

Signet Classics

CHARLES DICKENS

BLEAK HOUSE



WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY ELIZABETH MCCrackEN

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*With a New Afterword by
Elizabeth McCracken*



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As a child, **Charles Dickens** (1812–70) came to know not only hunger and privation, but also the horror of the infamous debtors' prison and the evils of child labor. A surprise legacy brought release from these nightmare conditions and afforded Dickens the opportunity of two years' formal schooling. He taught himself shorthand and worked as a parliamentary reporter until his writing career took off with the publication of *Sketches by Boz* (1836) and *The Pickwick Papers* (1837). As a novelist and magazine editor, Dickens had a long run of serialized success through *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). In later years, ill health slowed him down, but he continued his popular dramatic readings from his fiction to an adoring public, which included Queen Victoria. At his death, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remained unfinished.

Elizabeth McCracken is the author of two novels, *The Giant's House* (a finalist for the 1996 National Book Award) and *Niagara Falls All Over* (winner of the 2001 PEN/Winship Award), as well as a collection of short stories, *Here's Your Hat What's Your Hurry*.

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Dedicated
as a remembrance of our friendly union
to my companions
in the
guild of literature
and art

PREFACE

A CHANCERY JUDGE ONCE 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 renewed!"

But as it is wholesome that the parsimonious public should know what has been doing, and still is doing, in this connexion, 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 profes-

sionally 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 Baudi 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

* In August, 1853.

she had died the death of 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 30, vol. ii.,* † 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.

1853

* Page 476 of this edition.

† Another case, very clearly described by a dentist, occurred at the town of Columbus, in the United States of America, quite recently. The subject was a German who kept a liquor-shop and was an inveterate drunkard.

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