

How Hartley, Frank & Co. Suspended

It was in May, 1863. I had been up in Pennsylvania on a visit to some relatives of my wife's, and returned on Saturday afternoon. I called at my office in Wall Street, and found both my partners in high glee. Business had been even more profitable than usual during my temporary absence; and so rapidly was our reputation for skill and straightforward dealing rising and extending, that telegrams had that very afternoon been received from one of the departments at Washington, urging my immediate visit there, in order to undertake some financial negotiations, requiring more than ordinary tact and management. It was already late. Both my partners were anxious to get away—one to attend a rowing-match, the other to take his young wife out riding. But a few words could be exchanged in reference to the Washington enterprise, and scarcely a word was said in relation to business matters in general. They hurried up-town; and I went over to Brooklyn to dine, and pack a fresh valise, so as to leave for Washington by the 9.13 P. M. train.

Through one of our messenger-boys from the office, I had secured a state-room in the sleeping-car, and, on reaching the train, walked through the entire length of it to find that my state-room was at the very rear end of the last car. The couch in it had not yet been made up; but on the seats were sitting two gentlemen, with heads bowed down, in earnest, whispered conversation. I peered through the narrow door in the dim light of the car, to make sure that it was letter K—the letter of my room—and, not desiring to sit down then, was quietly stepping back into the passage-way, intending to pass out on to the platform, when one of the gentlemen looked up, and I recognized a well-known New-York merchant, with whom my firm frequently had large business transactions, and whom I had repeatedly happened to meet on the Washington cars within the last few months. Referring mentally to a remark I had made to him the last time we met on the cars, I said, jokingly, as I held out my hand to him:

“I knew I should find you somewhere on board; I looked all through the train for you.”

“You *did*?”

I thought his hand trembled as I held it, and I noticed a strange look of fear and agony upon his countenance, entirely unsuited to the prim, half-reserved, wholly self-satisfied expression which the wealthy Mr. Brisket generally wore. But I paid no special attention to it. The cars had started; there was the usual jolting, and jarring, and locomotive-screeching, and bell-ringing, on going out of the depot; and in the dim light of the sleeping-car—dimmer than elsewhere in this corner state-room—every thing looked unnatural and distorted. I thought no more of it.

“Did you look for me?” he repeated. “Why?”

“You have forgotten, it appears, what I told you two weeks ago—that we always seem to go to Washington together.”

“Oh, I remember,” he said; “but Frank told me this morning that you were out of town, somewhere up in Pennsylvania, and were not expected home till Monday.”

For some reason or other, it struck me as strange that Frank, my partner, who himself attended to all of Mr. Brisket's business, should have mentioned my absence, which ordinarily would pass entirely unnoticed by any one of Frank's particular customers, for the reason that in those days I was scarcely ever in the office, but attended to out-door work exclusively. It was, besides, one of my pet rules, both with my clerks and junior partners, never to tell any one any thing in connection with business that could possibly be avoided. But, before the thought could really assume a definite shape in my mind, Mr. Brisket gently drew me down on the seat beside him, saying, in a very absent-minded way, to the gentleman opposite him:

"Mr. Brandon, this is Mr. Hartley, of Wall Street, whom you have often heard of."

The person addressed looked up somewhat peevishly, saying:

"Grant, Mr. Brisket—Thomas Grant, sir. Do get the name right; it is simple enough."

To my astonishment, Mr. Brisket made no reply, offered no explanation for misnaming his acquaintance, but kept looking, with a vacant yet anxious eye, up the passage-way of the car, as though he momentarily expected an apparition to enter by the door at the opposite end.

