

From Sketches in London, No. 10.

I have referred to the odd and amusing illustrations of human character which are so often afforded at the London Courts of Requests. In attempting to convey some idea of a few of those, it is proper to remark, that no description can do justice to them, as so much depends on the looks, tones, gesture, and manner altogether, of the parties. The first case may be entitled

THE CAMBRIC POCKET-HANDKERCHIEF.

This case afforded infinite amusement to all present. A slovenly-dressed but rather good-looking, portly female, seemingly about her twentieth year, and calling herself Jane Jukes, summoned Peter Straps, a stalwart, half-starved young man, with curly hair, a marked squint in his right eye, and a beard which had evidently been suffered to vegetate without interruption for at least six or seven days—for the sum of three shillings and sixpence.

Commissioner—What is this for, Miss Jukes?

Plaintiff—Please, Sir, I'm not Miss; I'm Missis Jukes.

Commissioner—Well, no matter, Mrs. Jukes. Pray tell us what the three-and-sixpence is for?

Mrs. Jukes—It's for a cambric handkercher (a handkerchief), please your vorship.

Commissioner—What! are you a handkerchief merchant, then?

Mrs. Jukes—Oh! nothing of the sort, your vorship. The money is for a handkercher lent, not sold.

"Sir, 'she lies like truth,' as Shakspeare says," interrupted the defendant, folding his arms on his breast, and assuming a very theatrical attitude.

Commissioner—Sir, you hold your tongue at present; you shall be heard by-and-by.

"She gave it me, Sir. Did I not, Mrs. Jukes (turning to the plaintiff), on receiving it from your hand, say, in one of the poems of the immortal Bard of Avon,

'Gifts then seem  
Most precious, when the giver we esteem'

And did I not—"

Mr. Straps was evidently about to launch into some long exposition of the circumstances under which the handkerchief had come into his possession, when he was again interrupted by the Court, and admonished, in pretty plain terms, that if he did not wait until his turn came, the case would be decided against him.

Commissioner (to the plaintiff)—Proceed with your case.

Mrs. Jukes—If I must tell all, Sir; this 'ere man is a hactor at a small twopenny theatre in Newton-street; and he said to me, one afternoon, says he, "Jane, my love, we are a-goin' to have a werry affectin' piece of tragedy to 'hact to-night; and as I am to have the principal character, and will have a good deal of cryin, to go through, perhaps you would oblige me by the use of your slap-up hankercher for the occasion?" "My cambric handkercher?" says I. "The best handkercher you've got," says he. And so I gave him my cambric handkercher, my lord.—(Laughter.)

Commissioner (to the defendant)—Well, Sir, what have you got to say to this?

Mr. Straps (heaving a sigh, and looking very sentimental)—The truth is, your worship, there was a sprinkling of the tender passion in the matter. As Shakspeare says in his "Love's Labour Lost,"

"As love is full of unbefitting strains;  
All wanton as a child, skipping, and vain;  
Form'd by the eye, and therefore like the eye,  
Full of strange shapes, of habits, and of forms:  
Varying in subjects, as the eye doth roll  
To every varied object in his glance,  
So—"

"Pray, Sir, if you please," interposed the Commissioner, before the hero of the sock and buskin had time to finish his sentence; "Pray, Sir, if you please, tell us what you have got to say yourself, and not what Shakspeare says?"

Mr. Straps—Ah, Sir! as Shakspeare says, in his beautiful drama of "Troilus and Cressida,"

"Didst thou but know the inly touch of love,  
Thou would'st as soon go kindle fire with snow,  
As seek to—"

"Really, Sir," said the Commissioner, again interrupting Mr. Straps, "this is trifling with the Court. It must not be permitted."

Mr. Straps—Well, Sir, I should be sorry to act improperly, or to say anything disrespectful to this Court; but as I was about to state, I was at the time devotedly attached to Mrs. Jukes, and believed her to be equally so to me in return. We were, Sir, in short, pledged to each other; and under those circumstances, I thought the handkerchief was given me as a gift. But Sir, as Shakspeare says, in his "Julius Cæsar,"

"Ah, me! how weak a thing  
The heart of woman is!"

