

## *Watching a Defaulter*

BY WILLIS GRIBBLE

No doubt ingenuity is the first rudiment that combines with tact and energy to make a good detective. But once in a long stretch “good luck” is sure to gain a supremacy over those three virtues. At all events, there is an episode on record wherein luck not only gained the supremacy, but atoned for the absence of the other three.

To be sure the case was not a complicated one. There was no mystery that called for the keen instinct of an adept at unraveling to ferret it out. Instead, it was a most simple chain of circumstances. One Philip Brashear had been suspected of appropriating the funds of his employers, and while the firm was busy summing up the total of their losses, he decamped, carrying with him money and bonds to the value of half a hundred thousand. A futile search of the city and its environs followed; but to all appearances the culprit vanished, leaving no traces that might be followed up to the epoch of his apprehension.

At least that was the popular verdict, expressed by every one having a special interest in the affair. With the exception of Mr. Americus Biggerton, Chief of the United States Detective Service, whose men all traced Brashear not only to the place he adopted in his flight, but to the house where even now he lay awaiting a favorable opportunity to quit the country.

Mr. Americus Biggerton was of himself a diplomat, who, though loving honesty and square dealing much, loved the fabulous possession of Midas more. Hence, when a beggarly pittance of “two hundred dollars, dead or alive,” was offered for the apprehension of Brashear, Mr. Biggerton dilated his wide-spread nostrils, and whispered he would await a higher fluctuation in the market of reward.

So it happened that one afternoon, as he sat conning over the entries made by his head clerk, Sliggins, in his “Docket of Criminalities,” the dusty door of his dustier office revolved on its creaky hinges, and, looking up, Mr. Biggerton spied the well-known form of his nephew, John Liel, standing abashed in the shadowy aperture.

“Well, it is you, is it?” quoth Mr. Biggerton, ungraciously enough.

“Yes, sir.” And John Liel walked unsteadily forward. “I hope you are glad to see me, uncle.”

“I can’t say I am,” grunted the chief. “I suppose you are out of work again. Idleness has become a chronic malady with you, John.”

John Liel stood twitching the frayed end of a not immaculate handkerchief through his rigid digits.

“I hope not, uncle; leastwise, I—”

“Happily, we don’t see our own faults, John. But let me tell you that one of yours is laziness; so don’t stand on the defensive.”

“I have not endeavored to defend myself nor could I conscientiously do so,” with a short faint laugh.

Mr. Biggerton replaced his gold-bowed glasses, and sat looking for a moment or two at his nephew. He was a short, corpulent, old fellow, this uncle of John’s; close-shaven, keen-eyed, alert, and dressed with scrupulous care in a suit of shiny black broadcloth.

“Well, what are you going to do with yourself?” he finally interrogated.

“I hardly know;” and John looked down appealingly to the round, ruddy face of his kinsman. “I had entertained a faint hope—”

“And what did you hope?”

“That there might be something in the service that you could offer me.”

Mr. Americus Biggerton let fall his docket of criminalities with something very much like a smothered gasp.

“You?”

“Certainly; why not?”

“Why not? For the very sufficient reason that you are not qualified to fill any position beyond the counter of a country shoe-shop. It takes a deal more than a good-natured dolt to fulfill the duties required of a detective.”

“For all that, you might put me to the test.”

Just then, a sudden thought revealed itself to Mr. Biggerton.

“And so I might,” he conceded. “I supposed it’s against the code of human nature to let one’s own flesh and blood starve outright, and I have a kind of half notion to try you, anyhow. There, there!” he rejoined, cautiously; “don’t rush into a vortex of avowals before you are certain of my intentions, which are these: You’ve heard of Brashear, the clerk who decamped a week or so ago, leaving Killop and Carr a considerable sum the worse for his flight. Well, very confidentially, and strictly between ourselves, the United American Detective Service has tracked the fellow to a little manufacturing centre in Massachusetts, where the aforementioned service intends to keep him until the rewards offered for his apprehension is colossal enough to recompense them for their pains. Now, John, here’s your chance. Go up to Beamis Point, and keep a clear eye on the fellow; then, when the time arrives to expose him, I’ll come up and arrest him, and pay you well for your trouble—all with the promise that you do your work in the right way.”

“But how will I recognize the culprit?” queried Liel.