I offered some apologetic remark on the facility of making mistakes, spoke about the weather, the crowded train, the great comfort of the sleeping-cars; and, finding my companions rather tedious, I walked to the front platform of the car, and lit a cigar, the aroma of which mingled not unpleasantly with an occasional whiff of sea-breeze coming across the salt meadows. The cigar and the night-air sharpened my brain, for like lightning the thought flashed upon me suddenly: There is something wrong about Brisket. He is after some great game, or he is in some mischief. What can it be? A woman? There had been rumors, faint and fleeting, that the great merchant was not altogether immaculate. But somehow his manner did not look like that. Gambling? No! He was too timid, too sensitive; and, if he had, no sum that he could lose could hurt him. It was impossible. But who was that man with him? I had an indistinct recollection of having seen him before, and the impression was by no means in his favor. He had the look of a Southerner, and in those days men readily thought ill of any one whose complexion was a little darker than his neighbor's. Was he mixed up with Brisket in some way? Were they engaged in some smuggling operation, or worse? But, while I was speculating, the train ran into the dimly-lighted Newark depot. I drew the last whiff of my cigar, and entered the car; but, as I shut the door behind me, I heard distinctly a firm and somewhat authoritative but not loud voice cry, "Police!" It came from the rear end of the car, and sounded precisely as though someone in the state-room, where I had left Mr. Brisket and his friend, had put his head out of the window to utter a cry.

I stepped rapidly along the car, and looked into the room. The two were leaning back on their couches, apparently asleep. I could not resist the temptation to say:

"Was it you who called for the police?"

Grant only opened his eyes, as with half-sleepy curiosity; but Brisket fairly jumped to his feet, livid with terror.

And now, almost at our ears, that same voice, not louder, but with more emphatic authority, again cried, "Policeman!"

Brisket put his hand to his coat-pocket—I knew he was feeling for a revolver—and raised himself to his full height, with an air of desperate resolution that I did not think his countenance capable of expressing. But, the next instant, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he sank back in his seat, saying, as if to explain his excitement:

"The air is perfectly stifling here; I am almost choked."

I was now thoroughly convinced that something was wrong with Brisket. I stepped to the rear platform, where the voice had evidently come from, and saw a youngish, military-looking gentleman handing a paper to a policeman who stood by the train, and saying, evidently in answer to some objection:

"I will see you harmless. Show the message to your captain. I am Mr. —, assistant secretary of war. But find the operator first, and make him send it, without fail; it *must* go—do you understand? —and I hold *you* responsible."

With that the train moved slowly on, the policeman bowing himself back, with finger to his hat, considerably impressed with his important responsibility.

Mr. Assistant Secretary of War entered the car ahead of me, passed by Brisket's seat without so much as looking at it, evidently totally unconscious of Brisket's existence. It was clear that, whatever reasons the latter might have for fearing the police, in this case neither the call for the police nor the dispatch had reference to him.

He was still looking out of the window as I slipped into the seat beside him, but quickly turned, and, with assumed indifference, but in a voice scarcely audible, asked:

"What's the trouble?"

"Nothing particular," I answered, with as much meaning in my words as possible; "only some detective, I suppose, telegraphing ahead for more assistance at the next station to arrest some one on board the train."

He had by that time recovered all his self-possession, and eyed me so quietly, yet so firmly, so scrutinizingly, that I quailed, and dropped my glance, feeling strongly how totally unable I was to sustain the insulting suspicion I had so plainly expressed.

"I scarcely should think that," he replied, after a moment's pause. "Many persons heard the man call out; I saw them looking out of the windows, and such a warning as that would scarcely improve their chances of catching the thief. No, Mr. Hartley; shrewdly as you guessed, I think this time you must be mistaken."

Taking in all the meaning there was in his words, I bluntly asked:

“What good would the warning do the thief? You do not mean that a man would jump off this express-train in the dark?”

“I mean,” he said, speaking between his teeth, and hissing out the words with suppressed vehemence, “I mean that a man, hounded on by despair, becomes reckless, desperate, and does not stop to think.”

“Tickets, gentlemen!” and the bright light from the conductor’s lantern fell full and sudden upon Brisket’s face. He turned quickly aside, but not before I had noticed an expression of such utter, reckless defiance as filled me with fear and dread.

“Tickets, gentlemen, if you please!” repeated the conductor, in a slight tone of impatience. Mr. Grant awoke from a doze, and fumbled for his ticket, while Brisket and I handed out ours—his hand steady, mine visibly trembling.

