

The Absconding Debtor

by a Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

THE winter of 18— will be long remembered for its extreme and enduring cold. It was in the middle of one of the most slippery portions of that rigorous season that I transacted, with one of the most slippery customers I ever met, the regular professional business hereinafter described.

“Good morning, John,” said Lawyer Brian, in his dry, slow way. “Let me make you acquainted with Mr. Spiggleton, of New Haven; Mr. Spiggleton—Mr. Barker.”

We testified great mutual delight at the acquaintance, and Lawyer Brian continued; —

“Mr. Spiggleton is partner in Longtime, Sellemup, & Co., merchants, of New Haven. He’s come on a rather unpromising business, and I’ve told him that you are exactly the man to make every human exertion in the matter, provided only you have the time.”

And as he gravely and deliberately uttered those words, he winked to me a professional and confidential wink with the eye farthest from Mr. Spiggleton, but without any motion of the other eye, or any other change of feature. With corresponding gravity, I replied.

“I’m much obliged to you, Mr. Brian. But when must we go, and whither, and how long must we stay?”

“Only to Middletown; but if there’s any thing to be done, it must be done by tonight. You can come back in the morning.”

“I don’t know; let me look at my notebook. Why, I’ll undertake it if I can positively come back tomorrow.”

“Well, I’ll leave Mr. Spiggleton with you for the present. If you’ll just run into my office before you go, I’ll give you a hint or two; and you can make the experiment, at any rate.”

So he stalked off, and I inquired of Spiggleton what the business was. Being a clear-headed business man, in spite of his prigness and putty-colored complexion, he proceeded to give me a very succinct statement to the effect that a certain John Tupling, keeping a “country shop” in Chatham, opposite Middletown, and on the Connecticut River, nearly halfway from Hartford to the Sound, but also doing business in Middletown, and residing there, had bought a large bill of goods of Longtime, Sellemup, and Co.; that they had received private early advices of his intention to “fail,” and probably to *bolt* with the proceeds; and that he, Mr. Spiggleton, had half an hour ago arrived in hot haste to get the professional help of Mr. Brian, the usual counsel for the firm in those parts, for the obtaining of any possible security; but that Mr. Brian had intimated that Tupling’s case was somewhat understood, as it happened, in Hartford, and that the result of the attempt was rather doubtful.

“What were you proposing to do, Mr. Spiggleton?”

“Why, wouldn’t you levy on the goods?”

“I would if I could. But is the payment due?”

“One bill for two thousand and thirty-five, due three days since—pro tested. Two others, amounting together to three thousand eight hundred, and seventy-eight, due thirty days hence.”

“You can levy for the protested note only, then.”

“But,” said Spiggleton, “we thought that we might get security for the whole if we threatened to break him up.”

“He’s too broken already, it’s very likely, to be afraid of being broken any more. It’s possible, however, that some of the goods may be within reach. The only thing to be done is to try that, at any rate.”

“Can’t you arrest the fellow, Mr. Barker?”

“No, Mr. Spiggleton, unless upon affidavit of the debtor’s fraudulent intention to leave the country. I rather think it’s a gone case unless we can find some of the goods; and even then, if you wanted to do more than to secure that first note, you can only do it on affidavit charging fraud in the purchase, not on action of debt.”

“I am prepared to make that affidavit.”

“Very well. I’ll leave for Middletown at three, then. I’ll get the papers ready, and if I want you I’ll call. You are stopping where?”

“At the City Hotel.”

So Mr. Spiggleton left me, and I prepared for my trip; that is, I ate my dinner, made out a writ for a Middletown officer whom I happened to know, and then stepped over to the legal sanctum of Lawyer Brian.

