

BLEAK HOUSE – Audition Piece

Ensemble / Miss Flite / Smallweed

- ENSEMBLE 1: London. Michaelmas Term lately over ...
- ENSEMBLE 2: And the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. ...
- ENSEMBLE 3: As much mud on the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth
- ENSEMBLE 4: Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle
- ENSEMBLE 5: Dogs, indistinguishable in mire, horses splashed to the very blinkers ...
- ENSEMBLE 6: Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas in a general infection of ill temper. .

The people start to move again, this time more naturally. The music begins again, softly.

- ENSEMBLE 1: Fog everywhere!
- ENSEMBLE 2: Fog up the river among green meadows, fog on the Essex marshes ...
- ENSEMBLE 3: Fog on the Kentish heights...
- ENSEMBLE 4: Fog hovering in the rigging of great ships
- ENSEMBLE 5: Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by their firesides ...
- ENSEMBLE 6: Fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of the shivering little 'prentice boy!
- ENSEMBLE 1: Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time....
- ENSEMBLE 2: But nowhere is the fog denser, nowhere are the muddy streets muddier, than round that leaden-headed old obstruction, the High Court of Chancery.
- ENSEMBLE 3: Never came fog so thick nor mud so deep as in the groping and floundering condition held by this most persistent of hoary sinners, the High Court of Chancery!

The people stop, and gaze upstage, their backs to the audience. They lean towards each other and begin to whisper to each other. Gradually their words become audible.

- ALL: Affidavits! Rejoinders! Injunctions! Bills! Cross-bills! Issues!

Masters' Reports! References to Masters! Answers! Litigations!
Affidavits!

Their voices rise to a gossipy crescendo. From the crowd a little old woman, Miss Flite, breaks loose and runs downstage, holding a birdcage, and shrieking with laughter.

MISS FLITE: All nonsense, my dears, mountains of nonsense!

She sees the audience and becomes quiet. The crowd in turn falls silent, then begins to gossip silently about her. Miss Flite talks to the birds, whose chirping we can now hear.

MISS FLITE: Oh my dears, my dears, how unfortunate that you, so small, so pretty, you who should rightly be flying free in wide blue skies, are so unlucky as to be held imprisoned here, miserable and hopeless parties to the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce! I weep for you, my pretty ones, for I fear that you will never be free!

ENSEMBLE 1: *(Turning, while addressing a friend)* They say the case has been going near fifty year...

SMALLWEED: And there ain't three Jarndyces left on the face of the earth, since old Tom Jarndyce blew his brains out in despair, the brimstone fool!

ENSEMBLE 2: At least five Chancellors come and gone..

ENSEMBLE 3: And all the little children the case was about grown up, grown old and died...

ENSEMBLE 4: ... and all on account of a will.

ENSEMBLE 5: Wot the family couldn't agree on ...

MISS FLITE: *(Shrieking)* Trickery! Evasion! Procrastination and prevarication! Spoliation! Botheration! These are all that ever came out of the Court of Chancery!

The people stop and listen to her. Gratified by having an audience, she continues.

MISS FLITE: I was once a ward in Jarndyce and Jarndyce. I was once young, And pretty too. Like a little bird I waited for the judgement that was to set me free, but the judgement has not come yet. I expect a judgement shortly.

SMALLWEED: Same old story, don't you ever let it lie? There's no money in it now, mark my words.

ENSEMBLE 2: Why don't you let it lie, Miss Flite? No good can come of it now.

MISS FLITE: A judgement will come shortly, and then the young wards in Jarndyce will be set free, like little birds.

ENSEMBLE 3: What, are there still parties to the case? I thought they all died out long ago. I thought all it was about now was how the lawyers were going to divide up what's left o' the money..

General laughter

SMALLWEED: What would she know about it? She's mad anyway, she's a brimstone chattering fool!

General laughter

MISS FLITE: I know what I know, Mr Smallweed. Even the blighted have children, and the last two of these, the last wards in Jarndyce, are barely out of childhood. What's to become of them, that's all I ask, what's to become of them?

The crowd becomes serious again.

ENSEMBLE 6: Be better if they'd never been born.

ENSEMBLE 5: Born under a curse, that's what.

SMALLWEED: They can keep their money, I wouldn't be a party to Jarndyce and Jarndyce, not for all the tea in China.

They disperse, muttering.

MISS FLITE: *(Shrieking)* The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce! The matter at hand being the disposal of the two young wards, I now declare the proceedings open!