

"BLEAK HOUSE" BELIES ITS TITLE



ANOTHER Dickens novel, produced as a radio serial by the BBC, will have its first New Zealand broadcast during the coming week, when episode one of *Bleak House* is heard from 3YA on May 5, at 2.30 p.m. Listeners who have enjoyed other Dickens broadcasts—for example, *Dombey and Son*, *David Copperfield* and excerpts from such other favourites as *The Pickwick Papers* and *A Christmas Carol*, will be interested in the appreciation (written by Gordon Stowell for the *Radio Times*) which we reprint below. The new serial, which will be presented in 13 half-hour episodes, was prepared for radio by Mabel Constanduros and Howard Agg, and the producer was Howard Rose. This is a different production from that by George Edwards which is already on the air.

WHAT is it, asks Gordon Stowell, that constitutes the particular charm of this book with the forbidding title, a book that has endeared itself so persistently to so many readers, sophisticated and simple, for more than ninety years?

Chiefly it is, I think, the fact that of all his works this is the one that most satisfactorily combines all Dickens' superb skill in the telling of a good story with all his supreme genius in the rich and diverse portrayal of human character. There were other (earlier) books dominated by characters more richly exuberant than any in *Bleak House*—Pecksniffs, Swivellers, Bumbles, Micawbers and other magnificent extravaganzas; but these books were not so much stories as so many portrait galleries. There were other (later) books in which Dickens diverted too large a portion of his genius from the creation of character to the concoction of complex plots. *Bleak House* has exactly the right balance of both. It is as densely and attractively populated with memorable men and women as any of the earlier works. But they never go soaring away beyond control. They live and move and have their being according to plan . . . Dickens' plan.

Dramatis Personae

Down at Chesney Wold, Lincolnshire, a proud aristocrat nurses his gout in dignified state while his handsome lady is bored to tears. In *Bleak House*, Hertfordshire, an elderly bachelor, one of the many refutations of the parrot-cry that Dickens could never depict a gentleman, sits in his Growlery and modestly ponders how best he can employ his kind heart to the benefit of others. In London, a lonely young woman, emerging from a childhood of tormenting shadow, arrives in a thick fog and meets wonderful new friends. In Lincoln's Inn Hall the Lord Chancellor sits listening to the interminable Chancery suit of *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*. A crazed little woman attends every sitting of the Court . . . with her documents. In a filthy rag-and-bottle shop off Chancery Lane, an unknown and penniless law-writer is found dead because of an overdose of opium. The threshold of the pauper burial-yard where they deposit his bones is kept

clean by a crossing-sweeper, a poor derelict who mutters as he sweeps: "He was very good to me, he was!" Elsewhere a misguided female philanthropist lavishes upon the natives of Borrioboola-Gha all the care she could better give to her own squalid household. In Cook's Court, Cursitor Street, a man with an oily smile, vaguely personic, dilates at length upon the subject of "ter-ewth." A tight-lipped lawyer, a sinister figure in rusty black, sips port in his chambers and confides to his own breast the shadier secrets of his blue-blooded clients. In Mount Pleasant, a decrepit old miser sits with his cash-box under his chair and throws cushions at his wife, calling her a "brimstone chatterer." Near Leicester Square, a breezy and big-hearted ex-trooper runs a shooting gallery. In Newman Street, a fat scoundrel, "with a false complexion, false teeth, false whiskers, and a wig" sponges on his son's scanty earnings and deplores the degeneration of England. A vulgar lawyer's clerk, with lodgings in Pentonville, keeps one eye ever on the main chance while the other alights upon a certain portrait in the long drawing-room of Chesney Wold. . . .