The old gentleman was deep in the consideration of a tough point in the law of insurance, but with professional versatility he piled up his books and proceeded to give me the information at which he had hinted. It appeared that by some of those numerous secret channels by which all sorts of queer information come quietly into a lawyer’s hands, he had learned that Tupling had been selling a large lot of goods in Hartford at very low prices for cash within a week; that those goods were gone and out of reach; that sundry New Haven creditors had also possession of the information which Messrs. Longtime, Sellemup, and Co., thought exclusively theirs; and that officers were waiting for Tupling at Hartford, and were also looking after him in Middletown; and that he was undoubtedly hidden somewhere about this latter city, with a considerable amount of money on his person; that the idea of attaching any goods was absurd; that the only plan was to catch him, and frighten him into partial or full payment; that he was a stout, active, quarrelsome fellow, and an ugly customer; and that, on the whole, it was as barren a prospect for

securing a debt as could well be imagined. He added that he had a sort of business-partner, or fellow-rascal, in Hartford—one Johnson—but that he was too wary a rogue to make any thing of.

“Has Tupling a wife?” I asked.

“Yes. It’s astonishing,” indignantly moralized the old lawyer, “how the biggest villain under heaven can always find some woman that’s fool enough to have him!”

“Then he might be concealed at home. Or, stay—I see! I can find out from her where he is.”

“Hardly, I think; but you can try. One thing more; make those New Haven men pay you from half to three quarters of any thing you secure. They would jump at ten *per cent.* for their claim this minute.”

“Thank you, lawyer,” I answered, laughing. “I’ll think of it, unless I should get a — thrashing! Good day.”

Leaving word with Spiggleton that I should be back next morning with news, I rode to the railway station. Espying a constable lounging about the building, I accosted him.

“Ah, Mr. Lockitt, how’s the bracelet and nabbing business today? Any thing new?”

“Why, no,” replied he. “I’m here on the chance of ketchin’ Jack Tupling. But I reckon he’s too sharp to stick his nose in here. He’s a darn’d sight more likely to be at the station below. But he’s wanted there, too.”

“Is he?” I answered. “Pleasant thing to be of so much importance, eh? But isn’t there some partner of his here in Hartford?”

“Yes, I believe so,” said Lockitt; “Jotham Johnson, they say. But there won’t nobody prove nothin’ against *him*. He’s an old bird!”

The train now came thundering in, and, bidding the communicative constable good morning, I entered the carriage and went on my way. My intention was to pretend a message from Johnson to Tupling, if I could find Mrs. Tupling, and thus discover his hiding place; but I deferred any detailed scheme until I should have reconnoitered. Changing carriages at B—, where also I noticed a Hartford officer quietly ensconced in a corner of the stationhouse, I arrived at Middletown in good season, and proceeded at once to the residence of the officer to whom my writ wail directed. He was absent. His wife thought he was “up to John Tupling’s,” and getting the direction, thither I went.

It was an insignificant but snug-looking little white tenement, in the northeastern part of Middletown, near the river. As I entered the street where it stood, I met Mr. Japes the constable walking slowly, his hands in his pockets, and his head down, but his eyes and ears wide open for all that.

“Ah, Mr. Japes, how are you? Will you serve a writ against Tupling for me?”

“Why, yes, Mr. Barker, after I’ve found him first, and then served half-a-dozen others I’ve got in my pocket here,” he answered, with a grim official smile.

“How deep is he in?” I asked confidentially.

“I don’t know, I’m sure. There’s three fellers up from Boston, and several from Hartford, and more’n one from Middletown. There’s an officer in the house, and one or two in the streets; there’s a chance of his comin’ home tonight, they say. I do’no—I ’spect there won’t be enough ketcht on him to put in your eye! Why, they say that if you count all he’s done, he’s let folks in up to sixty or seventy thousand dollars! He’s a deep one, I tell ye!”

“I’m late in the day, I’m afraid,” I observed; “however, there’s the writ; I’ll go back to the tavern and get some supper, I believe. Hold on, I think I’ll see Mrs. Tupling a moment.”

I approached the house and knocked at the door for the purpose of trying the experiment aforementioned. “Come in!” answered a querulous and nasal feminine voice, and I entered. The door opened directly into the plain and very neat little sitting room. A thin and pale woman, with a worn and frightened look, stood looking out of the window, while a rough-looking fellow, the officer, sat silently by the fire.

