CHAPTER XIX.

MEESON V. ADDISON AND ANOTHER.

The most wearisome times go by at last if only one lives to see the end of them, and so it came to pass that at length on one fine morning about a quarter to ten of the Law Courts' clock, that projects its ghastly hideousness upon unoffending Fleet-street, Augusta, accompanied by Eustace, Lady Holmhurst, and Mrs. Thomas, the wife of Captain Thomas, who had come up from visiting her relatives in the Eastern counties in order to give evidence, found herself standing in the big entrance to the new Law Courts, feeling as though she would give five years of her life to be anywhere else.

"This way, my dear," said Eustace; "Mr. John Short said that he would meet us by the statue in the hall." Accordingly they passed into the archway by the oak stand where the cause-lists are displayed. Augusta glanced at them as she went, and the first thing that her eyes fell on was "Probate and Divorce Division Court I., at 10.30, Meeson v. Addison and Another," and the sight made her feel ill. In another moment they had passed a policeman of gigantic size, "monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens," who watches and wards the folding-doors through which so much human learning, wretchedness, and worry pass day by day, and were standing in the long, but narrow and ill-proportioned hall which appears to have been the best thing that the architectural talent of the

nineteenth century was capable of producing.

To the right of the door on entering is a statue of the architect of a pile of which England has certainly no cause to feel proud, and here, a black bag full of papers in his hand, stood Mr. John Short, wearing that air of excitement upon his countenance which is so commonly to be seen in the law courts.

"Here you are," he said, "I was beginning to be afraid that you would be late. We are first on the list, you know; the judge fixed it specially to suit the convenience of the Attorney-General. He's on the other side, you know," he added, with a sigh. "I'm sure I don't know how poor James will get on. There are more than twenty counsel against him, for all the legatees under the former will are represented. At any rate, he is well up in his facts, and there does not seem to me to be very much law in the case."

Meanwhile, they had been proceeding up the long hall till they came to a poky little staircase which had just been dug out in the wall, the necessity for a staircase at that end of the hall, whereby the court floor could be reached having, to all appearance, originally escaped the attention of the architect. On getting to the top of the staircase they turned to the left and then to the left again. If they had had any doubt as to which road they should take it would have been speedily decided by the long string of wigs which were streaming away in the direction of Divorce Court No. 1. Thicker and thicker grew the wigs; it was obvious

that the cause célèbre of Meeson v. Addison and Another would not want for hearers. Indeed, Augusta and her friends soon realised the intensity of the public interest in a way that was as impressive as it was disagreeable, for just past the Admiralty Court the passage was entirely blocked by an enormous mass of barristers; there might have been five hundred or more of them. There they were, choked up together in their white-wigged ranks, waiting for the door of the court to be opened. At present it was guarded by six or eight attendants, who, with the help of a wooden barrier, attempted to keep the surging multitude at bay--while those behind cried, "Forward!" and those in front cried "Back!"

"How on earth are we going to get through?" asked Augusta, and at that moment Mr. John Short caught hold of an attendant who was struggling about in the skirts of the crowd like a fly in a cup of tea, and asked him the same question, explaining that their presence was necessary to the show.

"I'm bothered if I know, Sir; you can't come this way. I suppose I must let you through by the underground passage from the other court. Why," he went on, as he led the way to the Admiralty Court, "hang me, if I don't believe that we shall all be crushed to death by them there barristers: It would take a regiment of cavalry to keep them back. And they are a 'ungry lot, they are; and they ain't no work to do, and that's why they comes kicking and tearing and worriting just to see a bit of painting on a young lady's shoulders."

By this time they had passed through the Admiralty Court, which was not sitting, and been conducted down a sort of well, that terminated in the space occupied by the Judge's clerks and other officers of the Court. In another minute they found themselves emerging in a similar space in the other court.

