

hand in the matter; so having succeeded in making her voice heard, she suggested this view of the case, and recommended that all the babies should be assembled in one place, so that each mother might see whether her own was to be found.

So admirable a solution of the difficulty was at once carried into effect. Each woman rushed back to her cradle, and snatching up the poor baby (now well-nigh exhausted with prolonged crying) she brought it to this improvised baby-show. Needless to say, few

minutes elapsed ere each happy mother recognised her own darling, and joyfully clasped it to her bosom, soothing its alarm, and hushing its pitiful cries.

In the general confusion the perpetrators of the joke, having thoroughly enjoyed its success, escaped from their hiding-place, and made good their retreat. The subject was made a matter for much good-natured banter, and thenceforward the good folk of Cromarty seem to have in a great measure got over their dread of fairy interference in their domestic affairs.

SKETCHED IN COURT.



CONTEMPT OF COURT.

IN the old legends the administration of justice always wears a more or less paternal character, and it is this feature, in large survival, which chiefly impressed the writer in a visit casually paid of late to an English County Court. The Judge is not so much the stern personification of authority—a vitalised statute-book—as guide, adviser, mutual friend of each contending party. He has onerous and peculiar duties, and to fulfil them with even approximate satisfaction he

encloses a purely agricultural area, and not a single manufacturing town of any size or importance. Bullbridge, where his Honour is sitting on this particular Tuesday, is a straggling, old-world town, with its nearest railway station miles away, and its great annual carnival, the unabridged Michaelmas “hiring-fair.”

The wheezy market-house clock has announced the hour of noon, and the Court is arranged for business. A long table in front of the mimic throne is hemmed about by lawyers, clerks, local reporters. Long benches are placed at right angles thereto for the accommodation of suitors and witnesses. To the eye of imagination, a good many thorns are sprinkled about those hard seats. A wide space intervenes, apparently to allow the portly usher—the model of a conventional alderman—sufficient air to ward off apoplexy, and a sufficient frame for his dignity and graces. Then begin the rows of unsightly wooden forms for spectators and for friends of the antagonists in the coming duels. These seats rapidly fill up, and finally the door is chronically blocked up by a group compelled to stand.

The Judge is a trifle late, by reason of the delays and inconveniences of a long coach journey. But at last he is comfortably ensconced in his chair of state, and in a hurry for a start. He is a rotund, well-preserved little man, plainly nearing the Scriptural limit of threescore years and ten. He has a large, fleshy face, which shows to marked advantage beneath that relic of a past frivolity, the wig, and which is as the sun in the firmament to those whose hopes and anxieties hang breathless upon his verdicts. The beams of a contemplative smile are joy, suffusing the entire landscape on that side with warmth and brilliancy; the puckerings of a frown convey terror and discontent, and wrap the prospect in grey shadow.

A long string of unopposed cases are taken first, judgment in repeated instances being given in default. Where the defendant appears, the process is exceedingly simple, and it brings prominently out that paternal aspect of “His Honour’s” proceedings on which we first remarked. The defaulters are chiefly labourers of the very poorest and most improvident class; they are often represented by their wives, who, as a rule, are adepts in casuistry, and could give the

needs tact, patience, a rare gift of sympathy, and intimate knowledge of the manners and habits of thought of his appointed district. That the County Court is so useful and respected, and, in a sense, popular an institution as dwellers in country places especially know it to be, is in a great degree owing to the conscientious and painstaking devotion of the men who give its decisions. The observations of a stray hour or two in this atmosphere of homely law may have their interest as differentiating some noteworthy social types, and as reflecting some genuine humours of the British rustic.

“County Court Circuit, No. 999” (for the purposes of our narrative), is less than fifty miles from London, measured from any twist in its irregular curve. But in character and modes of existence it is as truly provincial—nay, as primitive—as any district between the proverbial Land’s End and John o’ Groat’s. Its sweep

lawyers lessons in the art of fighting shy of a direct question. The claims are mostly brought by long-enduring grocers, drapers, and coal merchants, men to whom a few shillings of absolute loss means a ruinous reduction of profits.