“Through to Washington?” asked the conductor, and, being answered in the affirmative, handed us each a pink way-ticket, saying: “Now you won’t be disturbed.”

He opened the rear door to see if any one stood on the platform and then returned to the forward car.

Mr. Grant examined his ticket carefully, and turned to me.

“This is some new dodge,” he said, sleepily. “What do all these figures mean?”

I did not answer at once, and he turned to Brisket with the same inquiry. But Brisket didn’t know either.

“There are ten numbers, I see,” said I, examining the ticket carefully, for I had never noticed it before, “and they are all below thirty. They must represent the days of the month; and, sure enough, to-day is the 16th, and the 16 is punched through.”

“That’s so,” chimed in Grant; “and I suppose they have blue and yellow tickets with the other days, so as to change them every day. But I don’t see, now, what the object is.”

“It must be in order to prevent fraud in some way,” I suggested.

“Something like these new-fashioned checks that have all the hundreds and thousands printed along the edge, and you cut out the amount with a punch, besides writing it in ink. Not much chance of a forgery with those.”

“Pooh!” interrupted Brisket; “they are no protection against forgery. Not one man in twenty would take the trouble to compare the amounts.”

“Now, gentlemen, if you’ll allow me, I’ll put up this bed,” said the colored waiter-boy, putting his head in at the door.

“Is this *your* state-room?” asked Brisket, abruptly rising. “I am afraid we have kept you waiting.”

I stood in the passage-way, while the boy prepared the couch, filled, with suspicion no longer, but with the certainty, that Brisket had committed some great crime. I felt almost certain that he had been guilty of forgery, and I had a strange, inexplicable foreboding that I was in some way mixed up with it. My eyes involuntarily followed him, as he retired to his couch, which was only the third from my own, and I noticed that he lay down fully dressed.

I threw off my coat and vest and lay down, hoping to gain a few hours’ sleep. But it was a hopeless undertaking. The couch seemed unusually hard and uncomfortable, and the pillows soft and clammy, and the noise seemed greater than usual, and the air in the car more close and stifling. It was impossible to sleep. And then this mystery about Brisket. Why was he so startled when I said I had looked for him on the train? Why should he fear me? Why his terror at the mention of the police? Why should a peaceable man go armed? for I was certain that he carried a revolver, and that he was feeling for it when “police” was called the second time. And what had I to do with it? That his crime was forgery, was the merest surmise; and even by forgery, how could I suffer? His transactions with us were all of the simplest kind. We received no check of his, or, indeed, any one else’s, without having it certified; and, if there had been any unusual transaction, I felt certain that, short as the time was that I spent in Wall Street, I should have been told of it. And Frank was so cautious!—But, hark! what was that? It sounded like the click of a pistol, and the sound seemed to come straight from Brisket’s couch. I raised myself up and stealthily opened the door of my state-room. Not a sound was stirring in the car, save the usual rattle of the train. The curtains before Brisket’s bed were not drawn close, and I could see his arm lying quietly across his chest, the diamond-ring upon his little finger shining steadily in the dim light of the lamp overhead. I sat upright and watched and listened; but not a sound, not a motion. I began to think I was very foolish, and that I was working myself into a great excitement upon a very slender foundation. How could I, amid that noise, have heard or distinguished the click of a pistol? It was nonsense. I would think no more about it, but try to sleep. I threw back the door of my state-room on to the catch which held it open, so as to get more air, and, thinking of my wife and children at home, tried to forget Brisket.

I fell asleep, and dreamed endless dreams of mystery and danger and dread. At last I was travelling across an arid plain, somewhere in Mexico. It was fearfully hot, and we had been for days without water. I was parched, but I bore up as well as I could, and pushed on, on, in hopes of reaching water to save my little boy, whom I carried before me, and who was delirious with fever and thirst. Then we were suddenly in the cars again, and I knew there was water, precious, cold ice-water, right behind me, that would save my boy; but someone was running toward it with intent to spill it on the ground. With a desperate effort I threw myself across his path, and caught him by the throat, and I awoke.