“Mrs. Tupling?” I inquired, bowing.

“That’s my name,” she answered, in an impatient, angry tone.

I stepped near her, and said, in a tone too low for the officer’s ear, “Mrs. Tupling, won’t you let me see you alone a moment?”

She looked suspiciously at me. I added, “I have a message from Jotham Johnson”—she started—“and if I can’t find your husband, I must leave it with you.”

She answered with a meaning look, “The books are in the other room, if you’ll just step in there a moment.”

She led me into the kitchen, and leaving the door ajar, took down two or three account books, and laid them open upon the table. There,” she said, “it must be there.” I approached, and, bending over them, pretended to search for some item, while I told her, in a low tone, that I was to warn Mr. Tupling not to endeavor to leave by way of Hartford, for that they were waiting for him there and at Springfield too.

“He isn’t here,” she answered, in the same manner. “He’s across the river. He was a goin’ up on skates, on the ice, to take the stage at East Hartford. You’ll have to go and see him there, for he aint a comin’ home agin.”

“Across the river?” I said, with a show of reluctance. “It’s terrible going, and very cold. But I suppose he must know it. Where is he!”

“At Pat M’Cabe’s old shanty, near the Upper Quarry,” she answered, with some hesitation. “If you knock, and call out for Jotham Johnson, he’ll let you in. You must be pretty quick, for he was a goin’ to start not far from this time.”

“I’ll go right over,” I said; “but it’s a tough job.” Then I continued, more loudly, for the officer’s benefit—I had seen him peering through the door— “I don’t find it. I must look again in the morning. Good night, ma’am.”

“Good night.” And I quietly left the house, and having saunteringly passed by Constable Japes, yet on his chilly post, with the remark that I hoped he’d have better luck than I looked for, I turned the corner, and made very quick time to the hotel, scheming as I went.

This was evidently a pretty well-considered scheme of Tupling’s, and indicated that he must have something somewhere worth taking a good deal of pains for. This could not well be any thing except money, which, accordingly, I presumed he had about his person, to the full amount of the receipts from his swindling sales; very likely twenty or thirty thousand dollars. On skates? I meditated; that is not a bad idea, it’s glorious skating all the way up, and for such a slippery trick so slippery a means is very suitable.

I determined that I would take a hasty supper, procure a pair of skates and a stout stick, and start off alone after our sly friend John; for skating being a “specialty” of mine, I made no doubt that if he should have set out, I could overhaul him on the river. What exactly to do if I should come up with him, I didn’t know. But it was an adventure at any rate, and I felt quite assured that either by persuasion or force I could effect some arrangement or other which should benefit my clients, and, willy, nilly, ease his conscience. At the worst, I proposed to arrest him on my own responsibility, and secure him in some way until I could transfer him to the clutches of the law. Nearly six thousand dollars! It was worth one hot chase, or a cold one either. But—suppose he should overpower me? A great rough, black-whiskered bully, Spiggleton called him. It would be, in common phrase, “pretty ridiculous” if he should knock me on the head and leave me on the ice. Yet some risk must be taken, and with my training in the fistic art, I did not, on the whole, fear for the result of a single combat.

So meditating and deciding, I reached the hotel, and finding the proprietor, I addressed him in haste:

“Landlord, I want you to do four things a *little* faster than they ever were done before. First, get me supper. Second, send out and buy me a good pair of skates, and also, third, a stout straight cane. Fourth, furnish me a pocket-flask of brandy.”

“It shall be done in fifteen minutes, sir.” He disappeared with speed, and it was done—I mean the supper—and before my short and rapid meal was complete, the required remaining articles were at hand; and paying my bill, putting the skates and the flask in my pocket, fortifying myself with comforter, overcoat, gloves, and mittens, and grasping my stick, I was ready.

“Where is the road to the Upper Quarries?”

“Cross the river at the steamboat landing,” answered the somewhat puzzled host, “and it leads you a direct route, behind the Middle Quarries, straight along, up past Pat M’Cabe’s old shanty.”

“That’s enough; thank you. Good night.”