Before taking the seat that was pointed out to her and the other witnesses in the well of the court, immediately below those reserved for Queen's counsel, Augusta glanced round. The body of the court was as yet quite empty, for the seething mob outside had not yet burst in, though their repeated shouts of "Open the door!" could be plainly heard. But the jury box was full, not with a jury, for the case was to be tried before the Court itself, but of various distinguished individuals, including several ladies, who had obtained orders. The little gallery above was also crowded with smart-looking people. As for the seats devoted to counsel in the cause, they were crammed to overflowing with the representatives of the various defendants--so crammed, indeed, that the wretched James Short, sole counsel for the plaintiff, had to establish himself and his papers in the centre of the third bench sometimes used by solicitors.

"Heavens!" said Eustace to Augusta, counting the heads; "there are twenty-three counsel against us. What will that unfortunate James do against so many?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Augusta, with a sigh. "It doesn't seem

quite fair, does it? But then, you see, there was no money."

Just then John Short came up. He had been to speak to his brother. Augusta being a novelist, and therefore a professional student of human physiognomy, was engaged in studying the legal types before her, which she found resolved themselves into two classes--the sharp, keen-faced class and the solid, heavy-jawed class.

"Who on earth are they all?" she asked.

"Oh," he said, "that's the Attorney-General. He appears with Fiddlestick, Q.C., Pearl, and Bean for the defendant Addison. Next to him is the Solicitor-General, who, with Playford, Q.C., Middlestone, Blowhard, and Ross, is for the other defendant, Roscoe. Next to him is Turphy, Q.C., with the spectacles on; he is supposed to have a great effect on a jury. I don't know the name of his junior, but he looks as though he were going to eat one--doesn't he? He is for one of the legatees. That man behind is Stickon; he is for one of the legatees also. I suppose that he finds probate and divorce an interesting subject, because he is always writing books about them. Next to him is Howles, who, my brother says, is the best comic actor in the court. The short gentleman in the middle is Telly; he reports for the Times. You see, as this is an important case, he has got somebody to help him to take it--that long man with a big wig. He, by-the-way, writes novels, like you do, only not half such good ones. The next"--but at this moment Mr. John Short was interrupted by the approach of a rather good-looking man, who

wore an eye-glass continually fixed in his right eye. He was Mr. News, of the great firm News and News, who were conducting the case on behalf of the defendants.

"Mr. Short, I believe?" said Mr. News, contemplating his opponent's youthful form with pity, not unmixed with compassion.

"Yes."

"Um, Mr. Short, I have been consulting with my clients and--um, the Attorney and Solicitor-General and Mr. Fiddlestick, and we are quite willing to admit that there are circumstances of doubt in this case which would justify us in making an offer of settlement."

"Before I can enter into that, Mr. News," said John, with great dignity, "I must request the presence of my counsel."

"Oh, certainly," said Mr. News, and accordingly James was summoned from his elevated perch, where he was once more going through his notes and the heads of his opening speech, although he already knew his brief--which, to do it justice, had been prepared with extraordinary care and elaboration--almost by heart, and next moment, for the first time in his life, found himself in consultation with an Attorney and a Solicitor-General.

"Look here, Short," said the first of these great men addressing James as

though he had known him intimately for years, though, as a matter of fact, he had only that moment ascertained his name from Mr. Fiddlestick, who was himself obliged to refer to Bean before he could be sure of it--"look here, Short: don't you think that we can settle this business? You've got a strongish case; but there are some ugly things against you, as no doubt you know."

"I don't quite admit that," said James.

"Of course--of course," said Mr. Attorney; "but still, in my judgment, if you will not be offended at my expressing it, you are not quite on firm ground. Supposing, for instance, your young lady is not allowed to give evidence?"

"I think," said a stout gentleman behind who wore upon his countenance the very sweetest and most infantile smile that Eustace had ever seen, breaking in rather hastily, as though he was afraid that his learned leader was showing too much of his hand, "I think that the case is one that, looked at from either point of view, will bear settlement better than fighting--eh, Fiddlestick? But then, I'm a man of peace," and again he smiled most seductively at James.