My dream, so far, was true; I had caught someone by the throat; but I was on my knees, struggling to rise, and he had a pistol at my head, and hissed into my ear: “One single word, and I fire. Don’t make me commit murder, too. I do not intend to escape.”

It was Brisket. My hands fell by my side. I rose with difficulty to my feet. We were standing in the passage-way of the car, in front of my state-room. My eye ran along the whole length of the car. No one stirred. The train was running at a high rate of speed; the car swayed wildly to and fro, and the noise was tremendous. No one had seen or heard what had happened. That was at first my only thought; and then, for a moment or two, I was almost unconscious, so sudden and extraordinary was the effect of my situation.

“Get your hat,” he said.

I obeyed mechanically.

“Here,” and he helped me on with my coat, the revolver still close to my face.

“Now, let us step out on the platform and talk.”

He gently pushed me ahead. As I passed the water-cooler, I was reminded of my thirst. I stepped aside to let him pass. He misinterpreted my movement, and clutched my arm with a force that I should have little thought him possessed of. “No nonsense, now,” he said; “you are at my mercy now, not I at yours, and you must let me have my say.” I pointed to the water, and he, in turn, motioned me to take the cup, while with his left he turned the faucet, still holding the pistol in his right. I drank a long refreshing draught, and, as I drank, somewhat recovered my scattered thoughts. Why did he want me on the platform? My life he could have taken before. I had even a better chance on the platform than inside the car; for, despite the unexpected strength he had shown, I knew I was three times as strong as he, and, somehow or other, his pistol did not alarm me. Without a tremor, I stepped on to the platform in advance of him.

The night was dark. I had no idea where we were. The train was running fast. The car, being the last on the train, swayed tremendously. The noise was deafening. I clung to the rail, and pulled my hat down over my face, but without taking my eyes off Brisket’s revolver. With the utmost coolness, he asked me to smoke; but I declined. He did not smoke himself; but, perching himself upon the rail, with his feet twisted round the stem of the brake, quietly began:

“You are a young man, Mr. Hartley, very young to do so large a business as you are doing. I am old enough to be your father. I bear you no ill-will. I suppose you only do what you are advised to do. At the same time, it seems to me, that you have been ill-advised. It would have been far better to have arrested me quietly in New York, instead of attempting to follow me, and dog my footsteps day and night. What do you expect to gain by it?”

I was about to answer, that I did not know what he was talking about, but quickly reflected that I might find out more by being silent. He evidently did not expect to get an answer, for he hurried on:

“If you expected to get any money by following me, you are mistaken. The money was gone long ago. Gone a year ago and more. It went, sir, loyally, patriotically, sir, what there was of it. Not that there ever was much of it. But, what little there was, went in supporting the government,

the credit of the country—went in doing my share toward keeping down the price of gold. When gold went to a hundred and twenty last July, sir, I was busted higher than a kite. It was the greatest joke you ever saw. Without one cent of money, I subscribed for three hundred thousand dollars' worth of five-twenties, and my credit was as good as new. I bought them for investment, you know," and he nudged me with his elbow. "I needed thirty thousand dollars to pay on account. Those I borrowed on my individual note, with my office boy's indorsement. Oh! New York is a glorious place. Such fools! And the way they keep it up! Why, if you once get one good look behind the scenes, you need no more. I tell you, half the houses up-town and down-town are bankrupt, rotten shells, living on their credit, sir—as I did. Why, I tell you, sir, it makes a man a rogue almost, to merely think of it. When I was an honest young fellow, making my way in the world with my own little money, I was nobody. As soon as I lost a little money of my own, and went it strong on other people's, I at once became the great house of Brisket, Moss & Co. Oh, the farce! And, do you think, the people inside don't know it? Why, of course they do. It's that that keeps us all up. Many a time I've come down in the stage, in the morning, with half a dozen of 'our most eminent, most highly respected merchants,' smiling, dignified, the picture of eminent solvency—bankrupt, sir, every d—d one of them, if the world only knew it. And do you suppose they didn't know where I stood? Why, of course they did. But, when my paper came up in their bank, didn't they swear they knew I had a quarter of a million of governments as an investment! and, when their paper came up in my bank, didn't I swear ditto. Do you suppose such eminent men are bank directors for nothing? Not, by a long shot! You are young, Mr. Hartley; you may be a bank director yourself, one of these days. Take my advice, sir, don't go back on your friends! But don't hold too much stock in your own bank, that is to say—with your own money. It don't pay over-well—on the stock, that is—it pays moderately well otherwise."

