

Bleak House – Audition Piece

Miss Flite / Esther / Ada / Richard / Guppy / Jenny

MISS FLITE: Ah, it is the wards in Jarndyce! Which are they?

ADA: I am Miss Ada Clare, ma'am.

RICHARD: And I am Richard Carstone.

MISS FLITE: And who is this?

ESTHER: My name is Esther Summerson, ma'am.

MISS FLITE: The wards in Jarndyce! Very happy, I'm sure to have the honour. It is a good omen for youth and hope and beauty when they find themselves in this place and don't know what's to come of it.

She laughs hysterically

RICHARD: *(Quietly)* I think she's mad.

ESTHER: Sshh!

MISS FLITE: Right, mad, young gentleman, yes indeed. I was a ward myself once. I was not mad then. I had hope and youth, and beauty. I attend the court regularly, and I expect a judgement shortly, on the Day of Judgement. I have discovered that the sixth seal mentioned in Revelations is none other than the Great Seal of England ... please accept my blessing.

Enter William Guppy, Mr Kenge's article clerk

GUPPY: Miss Flite, how many times do I have to tell you, we don't want none of your nonsense in front of the clients. Sir, Ma'am, Ma'am, the name is Guppy, of Kenge and Carboy, solicitors. I presume I am fortunate enough to be addressing Mr Richard Carstone, Miss Ada Clare and Miss Esther Summerson. I 'ave the honour to be your escort and guide, charged with conducting your persons in comfort and security to the domicile of our client and your newly appointed guardian, MrJarndyce. 'Ave you been introduced to each other?

RICHARD: Yes indeed, we...

ESTHER: Not formally, Mr Guppy, we all just met on the Chancery steps this minute.

- GUPPY: A singular place to meet, miss, I must say.
- ESTHER: Mr Guppy, is there a fire somewhere?
- GUPPY: A fire? No, should there be?
- ESTHER: Why are the streets so full of smoke?
- GUPPY: *(Puzzled)* Smoke! *(He laughs)* Oh no, miss, that ain't smoke, no how, that's a London partic'lar.
- RICHARD: A what?
- GUPPY: A fog, sir. They has 'em most days, in the winter months. S'why all the folks hereabouts looks pale and wheezes a lot. But I see the fog ain't done your looks no harm, miss.
- ESTHER: I thank you, Mr Guppy, but ...
- MISS FLITE: A good omen, expect a judgement any day, accept my blessing
- GUPPY: Miss Flite, I have your allowance for the week, here you are. Now run off, there's a good lady.
- MISS FLITE: Then Jarndyce, Jarndyce and Fitz-Jarndyce, I take my leave of you, with my blessing. Expect a judgement!
- She leaves, curtsying, and runs off. Her thin laugh echoes back.*
- RICHARD: What did she mean, Fitz-Jarndyce? It was you she said it to, Esther.
- ESTHER: I am sure I don't know. I am not of the family, though Mr Jarndyce was kind enough to take me in. My late godmother was an old friend of his, I believe.
- ADA: Richard and I are his cousins, and each other's, though very distant.
- GUPPY: Not wishing to hurry the young ladies and gentleman ...
- RICHARD: Mr Guppy, who was that mad woman?
- GUPPY: No need to trouble yourselves over her, Mr Carstone, she's an old connection to the case.
- RICHARD: The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. What's the case about, Mr Guppy?

GUPPY: I'll tell you all I know, sir, which ain't much, but could we perhaps talk as we go along? I gave my oath I'd deliver you to Bleak House by sundown.

RICHARD: Of course. Let's be going at once.

GUPPY: This way. It ain't a long walk, but with Chancery just closed, and the Inns finished for the week, I couldn't get a cab for love nor money.

Music. The fog thickens. Guppy and the three wards walking, slightly more quickly. The lights change periodically to denote change of place. Suddenly a ragged woman dashes out from the gloom carrying something wrapped in dirty cloth.

JENNY: Young ladies, young ladies, hear me a little. The baby needs food, and he's in the drinking-house ... there's been two died in our house this week, and this'n won't be long if someone don't help us.

GUPPY: Now now, my good woman, this won't do. Out of the ladies' way, or I'll send for the constable.

ADA: No, don't send her away. What is your name?

JENNY: Jenny, Jenny's my name, but don't speak it too loud. He'd kill me if he knew I was out. For pity's sake, my lady, just a few pence...

ADA: Wait a moment ... *(She searches her purse for coins)*

RICHARD: No Ada, let me. Here you are, my good woman, for the baby.

He gives the woman some money. She looks at it, expecting coppers. Her face lights up.

JENNY: Why, God bless you sir. God bless you all.

She turns and runs off. They start to walk again.

GUPPY: With all respect, sir, was that wise? We'll have the whole street on our backs if word gets out.

ESTHER: *(Stopping)* What is this place, Mr Guppy?

GUPPY: This? They call it Tom-All-Alone's, after old Tom Jarndyce, your grandfather. It were prosperous enough, once, till it fell into Chancery. Since then, nothing can't be done with it, not without Chancery say so, and that ... well, you know what that means. Can't be sold, can't be repaired, can't be re-let, so now it only houses them what's fell down so far even Chancery can't do 'em no more 'arm. Like 'im.