

Tally-ho Thompson

A Story of the London Detective Force

From Dickens' *Household Words*

by Charles Dickens

“Tally-ho Thompson,” says Sergeant Witchem, after merely wetting his lips with his brandy and water, “Tally-ho Thompson was a famous horse-stealer, couper, and magsman. Thompson, in conjunction with a pal that occasionally worked with him, gammoned a countryman out of a good round sum of money, under pretense of getting him a situation—the regular old dodge—and was afterward in the ‘Hue and Cry’ for a horse—a horse that he stole, down in Hertfordshire. I had to look after Thompson, and I applied myself of course in the first instance to discovering where he was. Now Thompson’s wife lived along with a little daughter, at Chelsea. Knowing that Thompson was somewhere in the country, I watched the house—especially at post time in the morning—thinking that Thompson was likely to write to her. Sure enough one morning the postman comes, and delivers a letter at Mrs. Thompson’s door. Little girl opens the door and takes it in. We are not always sure of postmen, though the people at the post offices are always very obliging. A postman may help us, or he may not, just as it happens. However, I go across the road, and say to the postman, after he has left the letter, ‘Good morning! How are you?’ ‘How are you?’ says he. ‘You’ve just delivered a letter for Mrs. Thompson.’ ‘Yes, I have.’ ‘You didn’t happen to remark what the postmark was, perhaps.’ ‘No,’ says he, ‘I didn’t.’ ‘Come,’ says I, ‘I’ll be plain with you. I’m in a small way of business, and I have given Thompson credit, and I can’t afford to lose what he owes me. I know he’s got the money, and I know he’s in the country, and if you could tell me what the postmark was, I should be very much obliged to you, and you’d do a service to a tradesman in a small way of business that can’t afford a loss.’ ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I do assure you that I did not observe what the postmark was; all I know is, that there was money in the letter; I should say a sovereign.’ This was enough for me, because of course I knew that Thompson, having sent his wife money, it was possible she’d write to Thompson by return of post, to acknowledge the receipt. So I said ‘Thankee’ to the postman, and I kept on the watch. In the afternoon I saw the little girl come out. Of course I followed her. She went into a stationer’s shop, and I needn’t say to you that I looked in at the window. She bought some writing paper and envelopes, and a pen. I think to myself, ‘That’ll do!’—watch her home again, and don’t go away, you may be sure, knowing that Mrs. Thompson was writing her letter to Tally-ho, and that the letter would be posted presently. In about an hour or so, out came the little girl again, with the letter in her hand. I went up, and said something to the child, whatever it might have been; but I couldn’t see the direction of the letter, because she held it with the seal upward. However, I observed that on the back of the letter there was what we call a kiss—a drop of wax by the side of the seal, and again, you understand, that was enough for me. I saw her post the letter, waited till she was gone, then went into the shop and asked to see the master. When he came out, I told him, ‘Now, I’m an officer in the Detective Force; there’s a letter with a kiss been posted here just now, for a man I’m in search of; and what I have to ask you is, that you will let me look at the direction of the letter.’ He was very civil—took a lot of letters from the box in the window—shook ’em out on the counter with the faces downward—and there among ’em was the identical

letter with the kiss. It was directed, 'Mr. Thomas Pigeon, Post Office, B———, to be left till called for.' Down I went to B——— (a hundred and twenty miles or so) that night. Early next morning I went to the post office; saw the gentleman in charge of that department; told him who I was, and that my object was to see and track the party that should come for the letter for Mr. Thomas Pigeon. He was very polite, and said 'You shall have every assistance we can give you; you can wait in side the office; and we'll take care to let you know when anybody comes for the letter.' Well, I waited there three days, and began to think nobody ever would come. At last the clerk whispered to me, 'Here! Detective! Somebody's come for the letter!' 'Keep him a minute,' said I, and I ran round to the outside of the office. There I saw a young man with the appearance of an ostler, holding a horse by the bridle, stretching the bridle across the pavement while he waited at the post office window for the letter. I began to pat the horse, and that; and I said to the boy, 'Why, is this Mr. Jones' mare!' 'She an't Mr. Jones' mare, anyhow,' says he; 'It's Mr. So-and-so's, of the Warwick Arms.' And up he jumped and off he went—letter and all. I got a cab, followed on the box, and was so quick after him, that I came into the stableyard of the Warwick Arms by one gate just as he came in by another. I went into the bar, where there was a young woman serving, and called for a glass of brandy and water. He came in directly, and handed her the letter. She casually looked at it without saying any thing, and stuck it up behind the glass over the chimney piece. What was to be done next?