“Easily enough; he is your height to a hair’s breadth, very dark, and effeminate to a last degree.”

“Are you certain he is at Beamis Point?”

“Certain as I am of my own existence. There is but one tavern in the place, and at it he is domiciled. It is highly probable he will be disguised and under an assumed name. But you must ferret out his identity, aided by the information I have given you, and the fact that he has been in the place just a fortnight come Tuesday. Here’s enough money to cover your expenses. In the event of your failure, I warn you never to come my way again. If you succeed your future is assured. Now go.”

And John, stowing away a generous coil of bills in his innermost pocket, obeyed Mr. Biggerton’s peremptory bidding.

Now Beamis Point was an aimless province of unfertile soil, somewhere along the Massachusetts coast; of which one predicted at first a scantiness of population, and a general poverty in the way of human comfort. There were precisely seven rambling farm-houses, an equally rambling church, and, more pretentious than the rest, a heap of brick and mortar stigmatized, for brevity’s sake, “The Tavern.”

John Liel got to this place on the second morning after his departure from Biggerton’s office. Once there, he set about his duties with all the system and regularity befitting them. Going directly to the tavern, he ordered a room, and while subscribing himself upon the battered register, took occasion to scan the names enrolled thereon.

In most part they were good, sensible Yankee names, such, he argues, as might be and probably were the possession of the itinerant peddlers who predominated in that section. But two names were one jot out of the stereotyped category; these were Miss Spear, New Haven, and Oliver Pierce, Brooklyn. He closed the book suddenly when he saw the date subjoining them, Tuesday, April 12. That was the day on which Philip Brashear had come to Beamis Point.

He went to his room, there to await the sounding of the dinner-gong. It rang at last, and, with a strangely fluttering heart John repaired to the dining-room, and the first person to be introduced to him was Mr. Oliver Price, of Brooklyn.

The fellow was manifestly in the last epoch of respectable intoxication; and as he lulled about the room, eating, gesticulating and talking all in a breath, John had no meager opportunity to study his rum-blossoming physiognomy.

His intuition told him the fellow was the one he sought. His face was covered by a straggling beard, of several weeks’ growth; he was quite dark, and John’s height “to a hair’s breadth.”

That afternoon John telegraphed Biggerton substantially as follows:

“*Uncle Americus*:—Everything is in excellent order, and awaiting your pleasure.  
JOHN.”

It was twilight when he again entered his room, and scarcely had he done so that he heard someone fumbling at the door-knob. A second later the door swung quickly open, and leaning against the panels was a woman. Quite a tall woman she was—certainly several inches above the accepted height of her sex. Her face, outlined by the dense shadows of the hall was strangely prepossessing; she had full, regular features, a damask-rose sort of complexion, and pale gray eyes, under dark, curling lashes.

Mr. Liel was the first to regain his composure.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

At the first sound of his voice she shrank back still further in the shadows. She had not seen him until he spoke.

“Yes,” she articulated, faintly, in a velvety contralto voice, “though I should never have intruded had I known you were here. The door of my room has become locked during my absence, and your key and mine are counterparts of each other.”

John stooped forward and wrested the key from its lock, then passed into the hall accompanied by the lady. Her room lay directly opposite his own, and it was the work of scarcely a moment to insert the key and turn the lock into its rightful position. Then, with a faint murmur of thanks, the lady passed within, closing the door behind her, and making to him an impromptu *Paradis* on the outer edge of a modern paradise.

He stayed there a second or two listening to the fall of her receding footsteps, then turned about, and was sauntering across the narrow hall, when suddenly a man staggered with drunken force against him. Just then a momentary shimmer of light burned upward from the fitful flare of the hallway lamp, and, lying half senseless, in his clasp, John Liel saw the figure of Philip Brashear.

He led the fellow a few paces, then set him on his feet, and watched him with a keen sense of satisfaction stagger against the door of a room farther on and sink into a heavy sleep across the threshold.

John felt more interested in his mysterious visitor next morning than he did in either Brashear or his breakfast. He watched for her until his eyes tired of their vain expectancy, and despairing at last of seeing her, he questioned his host about her, and had his trouble for his pains. His host knew absolutely nothing beyond the meager fact that her name was Spear; that she came from New Haven; that she paid her bills with uncommon regularity, and kept exclusively to herself.

