

Bleak House – Audition Piece

Neckett / Skimpole / Richard / Esther

NECKETT: There's no point trying to escape, Skimpole. I gotcher this time.

SKIMPOLE: My dear Mr Neckett, I shouldn't dream of trying to escape, as you put it. Only, could you try to be a little quieter and a little less disagreeable, for you know, peace and quiet are soothing to the soul.

NECKETT: I'll tell you wot's soothing to the soul, Skimpole, and that's paying your debts when they're due. A small matter of twenty-four pound, sixteen and sevenpence ha'penny.

SKIMPOLE: I know nothing of money, Mr Neckett. I know about nature, about art and music. I know how deep a blue the sky is on a summer afternoon, and how crystal-clear the water in a woodland brook, but of money I am as ignorant as a new-born child. This amount you mention, is it a small or a large sum?

NECKETT: It's large enough, Skimpole. I'm arresting you for debt. You'll be in Coavinses tonight.

Esther appears. She has clearly settled in, and carries the household keys on her belt.

ESTHER: Mr Skimpole, who is this man?

SKIMPOLE: Oh, my dear Miss Summerson, this is Mr Coavinses, who is making himself very unhappy and fretful over a sum of money, though quite how this implicates me, I am at a loss to discover. But then, I always was a child in such matters.

NECKETT: The name's Neckett, miss. Coavinses is the name o' the sponging house wot employs me. Which is where he'll be going if I don't get my twenty-four pound.

Enter Richard. He stops short when he sees Skimpole

SKIMPOLE: Now Mr Richard Carstone and Miss Ada Clare are parties to a Chancery suit, Mr Coavinses. I am sure Mr Richard or his beautiful cousin or both would be prepared to sign something, some sort of pledge or bond which would settle the matter? Of course, I know nothing of these things, but are there not such ways?

NECKETT: Not a bit of it.

SKIMPOLE: That seems a little odd, even to one who is no judge of these matters.

- NECKETT: Odd or even, Skimpole, the answer's the same!
- SKIMPOLE: Keep your temper, my good fellow, keep your temper. Don't be ruffled by your occupation. We are not so prejudiced as to suppose that in private life you are not a very estimable man, with a great deal of poetry in your nature, though you don't know it.
- NECKETT: Poetry! Men wot pays their way can't afford poetry, Skimpole.
- SKIMPOLE: Now my dear Miss Summerson, I am entirely in your hands. I ask only to be free. The butterflies are free. Surely nature will not deny to Harold Skimpole what it grants to the butterflies?
- RICHARD: I have ten pounds from Mr Kenge, Esther.
- ESTHER: And I, my savings, all my godmother left me. It's fifteen pounds and a few shillings. Mr Skimpole shall have it. Sir, you will be paid, if you come with us to the parlour.
- NECKETT: Hmm ... well it looks like a lucky escape for you, Skimpole.
- SKIMPOLE: Mr Coavinses, may I ask you something, without offence?
- NECKETT: Go on then.
- SKIMPOLE: As you came down here today, it was a fine day. The sun was shining, the wind was blowing, the lights and shadows were passing across the fields, the birds were singing ...
- NECKETT: Nobody said they weren't, to my knowledge.
- SKIMPOLE: And did you not think, as you came down, Harold Skimpole loves the sun, the wind, the lights dappled on the fields, the birdsong, and I, Coavinses, am about to deprive Harold Skimpole of these his only possessions!
- NECKETT: Good day Mr Skimpole.