"I turned it over in my mind while I drank my brandy and water (looking pretty sharp at the letter the while) but I couldn't see my way out of it at all. I tried to get lodgings in the house, but there had been a horse fair or something of that sort, and it was full. I was obliged to put up somewhere else, but I came backwards and forwards to the bar for a couple of days, and there was the letter, always behind the glass. At last I thought I'd write a letter to Mr. Pigeon myself, to see what that would do. In the morning (a very wet morning it was) I watched the postman down the street, and cut into the bar just before he reached the Warwick Arms. In he came presently with my letter. "Is there a Mr. John Pigeon staying here?" "No!— stop a bit though," says the barmaid; and she took down the letter behind the glass. "No, says she, 'it's Thomas, and he is not staying here. Would you do me a favor, and post this for me, as it is so wet?" The postman said Yes; she folded it in another envelope, directed it, and gave it him. He put it in his hat, and away he went.

"I had no difficulty in finding out the direction of that letter. It was addressed, Mr. Thomas Pigeon, Post Office, R———, Northamptonshire, to be left till called for. Off I started directly for R———; I said the same at the post office there, as I had said at B———; and again I waited three days before anybody came. At last another chap on horseback came. "Any letters for Mr. Thomas Pigeon?" "Where do you come from?" "New Inn, near R———." He got the letter, and away *he* went—at a canter.

"I made my inquiries about the New Inn, near R———, and hearing it was a solitary sort of house, a little in the horse line, about a couple of miles from the station, I thought I'd go and have a look at it. I found it what it had been described, and sauntered in, to look about me. The landlady was in the bar, and I was trying to get into conversation with her; asked her how business was, and spoke about the wet weather, and so on; when I saw

through an open door three men sitting by the fire in a sort of parlor, or kitchen; and one of those men, according to the description I had of him, was Tally-ho Thompson!

“I went and sat down among ’em, and tried to make things agreeable; but they were very shy—wouldn’t talk at all—looked at me, and at one another, in a way quite the reverse of sociable. I reckoned ’em up, and finding that they were all three bigger men than me, and considering that their looks were ugly—that it was a lonely place—railroad station two miles off—and night coming on—thought I couldn’t do better than have a drop of brandy and water to keep my courage up. So I called for my brandy and water; and as I was sitting drinking it by the fire, Thompson got up and went out.

“Now the difficulty of it was that I wasn’t sure it was Thompson, because I had never set eyes on him before; and what I had wanted was to be quite certain of him. However, there was nothing for it now but to follow, and put a bold face upon it. I found him talking, outside in the yard with the landlady. It turned out afterward that he was wanted by a Northampton officer for something else, and that knowing that officer to be pockmarked (as I am myself), he mistook me for him. As I have observed, I found him talking to the landlady outside. I put my hand upon his shoulder—this way and said, ‘Tally-ho Thompson, it’s no use. I know you. I’m an officer from London, and I take you into custody for felony!’

“We went back into the house, and the two friends began to cut up rough, and their looks didn’t please me at all, I assure you. ‘Let the man go. What are you going to do with him?’ ‘I’ll tell you what I’m going to do with him: I’m going to take him to London tonight, as sure as I’m alive. I am not alone here, whatever you may think. You mind your own business, and keep yourselves to yourselves. It’ll be better for you, for I know you both very well.’ I’d never seen or heard of ’em in all my life, but my bouncing cowed ’em a bit, and they kept off, while Thompson was making ready to go. I thought to myself, however, that they might be coming after me on the dark road, to rescue Thompson; so I said to the landlady, ‘What men have you got in the house, Missis? You have got an ostler, I suppose?’ ‘Yes, we’ve got an ostler.’ ‘Let me see him.’ Presently he came, a shaggy-headed young fellow he was. ‘Now attend to me, young man,’ says I; ‘I’m a Detective Officer from London. This man’s name is Thompson. I have taken him into custody for felony. I am going to take him to the railroad station. I call upon you in the Queen’s name to assist me; and mind you, my friend, you’ll get yourself into more trouble than you know of, if you don’t!’ You never saw a person open his eyes so wide. ‘Now, Thompson, come along!’ says I. But when I took out the handcuffs, Thompson cries, ‘No! None of that! I won’t stand them! I’ll go along with you quiet, but I won’t bear none of that!’ ‘Tally-ho Thompson,’ I said, ‘I’m willing to behave as a man to you, if you are willing to behave as a man to me. Give me your word that you will come peaceably along, and I don’t want to handcuff you.’ ‘I will,’ says Thompson, ‘but I’ll have a glass of brandy first.’ ‘I don’t care if I have another,’ said I. ‘We’ll have two more, Missis,’ said the friends; ‘and confound you, constable, you’ll give your man a drop, won’t you?’ I was agreeable to that, so we had it all round, and then my man and I took Tally-ho Thompson safe to the railroad, and I carried him to London that night. He was

afterwards acquitted, on account of a defect in the evidence; and I understand he always praises me up to the skies, and says I'm one of the best of men."

New Hampshire Statesman, October 25, 1856

Evening Star [Washington, D.C.], October 20, 1856

The Cecil Whig [Cecil County, MD], October 31, 1868

This story was excerpted from "The Detective Police" in *Household Words*, July 27, 1850; the introductory, orienting narrative is missing, and there is a second narrative, "The Butcher's Story" that is not included.