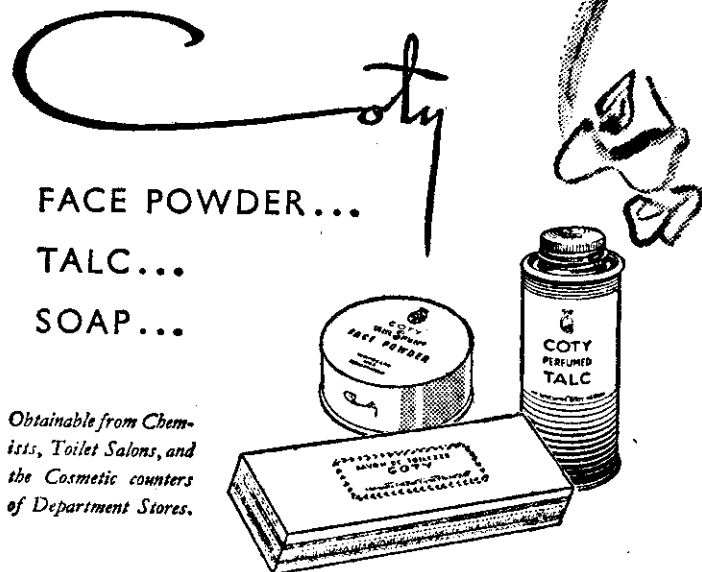
One could go on. These are only a few of the many good friends awaiting everybody in the pages of this friendliest of books. For you will agree, of course, that in the world of fiction, and especially in the world of Dickens, neither virtue nor wisdom is a necessary qualification for admission to your friendship. Dickens loved all his people, bad and good. Quilp no less than little Nell—possibly rather more! So can we. But then, Dickens loved humanity, reserving his bitterest scorn for the strange inhumanity of so many human institutions. So should we.

The great point is that these characters, and a hundred others just as varied, have all their appointed places in the story of *Bleak House* as it slowly unfolds. There they all are at the outset, scattered over London and over England, apparently quite unconnected, mostly unaware of each other's existence. And gradually the story draws them together, sometimes by a thread as delicate as gossamer, sometimes (let us admit) with a rather ponderous creaking of the machinery. Slowly at first, then ever more quickly, until at last all are caught up in one brilliant rush to the final crashing climax.

These qualities which I have mentioned as the main reason why so many have loved the book are surely the very qualities which should now make *Bleak House* memorable in its new form as a radio play. A book of nearly a thousand pages is adapted to occupy a total of only six and a-half radio hours. Obviously something must go. But if adapters and actors can give us all the stirring drama of *Bleak House* and still convey some sense of its warmhearted friendliness, they will have done their job.

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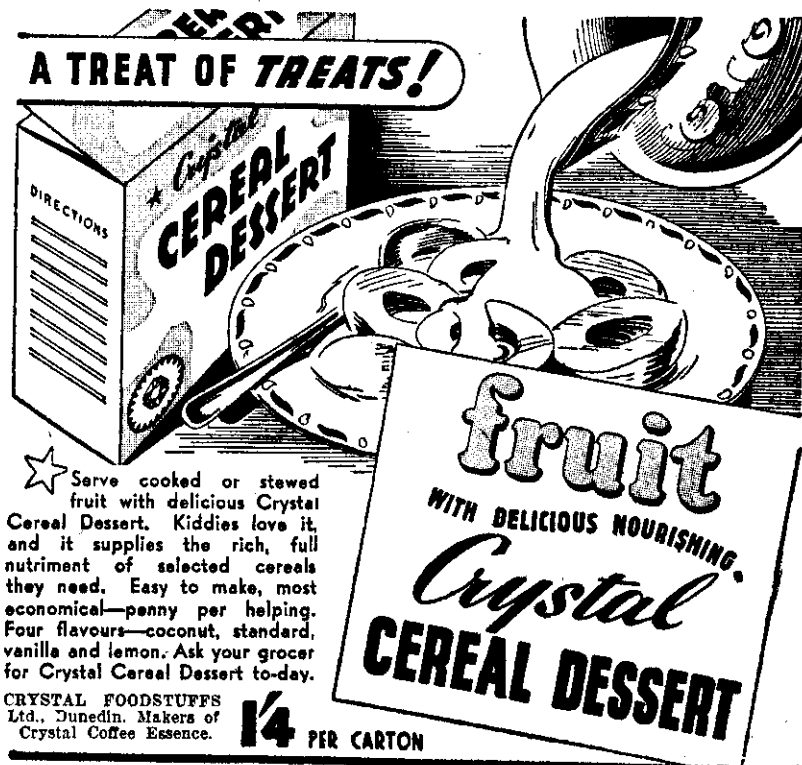


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