I soon had reason to believe that her affections were placed upon another. I remonstrated with her on the subject, which drew from her such a demonstration as at once brought to my mind the

expressive lines of the Bard of Avon, when he says, in his comedy of "Taming the Shrew,"

"A woman mov'd, is like a fountain troubled,  
Muddy, ill-seeming, thick, bereft of beauty;  
And while it is so, none, so dry or thirsty,  
Will deign to dip or touch one drop of it."

The tragedian or comedian—for I do not know whether Mr. Straps considered tragedy or comedy his legitimate walk—delivered this latter quotation with so much rapidity, that he had got to the end of it before the Court could interrupt him. "Yes, Sir," he resumed, "she resembled a perfect fury. As Shakspeare has it,

"She was the very—"

The Court—Don't give us any more of Shakspeare, but come to the point at once.

Mr. Straps—I will, your worship. I assure—

"There's not a word of truth in what he says, your honour," shouted Mrs. Jukes, interrupting Mr. Straps. "It's all false; I cut the advantage, because he said to me, one day, that if I did not behave myself to his satisfaction after we was married, he would give me the bag, and summons my father for my board and lodging." (Roars of laughter, in which the Court joined.)

The laughter having subsided, Mr. Straps adjusted the collar of a dirty shirt, and looking the Court significantly in the face, observed with much emphasis, "As the immortal poet says, in his 'Two Gentlemen of Verona,'

'A fine volley of words, gentlemen, and quickly shot off.'"

The Court (with considerable sharpness)—There must be no more of this nonsense. Did you, or did you not, receive a handkerchief from the prosecutrix?

Mr. Straps—I did, Sir; I don't deny it.

The Court—Then why did you not return it?

Mr. Straps—I understood it to be a gift.

Mrs. Jukes (with great energy)—It was ne'er a no such thing, you good-for-nothin' feller! I only lent it you.

Commissioner—Will you swear to that, madam?

Mrs. Jukes—Will I swear to it, your vorship! That I will: I'll give as many oaths to it as your vorship pleases. Ho only says I made him a present of it, because I married Jem Jukes in preference to him.

Mr. Straps (to the Commissioner)—There, Sir; there she goes with another thundering falsehood. But, Sir, if you will allow me, I'd rather express my sentiments in the words of the great dramatist, than in any humble phraseology of my own.

Commissioner—We've had too much of "the great dramatist" already. Madam (addressing Mrs. Jukes), you swear distinctly that the handkerchief was no gift?

Mrs. Jukes—I do, your vorship.

Commissioner (to the officer)—Hand her the book there, and administer the oath,

Officer (to Mrs. Jukes, holding out a New Testament to her)—You swear by—

"It's perjury, Sir!" shouted Mr. Straps, addressing himself to the Commissioner.

Commissioner—You hold your tongue, Sir, or the officers must turn you out.

The oath was then administered to Mrs. Jukes, Mr. Straps all the while making the most wry faces, and assuming every variety of attitude which could most forcibly express his horror of what he either conceived, or pretended to conceive, to be a false oath.

Commissioner (to Mr. Straps)—Now, Sir, she has sworn to the fact of only having lent the handkerchief to you; what has become of it?

Mr. Straps—Well, Sir, I'll tell you candidly. On the particular evening on which I got it from her, I had a very arduous part of a new piece to perform, in which,

"Albeit, unused to the melting mood,"

I had a great deal to do in the way of crying. As I was the hero of the piece, I thought it right to use the best handkerchief I could procure to dry up my imaginary tears. So far, so well, Sir; but in the words of the mighty Shakspeare,

"A change came o'er the spirit—"

Commissioner—Never mind what came o'er your spirit; but what came o'er, or rather of, the handkerchief? (Laughter.)

