

"Our first battle began and ended in a police court. But there was a still more formidable battle preparing..."

Must get a copyholder...

"We were advised unless we could secure a copyholder, of which there were not more than six left, or an Act of Parliament, the common must go.

I managed to obtain a list of copyholders, and there was only one at all likely to become a plaintiff.

He was a poor, ignorant old man, either a bachelor or a widower, living in a dirty, tumble-down, pantiled old copyhold, and obtained a miserable living by selling potatoes, brickdust, and treacle.

I had often seen him, but had never spoken to him.

I mentioned these qualifications to the lawyer, who said, "He is the very man!"

"Good morning, Mr Wrigsby..."

I said, "You are a copyholder?"

He replied: "Yes, but I never go to the Court. My father was a copyholder, and he kept two cows and a pony on the common, but I have no cows, and I am my own pony, and think it would be a good thing if the common was built over; it would bring a little more business into the parish."

"Have a little more gin and water, Mr. Wrigsby. I think as you don't get any benefit from the common the least they could have done would have been to give you compensation, or a piece of the common.

"You are a poor, hard-working man, and I think they have behaved very badly to you.

"All the rich people round the common have been helping themselves pretty freely, and I daresay you know I have been doing what I can to stop any further stealing."

"Everybody in the parish knows what you have done, but you don't seem to have prevented it. I hear that fellow Dobs, who owes me a bill I can't get, is taking in a bit near the lane."

"Mr. Wrigsby, Dobs is a land-stealer, and you are the only man in the parish that can stop his stealing."

"How can I stop it? I have no money to go to law."

Poor Mr. Wrigsby little thought that he had commenced proceedings against the lord of the manor, the Brighton and South Coast Railway Company, the West London Extension, the South-Western, and six others.

It may be said that I ought not to have taken advantage of Mr. Wrigsby's weakness, but it was our last extremity, and Aristotle would have defended it.

I called with a cab for the great plaintiff, but I had my fears. I felt as if we were going to an execution, but Wrigsby knew he was going into society, and dressed accordingly.

He had on a pair of primrose-coloured breeches and gaiters, which hung on his body in graceful fulness; a yellow plush waistcoat, with large glass buttons, which gleamed like cat's eyes; a blue coat, far too small, with a few brass buttons; and a large white choker twisted round his neck like a tablecloth.

The appearance of the plaintiff in court was a sensation.

The six defendants were each separately represented by counsel, supported by a strong detachment of lawyers.

Where the carcass is there will the eagles be gathered together.

As Mr. Wrigsby stood up the Vice-Chancellor looked at him, as well he might, for he was a natural curiosity...

Counsel for the Railway Company began by a few loving remarks about Mr. Wrigsby's health...

...and in less than twenty minutes Wrigsby told the whole story of his signing the affidavit – what I had told him to say, that I would stick to him to the last, that he should not be sixpence the poorer for the lawsuit, perhaps better, that the common was no good to him and never had been, and it was to oblige me that he signed the paper.

He didn't know exactly what it was about, but I told him it was all right.

"If an earthquake had swallowed up me and the others I should not have objected. After all my work this was a terrible blow.

The lawyer leaned over to me and said, "It is all up."

The counsel and lawyers for the defendants sniggered at each other, waiting for the magic words, "Judgment for the defendants, with costs".

The thieves who had stolen the common laughed outright, and as I came out of court jeered at me.

"The Vice-Chancellor, a pious, good old man – may he rest in peace ! – said, 'I shall reserve judgment.'

Then the counsel and lawyers stared at each other and leisurely packed up a cartload of papers and books and left.

In a few days we heard rumours of an armistice.

I never knew for certain; but I believe the good Vice-Chancellor had an interview with the lord of the manor, who consented to a friendly Act of Parliament by which all that was left of the common – about one hundred and fifty acres – should remain open and unenclosed for ever on payment of two hundred pounds a-year, or twenty years' purchase, secured on the rates of the parishes adjoining the common, which was about a farthing in the pound.

The parishes cheerfully assented, and after five years the fighting ended.