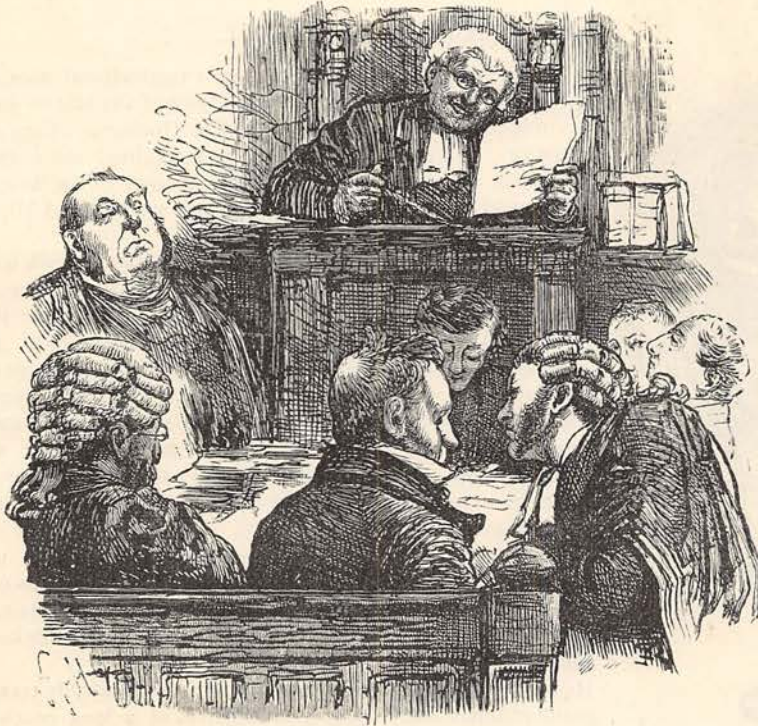
"Is this a correct statement? You admit that you owe this money?" asks the cheery voice of the Judge.

"Yes, y'r Honour."

"Then how can you pay?"

The defendant hesitates, tries to decipher imaginary

balance of ten pounds, overdue. The defendant, who hitherto has been enacting the rôle of an utterly indifferent spectator at the back of the Court, elbows his way to the front on hearing his name proclaimed. He stands a stolid six feet in his clanging shoes beside the bar. He is coatless and ragged, with sleeves tucked up almost to the shoulders, and red, unkempt hair. His contempt for the proprieties is evidently matched by his contempt for his adversary, at whom he contorts his features into what is meant for a sneer, but comes out as a most ferocious scowl.



"INQUIRY IS MADE AS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF AN EXECUTION."

hieroglyphics on the ceiling, and is brought into collision with disagreeable fact by the sterner repetition of the question.

"Eighteenpence a week, y'r Honour."

The Judge turns to the plaintiff. He signifies approval, and an order is made accordingly.

In the next case the plaintiff is offered four shillings a month, and objects.

"I have waited so long already, your Honour," he says; "let it be five shillings at once and the same sum every twenty-eight days afterwards."

The Judge considers this reasonable, and is at some pains to impress the advisability of compliance upon the debtor. With loud grumbling the man yields to *force majeure*.

By-and-by a break occurs in the monotony of non-resistance. A farmer has sued a hay-carter for a

The plaintiff's case is this time stated by a lawyer, and the Judge quickly understands it.

"How can you pay?"

"I dun' no what I be to pay for," in a voice to which all that has passed before is as the south breeze to the roar of a northern hurricane.

"You dispute the claim?"

"O' course I does."

The Judge orders defendant to be sworn. But, to the amusement of everybody, the hay-carter refuses.

"Naw, naw," he thunders, "I'll ha'e none o' that; I'll not swear aye nor nay."

This can only be interpreted as a surrender, and the Judge returns to the familiar query—

"Then how can you settle the account?"

"Two shillin' a month, not a ha'penny more, y'r Honour."



THE PLAINTIFF.

Father and son are in outward appearance strikingly alike, and yet present a weird contrast. The plaintiff is old, and has a pallor upon his wizened countenance as of one whose brows are already fanned by the chilly breezes of the long night time. He would be feeble but that his passion gives him an abnormal and costly energy. The son is in the prime of life, with bronzed ruddy cheeks, and shaggy flowing beard, as of a modern Esau. He has retained a well-known local advocate for his defence, and his twinkling bead-like eyes show, as yet, unshaken confidence in the result.