Mr. Straps—I was just on the eve of telling you that, Sir. There was one scene in the piece of a peculiarly trying nature,

in which no fewer than six of us were required to cry all at once. (Bursts of laughter.) And as we had only this one handkerchief amongst us, we were obliged to make it serve us all. As soon as one of the weeping—that is, the persons supposed to be weeping—parties had made a pretence of drying up his tears with it, he placed it in his hands at his back, while his face was to the audience, when another actor, unperceived by the spectators, took the handkerchief, and then openly applied it to his eyes on the front of the stage. His turn done, that of another came, who also placed his hands at his back in the same way as the other, and the next in rotation laid hold of it, unknown to the audience; and so on, till the handkerchief went over the whole six, two or three times, though the spectators fancied that each of the six actors had a handkerchief to himself. (Renewed laughter.) But, Sir, I now come to the gist of the story. While thus making the

tour, which it had repeatedly to do, of the half-dozen sorrowing histrionic personages, it unaccountably disappeared; in other words, some one in the crisis of this touching tragic scene, transferred the handkerchief from his eyes to his pocket; and it has not since been heard of. (Loud laughter.) This, Sir, if you will allow me, in conclusion, to quote the price of dramatists in one of his happiest plays,

"Is the head and front of my offending,"

in regard to the handkerchief which plaintiff still calls her own; though my impression was, that being given to me, it became mine. If however, it were in my possession, I would indignantly throw it up to her.

Mrs. Jukes (to the Court)—It's not the value of the handkercher that I cares for, or makes me summons him; it's only because he insulted me, your honour, both before and after my marriage. You (turning to Mr. Straps, and shaking her hand in his face); you know you did, you good-for-nothing, worthless baggage that you are. I have no doubt you've got the handkercher yourself.

At the latter sentence, Mr. Straps waxed mighty indignant, looked savagely at the quondam object of his affections, stamped energetically with his foot on the floor, and raising both his hands above his head, exclaimed, in stentorian tones, "Woman, the charge is false! Yes, your worship," he continued, in a subdued tone, "it is, as the mighty genius I adore says in his unrivalled tragedy of 'Hamlet,'

'As false as dicers' oaths;'

or, as the same great authority has it in his comedy of 'As You Like It,' it is

'Falsar than vows made in wine.'

Excuse my indignation, Sir; but I cannot repress my feelings when my character is attacked. I am sure, Sir, you would yourself, if placed in my unfortunate situation, feel the full force of the inimitable lines which Shakspeare puts into the mouth of Othello—

'Good name in man or woman

Is the immediate jewel of their souls:  
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;  
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;  
But he that filches from me my good name,  
Robs me of that which not enriches him,  
But makes me poor indeed."

The Commissioner (smiling)—Really, Mr. Straps, I have not readily allowed too much of this nonsense to go on. You admit, you've lost the handkerchief, and the prosecutrix has sworn she only lent it to you. There is, therefore, no alternative but to pay the amount claimed.

"Ah, Sir!" exclaimed Mr. Straps, on hearing the decision of the Court, "this is a hard case. As the Bard of Avon says—"

"No more of the Bard of Avon, or any other bard," interrupted the Commissioner; "the case is now decided, and the money must be paid."

At this moment, a young man, having the broken-down dandy appearance of an unfortunate actor, rushed into the court, almost exhausted. He stated that he and Mr. Straps lived in the same room together, and that some time after Mr. Straps had quitted home to attend the Court, a small package containing the handkerchief, had been addressed to him, with a request that it might be opened in the event of his absence. Inside, in a disguised hand, was a note to the effect that the writer had only taken a temporary loan of the handkerchief, and that hearing by accident it was to be made the subject of legal proceedings, it had been deemed right to send a special messenger with it to Mr. Straps, in order that no unpleasant results might ensue.

"Give it me," said Mr. Straps, in exulting tones, stretching out his hand to receive it. "Here, madam," turning to Mrs. Jukes, "is your handkerchief, and gently striking his hand on his breast, exclaimed—"My character stands forth pure and unsoiled as the unsunned snow."

Mrs. Jukes took her handkerchief, evidently disappointed that it had been recovered; and Mr. Straps having paid the expenses of the summons, retired from the court ejaculating something to himself in an under-tone; most probably a quotation from Shakspeare.

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