"What are your terms?" asked James.

The eminent counsel on the front bench turned round and stuck their wigs together like a lot of white-headed crows over a bone, and the slightly

less eminent but still highly distinguished juniors on the second bench craned forward to listen.

"They are going to settle it," Eustace heard the barrister who was reporting for the Times say to his long assistant.

"They always do settle every case of public interest," grunted the long man in answer; "we shan't see Miss Smithers' shoulders now. Well, I shall get an introduction to her, and ask her to show them to me. I take a great interest in tattooing."

Meanwhile, Fiddlestick, Q.C., had been writing something on a strip of paper and handed to his leader, the Attorney-General (who, Mr. James Short saw with respectful admiration, had 500 guineas marked upon his brief). He nodded carelessly, and passed it on to his junior, who gave it in turn to the Solicitor-General and Playford, Q.C. When it had gone the rounds, Mr. News took it and showed it to his two privileged clients, Messrs. Addison and Roscoe. Addison was a choleric-looking, fat-faced man. Roscoe was sallow, and had a thin, straggly black beard. When they looked at it, Addison groaned fiercely as a wounded bull, and Roscoe sighed, and that sigh and groan told Augusta--who, womanlike, had all her wits about her, and was watching every act of the drama--more than it was meant to do. It told her that these gentlemen were doing something that they did not like, and doing it because they evidently believed that they had no other course open to them. Then Mr. News gave the paper to Mr. John Short, who glanced at it and handed it on to his brother, and

Eustace read it over his shoulder. It was very short, and ran thus:--"Terms offered: Half the property, and defendants pay all costs."

"Well, Short," said Eustace, "what do you say, shall we take it?"

James removed his wig, and thoughtfully rubbed his bald head. "It is a very difficult position to be put in," he said. "Of course a million is a large sum of money; but there are two at stake. My own view is that we had better fight the case out; though, of course, this is a certainty, and the result of the case is not."

"I am inclined to settle," said Eustace; "not because of the case, for I believe in it, but because of Augusta--of Miss Smithers: you see she will have to show the tattooing again, and that sort of thing is very unpleasant for a lady."

"Oh, as to that," said James loftily, "at present she must remember that she is not a lady, but a legal document. However, let us ask her."

"Now, Augusta, what shall we do?" said Eustace, when he had explained the offer; "you see, if we take the offer you will be spared a very disagreeable time. You must make up your mind quick, for the Judge will be here in a minute."

"Oh, never mind me," said Augusta, quickly; "I am used to disagreeables. No, I shall fight, I tell you they are afraid of you. I can see it in

the face of that horrid Mr. Addison. Just now he positively glared at me and ground his teeth, and he would not do that if he thought that he was going to win. No, dear; I shall fight it out now."

"Very well," said Eustace, and he took a pencil and wrote, "Declined with thanks," at the foot of the offer.

Just at that moment there came a dull roar from the passage beyond. The doors of the court were being opened. Another second, and in rushed and struggled a hideous sea of barristers. Heavens, how they fought and kicked! A maddened herd of buffaloes could not have behaved more desperately. On rushed the white wave of wigs, bearing the strong men who hold the door before them like wreckage on a breaker. On they came and in forty seconds the court was crowded to its utmost capacity, and still there were hundreds of white wigged men behind. It was a fearful scene.

"Good gracious!" thought Augusta to herself, "how on earth do they all get a living?" a question that many of them would have found it hard enough to answer.

Then suddenly an old gentleman near her, whom she discovered to be the usher, jumped up and called "Silence!" in commanding accents, without producing much effect, however, on the palpitating mass of humanity in front. Then in came the officers of the Court; and a moment afterwards, everybody rose as the Judge entered, and, looking, as Augusta thought, very cross when he saw the crowded condition of the court, bowed to the

bar and took his seat.