

AN IMPORTANT DECISION.

INVOLVES A CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION.

The Supreme Court Interprets the Section Relative to a Circuit Judge Charging the Jury as to Evidence in a Case.

The Supreme Court, in rendering a decision in a case that came before it at the April term, passed upon a section of the new Constitution, thus rendering the finding of more than usual interest.

This action for claim and delivery was brought by Jane Estelle Clinkcales to recover from the defendants certain personal property covered by a mortgage, of which she was the assignee.

After the commencement of the suit, the plaintiff died, and her father and executor, E. B. Norris, was substituted as plaintiff.

The case was heard before Judge Earle and a jury at the January term of court, 1896, at Abbeville, and the jury found for the plaintiff. The defendants appealed to the Supreme Court from the rulings and decision of the circuit judge and from the decision of the jury on ten exceptions.

The Supreme Court at the April term heard the case and on five of the exceptions reversed the decision of the circuit court and ordered a new trial.

One of the exceptions involved the constitutional question of charging the jury, the judge having "stated the testimony" notwithstanding such power is denied him by the Constitution of 1895.

The Constitution of 1868 declares: "Judges shall not charge juries in respect to matters of fact, but may state the testimony and declare the law."

The Constitution of 1895 says: "Judges shall not charge juries in respect to matters of fact, but shall declare the law."

The first clause in both instances is the same, but the second clause has been changed in two important particulars. Permission to "state the testimony" has been omitted. The permission to "declare the law" has been changed into a mandate. Instead of being "Judges may declare the law," it has been made mandatory by declaring, "Judges shall declare the law."

The Supreme Court, in rendering a decision on this constitutional question, has this to say in regard to it: "Until the adoption of the Constitution of 1868, under the common law and the practice of the courts of this State, our circuit judges had the power to charge juries upon the evidence as well as upon the law. After the case was closed on both sides the judge summed up - in the old name applied to a judge's charge, and the name still used in the English courts - it was customary to state to the jury the issues involved, to explain the law applicable to the case, and to recapitulate the testimony so as to refresh the minds of the jurors and enable them to apply the law to the testimony and to pass intelligently upon it. It was competent for the judge to give the jury his opinion upon the facts as well as upon the law, provided he did not actually take the decision of the case from the jury, but left it to them to find a verdict according to their own opinions. This was the practice for many years throughout all the States, and it still obtains in the Federal courts. But this power to comment on the testimony has at various times and in various degrees been abridged in the respective States by constitutional or statutory limitations. No effort has been made, however, so far as we are aware, by Congressional legislation to deprive the judges of the Federal courts of this power which the States piece-meal have taken from the judges of the State courts."

"There is no doubt this power had been greatly abused. Not unfrequently charges evinced partisanship in their charges and moulded verdicts to their will; and as frequently juries shirked responsibilities and readily adopted the opinion of the judge, finding their verdict as he directed."

"It was to put a stop to this, and to secure the constitutional right of trial by jury, and not by a judge, that the various limitations on this common law power were imposed by constitutional or by statute."

The Supreme Court on the opinion of the clause that judges may "state the testimony" says: "This right has been taken away from the circuit judges by the change made in section 26 in the Constitution of 1895, the permission to 'state the testimony' having been left out, and we must hold, intentionally left out. It was manifestly the intention of the framers of the Constitution of 1895 to deprive judges of the right to state the testimony in charging juries and to take from them all the power which that phrase has been held to imply. Section 26 as it now reads, thus further restricts the right and limits the power of judges in charging juries, when they formerly enjoyed the common law, and therefore we have seen, has already been abridged and limited by the various provisions in the Constitution of 1895."

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