So John had to content himself that day with watching the movements of Philip Brashear, and congratulating his vanity upon the conquest he had won over his old enemy—Fate.

Towards evening he saw the door of Miss Spear's room slightly ajar, and ventured in with a neatly-worded pretense of having mistaken the apartment for his own. Miss Spear was manifestly surprised, and unquestionably displeased. However, she went through the formula of a half-hour's chat with a becoming show of good-nature. When he went away, she told herself that she must submit to his well-meant overture; for suspicion was a precedent she did not care to establish just then.

So time ran blithely away, and spring merged itself into summer, and John stood in hourly expectancy of orders from his chief. He had been at Beamis Point a month now, idly watching the movements of Brashear, and playing the agreeable to Miss Spear.

Even to himself it seemed strange that he had never told her of the mission that brought him to Beamis Point; fear of the shock upon her nerves that would most probably attend the revelation had alone kept him from making it. No woman had the strength of character to maintain a strict composure knowing herself to be beneath the same roof with a criminal, he urged.

And so things coursed along very pleasantly, until over the wires sped the following words:

*“John Liel:—Will be with you to-morrow.*

*Uncle Americus.”*

The missive set John to thinking, then to planning. First of all he decided that Miss Spear must not be compromised by so much as a sight of the affair. He would tell her everything and have her leave the house until it all was over. He slipped out of his room and along the hall until he faced the door of the culprit's room. Peering in, he saw the fellow lying prone upon his bed sleeping off the effects of his spiritual potations. Quick as thought he snatched up the key lying at his feet, and quicker still locked his prey securely within. That done, he went to Miss Spear.

A stiff wind had crept up over the sea, over which a storm was brewing. Miss Spear was leaning before the window, resting her head upon the jamb. He found her so as he entered the room in answer to her bidding. There was no time to lose, and he told her everything: of Brashear's crime, of his flight to Beamis Point, and lastly, of his being even now an inmate of the house. He meant to tell her, too, just which inmate he was, but she did not ask. And he thought it needless.

A transient cloud flitted over Miss Spear's face; then she paled to roots of her dark hair.

“And you—you have been watching his movements all along?”

“All along.”

She put her lips together rigidly, as if to stifle an utterance that had risen to them.

“And they are coming to arrest him?”

“Precisely.”

The wind crept still higher, thought the storm had abated somewhat in its fury. Miss Spear, reaching forward, pushed down the window, then crossed the room in a blind manner, and paused before a table under whose cover an oblong parcel lay hidden. A second later she turned about, retracing her footsteps, her hands pinioned at her back.

“You shall never live to see Philip Brashear taken!”

She sprang suddenly forward, a world of hatred glowing in her steely eyes. With one hand she tore the dark strands of hair from her head; with the other she leveled a weapon at his heart.

“You shall never live to arrest me, I swear!” There was a long moment of silence—then a sharp, muffled report, and a pool of vaporous smoke eddied upward towards the ceiling. Another space of silence; meanwhile the smoke of the shot was clearing, and looking forward, John Liel saw the form of Miss Spear, otherwise Philip Brashear, at his feet, and that of Uncle Americus at his side.

“Was it you fired?” John asked faintly.

“Not at all; I merely turned Brashear’s weapon upon himself; he is in an eminently agreeable condition now to be taken back to the city. As for you, John—well, I ain’t much on talking, but you’re a hero, and we’ll settle the rest between ourselves.”

Without an utterance John sped along the hall to where the supposed Brashear slept, unconscious of his incarceration. Afterward he learned that he was a confirmed drunkard, who had migrated to Beamis Point simply to finish his existence in a trance of ecstatic collapse. As for the resemblance between himself and Brashear, it was purely an accidental one.

Of course John prevaricated outrageously in the matter of his encounter with Brashear. It is not on record what his version of the affair was. No doubt it was absurdly incongruous with the real facts; but it answered the purpose, and the defaulter was sent to Sing Sing, and the reward given to Uncle Americus, who shared it with his nephew, and died sounding that young man’s praise.

“Nothing succeeds like success,” says John Liel, who is chief of the United American Detective Service now, and wears gold-bowed glasses and glistening black broadcloth, in direct imitation of his distinguished predecessor.

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