

*The Trap*  
by William Russell

BEFORE the telegraph came into use, the counterfeiters—or “horse-dealers,” as they call themselves—drove a much better trade than they do now. When they had started a good bill it would run two or three days—or a week even—before the public generally would find it out. But now-a-days, since we have had the telegraph all over town, they find themselves brought up with a short turn. Deputy Carpenter has arranged a plan which spoils their fun completely. Just as soon as information is received at any station that a counterfeit has been offered, that station communicates directly with headquarters, giving a description of the bill; from headquarters the news is telegraphed immediately to every station in the city; the patrolmen are called in, the captain or sergeant reads the description to them, and they go back at once to their beats and warn all the shopkeepers—in fact every body likely to receive money in business—that such a bill is out. So, in an hour after the counterfeiter starts a new bill, the whole island is on the look-out against it. I’ll tell you a good story how one country “horse-dealer” got “took in.” It was while I was with Chief Matsell—say about ten years ago.

A messenger came down, late one afternoon, from one of the uptown wards, asking me to come up and see if I could recognize a couple of fellows they had arrested on suspicion. They couldn’t find any bad bills on them, but thought they might have disposed of them in some way while being arrested: they have plenty of ways of getting rid of the stuff when they find it dangerous. Well, I had worked a good deal among counterfeiters, and they thought I might know them; so I went up. I took a look at them through a hole in a curtain—they hadn’t been put in the cells, but were detained in the sitting-room—and I thought I’d seen them somewhere; still I couldn’t fix them. However, I determined to know more about them before they were let go, and it didn’t take me long to arrange a little plan that worked first-rate.

They were told that somebody had been sent for to recognize them, and that he couldn’t come till morning; so they must make themselves comfortable in “hock” over night. They swore a good deal about it first—declared they’d make trouble for anybody that turned a key on them—but, finally, they submitted, as of course they had to. But before they were taken down to their cells I had had the gas turned down pretty low, and had also got myself a cell comfortably arranged between the two selected for them. The door of my cell was left a little on the swing, as if nobody was in it, and when they were brought down they were hustled into their cells so promptly that they hadn’t a chance to look into mine as they went by; besides, I was under the bunk, my head toward the door, and an old coal basket hid the end. There was no one else in the cell, and I arranged with the sergeant that, if any came in during the night, they should be put in the cells at the other end of the corridor. It was a quiet ward—never many arrests or lodgers. I told the doorman to be about just as usual, stir the fire, etc., but to be upstairs a good part of the time.

Well it wasn’t long before my men began to talk; you know there’s only gratings at the doors.

“I say, Bill,” says one, “do you think there’s any body down here besides us?”

“No,” says Bill; “it’s too early yet.”

“I haven’t heard no one stir; have you?”

“No; I tell you it’s too early; there won’t be nobody brought in these two hours yet.”

“Well then, see here! put your mug close to the hole, I want to talk with you.”

“Mind you talk low, then; some of those sly ‘copp’s’ may come sneaking down here. I wish they’d put us next to each other—but if there’s any thing to say, you’d better spit it out now; there may be some one brought in before we think.”

“Well, Bill, this is what I want to say. This man they’ve sent for may know me. I can’t think who it can be but it may be some cus’d spy that’ll blow me higher’n a kite. Never mind that, though; I’ve got to stand my chance, but they can’t hold you. You haven’t been with us long enough to be ‘spotted’ yet. They’ll have you up before the ‘break’ in the morning, but there won’t be nothing against you, and you’ll step out free.”

“I hope so!”

“I know so! they can’t hold you. And now I want you to do a little job for me. Can you hear if I talk lower?”

“Yes my ears are quick.”

“Well, there’s a man coming to town tomorrow from Orange county, somewhere, to buy ‘horses.’ We don’t know him by sight, but he has got the signs from Joe—he’s been out there; and I was to meet this man tomorrow night at the Tammany Hotel, and sell him all the ‘horses’ he wants. Dear me, there comes the doorman! How long did you live in Boston?”

“About a year. Hullo! here’s the doorman! I say, doorman, can’t you get us some supper?”

They gave orders for some supper and as soon as the doorman was gone, they began again. Bill says:

“Talk fast there, our time’s short!”

“Well, I want you to go there, and meet this man for me. Take him round to the old man’s and make as good a trade as you can.”

“But I don’t know the signs.”

“D—n it? No, you don’t; I forgot that. I wish I was sure there wasn’t nobody down here but us.”

“Well,” says Bill, “I haven’t heard the least sign of a noise any where round; have you?”

“No; I’ll risk it. He’s a new customer, and mustn’t come and find nobody to entertain him. Well now, listen careful! As you go into the hotel, just on the stroke of nine, mind you, take off your hat—it must be a beaver—and scratch the top of your head. He’ll see you, for he’ll be looking for you at that time, and he’ll take out a red handkerchief, and blow his nose loud; you’re then to go along by him and show him the two-finger sign—you know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And he’ll return it, and then you begin talking as you see fit.”

“All right; I’ll manage it for you. Is the old man all posted?”