And I was off. It was now between five and six o’clock, and bitter cold, with a sharp wind from the northeast. Settling my head well down in my coat-collars, as if I were trying to cover my ears with my shoulders, with hands in pockets, and cap drawn over my eyes, I struck a round pace for the landing, and in five minutes reached the dock.

The river lay utterly silent and motionless before me, one great sheet of cold, grayish snow ice; a dismantled schooner, careened over, was frozen-in a few rods out; no voice nor sound was heard; the lights from the houses opposite, in Portland, twinkled dimly through the keen air; and the unsteady, tremulous light of the wintry moon made the deadness of the scene almost ghastly. I paused a moment to look, and then climbing down upon the frozen surface, sliding, scrambling, half walking, half running, as those must do who walk on smooth ice, I proceeded. All at once a series of noises like—

Whip—prrt—slap bang—crack— crack—*crack!*—beginning somewhere out of sight, came ripping and rattling past me, in the ice, and so faded away down the river toward the Narrows. It was a “frost-crack,” and a token of the extremist cold—a sort of groan from the ice under the relentless rigor of the Ice King.

Reaching the other side, I found the road without difficulty. It led me some little distance back from the river, up the steep slant of the hills which border it, and then turning northward, ran along the verge of the immense excavations known as the Middle Quarries. Past the precipitous verge of these great horrible abysses, that looked all but bottomless in the deceitful moonlight, I cautiously and rapidly pursued my way; and having kept on in that direction perhaps a quarter of a mile, gradually returning towards the river, reached the miserable old hovel known as Pat M’Cabe’s shanty; a rickety, solitary, dismantled den, where M’Cabe had kept a beershop in the summer, and which had become notorious by reason of the many desperate rows that had occurred there and thereabouts. It was however, now altogether deserted, and indeed had lost so many boards and joists that it was little more than the tottering skeleton of a tenement.

I knocked loudly at the broken door, and called out, “Johnson! Jotham Johnson!” There was no reply, and I entered. The hut was empty; but in one corner there was a heap of shavings and a blanket or two, and there were also the embers of a decaying fire. Tupling had been there, and had recently gone.

Quarter past six. He must have it in mind to reach Hartford, and then the first railway station between Springfield and Boston, in time to board the evening express train, which leaves Hartford at eight P. M. “That needs fast skating and fast driving—and faster on my part, if I am to catch him.”

I hurried down the high precipitous bank to the river, slid out upon the gray, glassy ice, and, kneeling down, proceeded to put on the skates. Deliberately—for in such a business the more haste the less speed—and carefully I fitted them, jammed the heel-pins home, passed and buckled the straps, straining them until my feet felt as if compressed in iron shoes, replaced my mittens, grasped my stick, one hand at each end, holding it athwart me—a most excellent plan, by the way, in skating long distances—and wheeling about in a few small circuits to feel the ice, and the skates, and the elasticity of my muscles, I turned northward, bent low, headed diagonally across the river to round the next point above, and struck out across the glimmering silent ice with long, steady, rapid, sweeping strokes.

From Middletown to Hartford is about twenty-five miles by the course of the river. I might decrease this distance a mile or two by taking advantage of my knowledge of the river, and “cutting off corners.” But Tupling doubtless knew the same, and my object, if attained at all, must be so by desperate straightforward racing. My skates, fortunately, though quite new, were not too sharp; and as the ice was extremely hard, they ran over it with very little of the scoring cut which is so apt to diminish speed; and for twenty minutes I sped steadily on at a moderate pace, until I should get a little easy in my work. There had been so much skating that the many tracks along my route afforded me no indications as to my predecessor.

Click—whip—crack—*bang!* went another frost-crack. Colder yet; and although very little of me except the tip of my nose was visible, the air rushing past my face fairly *burned* it with cold. But now my blood began to grow warm with the manly exercise; and gradually I increased my speed up to a good racing pace, not however, going at a faster rate, than I felt that I could hold up to the old wooden bridge at Hartford. The icy northeaster whistled in my ears as I flew along, or moaned and sang dirges to me from among the leafless trees and evergreens on the bleak hillsides. It would blow the sound of Tupling’s feet back to me, and keep mine from him.