The plaintiff tells his story with a simple directness that is as effective as much rhetoric could have been. Aged and lonely, he went to live with his son, on the understanding that his own should still be his own, and that he should pay "Tom" a fixed stipend for accommodation. He expected comfort in his declining years; instead of receiving it, he was treated "more like a dog than a Christian." And his son wheedled a loan of a hundred pounds out of him, promising to pay it back in three months. Nearly a year had gone by, separation was inevitable, and, allowing eighty pounds to have been made good in one form or another, he demands the repayment of a meagre twenty. The lawyer cross-examines to very little purpose, except to elicit the contempt the old man feels for him and all his tribe.

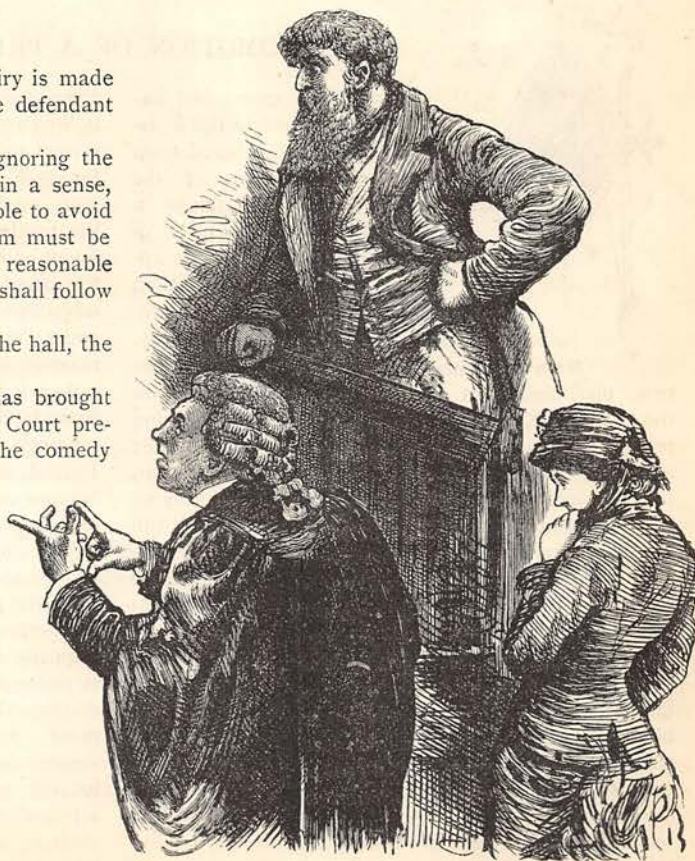
The Judge turns to the defendant, and quietly invites

The proposal is preposterous, and inquiry is made as to the possibility of an execution. The defendant has a horse and cart open to seizure.

"But," says the Judge to the plaintiff (ignoring the lawyer), "to sell this will be to take away, in a sense, the man's livelihood. It is always desirable to avoid so serious a step. Nevertheless your claim must be met. I will make what I imagine is a reasonable order now, and if not obeyed, your remedy shall follow in due course."

Muttering defiance the whole length of the hall, the hay-carter retreats.

Then opens the *cause célèbre* which has brought quite a number of rustic strangers into the Court precincts. An element of pain mixes with the comedy which follows, inasmuch as the contest is betwixt father and son. A retired dealer, named Digby, sues for twenty pounds, the balance of an alleged loan. The son—who throughout the prolonged discussion is colloquially spoken of by all, even the Judge, as "Tom"—pleads in reply that the money in dispute was a free gift. It is quickly evident that on one side or the other there is proceeding a considerable amount of what a Yankee would call "hard lying." It is the Judge's business to reach and discover the truth, and a tough piece of work he finds it.