“Yes, he’ll be all ready.” The two rascals had just time to complete their arrangements before their supper came in; and it was lucky that they had, for there happened to be an unusual number of arrests that evening, and the cells were so filled up that they could hardly have managed to talk if they had put it off.

I passed out while they were eating their supper, not taking any care to escape their notice.

“By thunder!” says Carter, the older one, as soon as he saw me. “V’you been in there all the time we’ve been talking? I say, Bill, here’s officer—been hearing every word we’ve said. He’s been in the cell between us all the time.”

There was any amount of cursing, swearing at themselves and me; and their luck. They’d been neatly sold and had nobody to blame but themselves. They needn’t have been fools enough to talk out their secrets in such a place. Carter offered me five hundred dollars to let them off; but I told him I couldn’t do it; said I was afraid he’d put off bad money on me. I told him I’d give him something for the “two-finger sign;” but says he,

“No, you don’t! You’ve got enough!” Then he asks me if I am going to meet the Orange county man.

“Of course I am,” says I.

“You’d be a fool if you didn’t,” says he; “and you’ll pump the bloke well, I’ll be bound! Was there ever such an unlucky, foolish piece of business as this!”

They were to keep these two precious rascals at the station till I called for them; and I went away and got ready to meet my country customer.

Just as the City Hall clock struck nine I walked into the office of the Tammany Hotel, took off my hat and scratched my head, carelessly looking round as if I wanted to find some one. I was charmed to see, right off, a regular country greeny take out his big red handkerchief; he blew his nose so hard that I thought he'd blow it off, and I wanted to laugh so to think how he was going to be "done," that I really had to turn away to hide my face. This was the moment when I wanted the two-fingered dodge; but as I hadn't got it, I must get along without it. I walked along by the place where country was sitting, and as I passed by him I stooped down to pick up something, and whispered:

"We're *watched!* Follow me out!"

The greeny got up and followed, and I led him to a low drinking-place, where I knew there was private rooms, just out of Chatham street, and there we had a talk. I pretended to be very cautious and asked him boldly if he was prepared to give me the finger sign. He showed it to me at once—this way: the little finger, and the one next to it, on the left hand, stuck out straight, and the other two held down by the thumb.

"All right," says I. "What kind of horses do you want to buy—the light or the dark?"

"Well," says he, "I think the darks travel best, don't you?"

"They *sell* best," says I; "but I never *drive* myself."

"Why, Joe told me that you were one of the best drivers he ever saw."

"Well, the fact of it is, the man who was to meet you—and he is a good driver—has had to leave town for a few days, and he sent me to trade with you. Did Joe give you his name? Carter, wasn't it?"

"Yes, 'twas Carter. It's all the same to me, as long as you trade fair. If I can find a *good* dark at thirty" (that is, thirty cents on the dollar), "I'm your man."

"How do you like that?" says I, and handed him a first-rate counterfeit "V" on one of the River banks. I'd got it only the day before from a woman that tried to push it off in Canal street, at a milliner's.

He looked it over carefully.

"*That's* the ticket," says he; "I want a pile of that."

"Well," says I, "come round with me to the old man's, and I can get you as much as you want. Ever been there?"

“No,” says he, “I never been to York but once before, for all I’ve lived so near.”

“Well, come along. Follow me a little ways off; but come close up if I whistle.”

“All right!” says he, and we started.

It was about half-past ten when we came out, and it was snowing fast and furious, and my man knowing scarcely any thing about the city, I gave him a few turns round the neighborhood, out past the hall of Records, and into the City Hall by a back door, through the dark passages—he following like a dog—and finally, right into the Chief’s private office!

“Old man,” says I, giving the Chief a wink, “here’s a customer for some dark horses. Can we accommodate him?”

“I presume so,” says the Chief.

“Make him the sign,” says I to greeny; and out he stuck his two fingers, almost in the Chief’s face. I never wanted to laugh worse in my life. The Chief was “fly,” and held up his two fingers in the same way.

Well, they two bargained for some “horses” at “thirty,” and the chief was just going to open his drawer to take out the bills, as it seemed, when he looks up and says to greeny:

“Do you know where you are, my friend?”

“Well, not exactly,” says he, looking round; “I—suppose—I’m—”

“I’ll tell you,” says the Chief. “You are in the office of the Chief of Police!”

I sat down in a chair by the door, and let out *my* laugh. I couldn’t help it. I laughed till I ached, and the Chief laughed too.

“No you don’t!” says greeny.

“You can’t come that game over *this* child! I suppose you want to scare me; but you’ll find I ain’t so green as I look. It’s a high old joke, but you can’t scare *me*.”

Well, sir, we could not convince that man that he *was* in the Chief’s hands till I took him and locked him up in the cells. *Then* he began to believe it and he took on, I tell you.

He proved just the man we wanted. We used him up completely; got evidence to convict Carter, and Bill, and Joe, and two others, and then we let him go on his good behavior.

I guess he hasn’t been to town to buy *horses*, since the Chief *sold* him that *dark* lot.

Russell, William. *Strange Stories of a Detective; or Curiosities of Crime*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1863.