Away I went, sweeping by the wide bare meadows, past the gorges in the hills, whirling round point after point, stretching in straight lines from one to the next, while the reduplicated ringing strokes of my skates made a monotonous music for me, and I could hear the little fragments cut out by an occasional heavy foot-thrust blown crackling backward by the wind.

Past Middletown Upper Houses; past the level meadows of South Glastenbury, famed for walnuts; past the steep, barren hillsides of Rocky Hill, I swept along for fifteen miles and more; and now I came shooting up toward Glastenbury Landing, and still I neither saw nor heard any skater. I rounded the point opposite the landing. From this place a long straight reach opens, the vista being closed by the roofs and cupolas of the County Prison, situate in W—. Now I could see upon the river, halfway up the reach, the figure of a man skating along at a good pace. It must be Tupling, and my coming upon him while he was speeding so rapidly toward the prison might be taken as an omen of his fate and my success.

Now, at last, I put forth the very utmost of my strength; and going at a tremendous pace, was rapidly overhauling the dishonest bankrupt. I was almost within speaking distance, when he must have heard the ringing of my skate-irons: for suddenly looking over his shoulder he saw me, and instantly redoubled his speed, which convinced me that he was my man. Away we flew for nearly a mile in perfect silence, except for the scoring and ringing skatestrokes; but I steadily

closed up, until as we turned and swept northward again, round the bend in the bow of which the prison stands, I spoke:

“Tupling, hold hard! I want to speak to you!”

“Go to —” he vociferated, with abundance of other curses, but slackened not his speed.

I continued to gain, and was just considering whether I would knock him down with my stick or lay hands on him, when, turning his head, he suddenly discharged first one pistol shot and then another, but, firing over his shoulder, missed me. I was even lifting my stick, and should have returned his compliment—unless he had “winged” me with a further use of his revolver—when at once the gray ice over which we had been gliding disappeared, and I seemed to be skating on water. It was dead black ice. *An air-hole!* An instantaneous, horrid thrill of fright shot through me. My speed was too great to turn aside, but with an instinctive impulse, I shut my eyes, and sprang desperately up from the ice with both feet.

The tremendous speed of my former motion, and the effort of that terrific leap, swung me over ten feet of black, open water, and threw me, with a severe fall, flat upon the thin but tough black ice beyond. As I leaped I heard a cry, the cracking of breaking ice, a plunge—Tupling had driven blindly into the ghastly open abyss!

I had slid some distance beyond the spot where I fell. Stunned and hurt, I rose with difficulty just as the prison bell rang out an alarm upon the keen still air. The two pistol shots had been heard, and it was probably thought that some convict was escaping. That was not exactly it; the old bell might, however, be taken to sound forth the signal that a culprit was caged. A glance showed me that we were opposite the entrance of that singular body of water called W—Cove, the warmer outflow from whose springs, passing through a narrow channel into the river, had kept open this deathtrap, within whose fearful circle Tupling had risen to the surface, and the swift current carrying him to the lower side of the orifice, he was sustaining himself by his arms, but made ineffectual struggles to creep out upon the thin ice, which cracked and broke as he bore upon it.

“Hold still!” I cried. “I’ll get a hurdle.” So I hurried to the next fence and was returning with the hurdle dragging behind me, when it occurred to me that circumstances facilitated the making of good conditions with friend John, since he was now, in a manner, at my mercy. So I halted and addressed him:

“You are John Tupling, are you?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll settle Longtime, Sellemup & Co.’s bill if I get you out, will you?”

He answered evasively, and with some curses—but rather cool ones, for he was hardly able to speak by this time—“Oh! Are you going to let a man drown before your eyes! Shove me that rail, will ye?”

And, in a rage he made a great spluttering in the water. But he was getting a little stiff, and the ice kept breaking, letting his head under.

I was not to be satisfied with evasions, and repeated my demand.