FOR THE DEFENDANT.

him to give his version of the circumstances. The counsel would intervene, but for the present is waved aside. Confused, maybe, by the sudden blaze of publicity, or pricked after all by an uneasy conscience, "Tom" miserably flounders. He starts from a very distant and hazy beginning, and tries the Judge's patience severely by the manner in which he wheels round and round inconvenient questions and never once grapples with them. The Judge rebukes him for his manifest shuffling, and metaphorically hands him across the table to his fidgeting lawyer. Now indeed the narrative wears the semblance of order. But, alas for "Tom's" cause! what has gone before casts an air of unreality over the exhibition. An ironical gleam—transient, but observed by many spectators—on the Judge's countenance proves that he is a sharer in the current notion that this scene has been rehearsed more than once in a private office.

"Tom's" wife is called. She has but one stereotyped answer to almost every inquiry. She says, "Yes, y'r Honour; sure, sir," with a pertinacity that causes repeated titters in Court. She is her husband's echo to an extent which might alarm city advocates of woman's rights.

At this point, and although the case is going clearly

in his favour, the plaintiff's self-restraint gives way. He breaks into a shrill, quavering torrent of abuse and excitedly shakes his stick—in dangerous proximity to the Judge's head—at his daughter-in-law. Remonstrance avails nothing to stop the outflow of unequivocal Anglo-Saxon, and the old man has to be coerced by a threat of expulsion.

No further witnesses are available, and the Judge—having ineffectually suggested arbitration with a view to a reconciliation—listens patiently to a long legal harangue, and then decides against the advocate and for the plaintiff. "I consider that 'Tom' has used his parent very badly," he says, "and has had but one aim from first to last, the obtaining by hook or by crook of his father's savings. Defendant will pay in a month, or be committed for twenty-eight days."

Thus is redress afforded in the case of a family quarrel, of flagrant unfilial injustice.

Enough has been written to reveal how large a part in the social economy of country life the County Court plays, how entitled to admiration and gratitude are its officials, how delicate and difficult are their tasks. Here, if anywhere (even in these days of new Law Courts), is the home of cheap and speedy p or man's justice.



THE PROMOTION OF A PRIVATE BILL.

SOME idea of the extent and importance of private Bill legislation may be gathered from the recent returns of the Board of Trade, made in pursuance of an Order of Parliament, by which it appears that no less than £5,418,454 12s. 4½d. have been expended by the existing railway, tramway, canal, gas, water, dock, navigation, pier, and port companies, or authorities, in the United Kingdom, in promoting and opposing private Bills during the ten years from 1872 to 1882 inclusive. Startling as these figures may appear, being an average of £541,845 per annum, they by no means represent the total expenditure on private Bill legislation, inasmuch as they not only omit a considerable number of existing companies which failed to render accounts, but they take no cognisance whatever of the vast sums disbursed for similar purposes by promoters of companies which do not reach incorporation, and by municipalities, other public bodies, and land owners. Nearly 300 petitions for private Bills have been deposited for the present session of Parliament, which will certainly involve a large opposition. Dealing only with the figures presented in the official returns, the amount expended by railway companies would have sufficed to pay for an addition of nearly 200 miles of line at £20,000 per mile; that for tramways,

177 miles at £4,000 per mile; that for gas, to have lighted 17 towns at £20,000 per town; and that for water, to have supplied 19 towns also at £20,000 for each, not counting how ports, and docks, and piers might have been improved or multiplied with the residue of the expenditure. The figures are eloquent enough in their simplicity. Those for railways, for example, might furnish an effective argument to advocates of State ownership of railways, whereby, of course, inter-company contests would cease. Cogent reasons are, however, not wanting for still leaving railways to the care of private enterprise, though State interference in their management is yearly extending, and the public demand yet more of it. Indeed, so alarmed have directors and shareholders become that they have recently organised a powerful association for the protection of their interests.

The object of, and necessity for, a private Bill is usually to obtain compulsory power over other men's property for the public good, and the profit of the promoters and persons who may provide the capital requisite for carrying out the undertaking. The title is consequently slightly paradoxical, but it serves to distinguish the measure from a Bill of the Government. As railway Bills predominate, it will be convenient to take a railway Bill as an illustration. The locality to be traversed by the line having been selected, the engineers survey and map out the route, showing upon the plan, drawn to a scale of not less than four inches to the mile, all the buildings,