 (the last instalment being a double issue). The novel first appeared in book form in late 1853.

Charles Dickens was born at Landport (Portsea), near Portsmouth, Hampshire on 7 February 1812. He was the second of eight children. His father, John, was a clerk in the Naval Pay Office at Portsmouth. The Dickens family, although not poor by the standards of the time, lived through a series of financial crises and the accompanying social insecurity. Dickens's childhood was spent in Portsmouth, London and Chatham in Kent, where there was a large naval dockyard. In 1822, facing financial ruin, the family moved to London and, on 5 February 1824, Charles began work in a blacking warehouse at Hungerford Stairs where he was employed to label bottles for six shillings a week. A short time previously Charles's father had been arrested for debt and the family, except for Charles, had joined him in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison. The combination of this family trauma and his own menial job profoundly affected Charles's life and view of the world, and were to haunt him for the rest of his days. John Dickens was released after three months in prison by having himself declared an Insolvent Debtor. Charles was sent to school at the age of twelve, where he did well; and at the age of fifteen, he began work in the office of a legal firm in Gray's Inn. Here he taught himself shorthand, and eighteen months later started as a freelance reporter in the court of Doctors' Commons. In 1829 Dickens fell deeply in love with Maria Beadnell, and the affair dragged on inconclusively until the summer of 1833. Meanwhile, Dickens's career was prospering, with his rapid and accurate reporting of debates in the House of Commons for the *Morning Chronicle*, and good reviews for his literary work led to his being commissioned by the publishers, Chapman & Hall, to provide text in monthly instalments to accompany sporting plates by the artist Seymour. It was in this way that the hugely successful *Pickwick Papers* were published in 1836–7. In 1858 Dickens separated from his wife, by whom he had had ten children, and developed his friendship with a young actress called Ellen Ternan. Dickens's health, adversely affected by the strain of his very popular readings, which he instituted in 1858, and a demanding tour of America in 1867–8, began to fail in the late 1860s. He suffered a stroke at his home at Gad's Hill, near Rochester, Kent, on 8 June 1870 and died the next day.

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BLEAK HOUSE

CHAPTER 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 snow-flakes – 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 foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this 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

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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 horse-hair 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 monied 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 short-hand 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 judgment 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 her 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 better by it. In trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, botheration, 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 off-hand 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 eye-glass 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 demonstrative '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!

CHAPTER II

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!

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too (as your Highness shall find when you have made the tour of it, and are come to the brink of the void beyond), it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air.

My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable

intelligence says so, for the comfort of the Parisians, and it knows all fashionable things. To know things otherwise, were to be unfashionable. My Lady Dedlock has been down at what she calls, in familiar conversation, her 'place' in Lincolnshire. The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's 'place' has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet through, and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman's axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires, where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been 'bored to death.'

Therefore my Lady Dedlock has come away from the place in Lincolnshire, and has left it to the rain, and the crows, and the rabbits, and the deer, and the partridges and pheasants. The pictures of the Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the damp walls in mere lowness of spirits, as the housekeeper has passed along the old rooms, shutting up the shutters. And when they will next come forth again, the fashionable intelligence – which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future – cannot yet undertake to say.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but there is no mightier baronet than he. His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit Nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence), but an idea dependent for its execution on your great county families. He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready, on the shortest

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