I listened in amazement. Was this Brisket? The man I would have sworn by? Whose paper would sell at eight per cent in the sharpest note-offices in the city? Was it not all a dream? No! there he sat, calm and imperturbable, with just enough of the devil in his eye to make it glisten in the darkness. There was the track stretching out behind us in the dim distance, the red lamp on our car throwing back a stream of dull, blood-red light, that showed the rails and ties, and even the gravel-filling, with the utmost distinctness; but all the color of blood. The locomotive had just blown for the brakes; I scented salt-water air; the train was slowing.

"It's Havre de Grace," he said, pausing for an instant, while the locomotive screeched; "we are behind time. Yes, sir; bubble! bubble! Our boasted wealth is all a bubble. Commercially speaking, we are rotten to the core! Oh! the quiet laughs I have had when people would come and beg my paper of me, and grave, wise, shrewd bank presidents, hat in hand, ask me for my account, and half you Wall-Street men bow and scrape to me as though I had all the treasury at my back. Gad, if I had wanted to, I could have made it millions, instead of tons of thousands. But I never believed in big figures. I only wanted my own money back, and, by thunder, I would have had it, hadn't it been for that fool Chase." He paused a moment and then went on: How refreshing the breeze is. You see, our car, is the last to get on the boat. We shall have the air all the way across. But, as I was saying, fools as they are down-town, up-town in our houses they are a caution. Why, I have gone home many a time intending to tell my wife that I was ruined and must give it up; but, before I could commence, she had to tell how it was all the talk, at Mrs. Greatcheek's luncheon, that I had made so much money, and that it was mean she shouldn't have a new coupé; or, how attentive young Nabory was to Gracie, ah! poor, poor Gracie, what will she

say? See, how the water eddles, now we turn to run up against the tide. It is running out fast. How long, think you, it will take to reach the sea? But Gracie will be reconciled. She has her own baby now, I never liked it much. But my little lame Meg—you do not know Meg, sir—she thinks I am right next to God Almighty. I could have faced all, but for her. See, that is the light-house down the bay; it is more than seven miles from here. She knows it. She is in weak health. She will soon follow me. And you, Mr. Hartley, you will soon be a bank director. Take my advice, ha! ha!”

With one leap, he reached the deck of the boat, jumped across the chain—a flash—a shot; he fell upon the deck, rolled over, and—was gone.

It was the work of an instant; but I followed so quickly, that even in the darkness I caught sight of his hat and face as he was swept away by the rapid, surging tide. The ferry-boat was stopped for an instant. A boat was lowered. Two deck-hands, urged on by my description of the valuables he had about his person, risked their lives in the darkness. But the body was never recovered. In his berth were found a variety of letters and papers, which, as I after-ward learned, explained his position and announced his intention. What had induced him to select this spot, was never known. I imagine it was in some way associated with his beloved daughter Meg, who, as he had said, survived him but a few short months.

I proceeded no farther toward Washington, but returned to New York by first train. My firm had paid him, that afternoon, a hundred thousand dollars in gold, and received, in payment, a certified check for nearly one hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The rest of that Sunday and Sunday night were anxious hours. The teller of the bank, who could have told whether the check was good, lived out of town.

Monday morning came. The check was not good. The certification was a forgery—was one of a dozen committed by Mr. Brisket. The financial and social community went into a spasm of horror, and the house of Hartley, Frank & Co. suspended payment.

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