“Agree to settle that bill in full, with interest, and here’s the rail. If not, why, you must get out yourself. Come, I can’t wait all night here, I have business at Hartford.” And, dropping the rail, I turned as if to depart.

Not that I would have left the rogue to drown, but it was as well to let him think so. So he very sullenly agreed to my conditions; upon which I spread myself flat on the ice, crawled out until I could reach him with the rail, and held it as firmly as I could while he raised himself upon it and cautiously crawled out, resting partly upon the rail and partly upon the ice.

As he scrambled along to firmer footing, such was the intensity of the cold that every time his mitten or his knee touched the ice, all dripping as he was with water, they froze fast to it; and when at last he stood erect, which he was only able to do by my help, and walked stiffly and feebly towards the shore, we had not reached the bank before he was clothed from head to foot in crackling icy armor. He would fain have sat down for rest, but he would never have risen; and it was only by threats and entreaties, and with no small amount of actual dragging and pushing, that I succeeded in leading him to the door of the nearest house, where, upon knocking, we were hospitably admitted, and forthwith put before a cheerful fire. The bustling dame and her husband both agreed with me that Tupling must at once go to bed, for he was almost speechless. When, however, Mr. Allen (our host) and I attempted to strip him, he would have resisted. Without attending to his efforts, however, we quickly disrobed him, when his reluctance was explained. He wore a belt with a considerable sum in gold sewed up in it, under his clothes. But we stripped him, rubbed him down with warm towels, gave him a dose out of my brandy flask, and it was not long before he was asleep. On emptying his pockets that his clothes might be dried, I took the liberty of investigating his exchequer, whereupon he appeared to be possessed of about twenty-five thousand dollars all told. From this I abstracted the amount for which I had stipulated with him, and having deposited the same with my own slender pecunium, I went to sleep, pretty well fatigued, but with a joyful mind.

Rising early, I suggested to Mr. Tupling (who was still asleep when I entered his room) the possibility of my delivering him up to certain individuals anxious to put papers into his hands (commencing “To the Sheriff,” &c., and ending “Justice of Peace”), and hands on his shoulder; at which idea he exhibited and expressed a disgust profound in character and altogether profane in expression. But the suggestion prevailed with him to yield a perfect assent to the little transaction of which I informed him, and whose completeness I demonstrated by exhibiting to him the bunch of wet notes in my pocketbook. And he took, though with an evil grace, a receipt in full from me as Longtime, Sellemup & Co.’s attorney.

Leaving him to his own devices, and thanking and paying Mr. Allen, I hastened to Hartford, where, not to fail in the strict line of my duty to the community, I notified officer Lockett of the place where I had left Tupling, whom, however, although the constable used instant diligence, he

failed to apprehend. I have received no news of him since; he may be in California, or in Congress, for what I know.

I found Spiggleton at the hotel in Hartford, informed him with a grave face that I had found that there were absolutely no goods to attach, and that I had reliable information that Tupling had left Middleton; but, I added, I thought that there was a certain channel by which, for a full release, twenty-five per cent, or thereabouts, of the amount due could be obtained.

Spiggleton's further inquiries about Tupling seemed to have even lowered his estimate of the man and his solvency; for he caught at the offer, and said it was lucky that they could get so much.

I laughed. "I beg pardon, Mr. Spiggleton, I couldn't resist the temptation to try your hopes. I've secured the whole amount. Have the kindness to count these notes, will you?"

And I deposited the documents, yet wet, but good money and true, upon the table. In silent wonder the merchant counted and summed up.

"Five thousand nine hundred and thirty one dollars," he said. "Did you fish the funds out of the river? The notes are wet enough."

"Yes, literally and truly I did," I answered; and told him my story, to his great satisfaction and delight.

Longtime, Sellemup & Co., paid me five hundred dollars for that night's work; but no money would buy me to experience again the one quick, deadly pang of fright that thrilled through me at the sight of the black ice of the air-hole; neither, to this day, can I walk over the frozen surface of any water without a slight instinctive trembling.

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