

SPLENDID HOLIDAY NUMBER!

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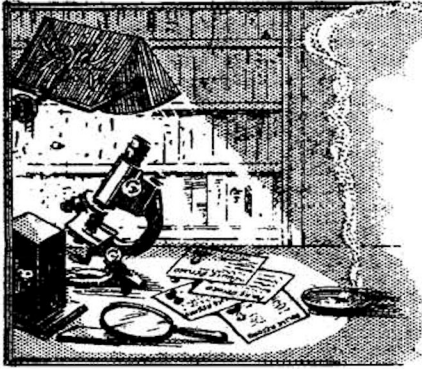
Aug. 6, 1921.



SOMETHING WRONG WITH STRINGER'S COOKING!

See the Magnificent Story of "STRINGER and Co."—Inside.

Another Splendid, Long Complete Story of Ferrers Locke, the Great Detective, and his Assistant, Jack Drake.



THE HIDDEN MESSAGE!

A Grand, Long Complete Detective Story introducing Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake.

BY OWEN CONQUEST.

A Strange Visitor!

FERRERS LOCKE opened a draw in his desk, took from it a small but serviceable revolver, and examined it attentively. Jack Drake glanced at his chief.

There had been a ring at the door of the house in Baker Street; the sound had penetrated faintly into the detective's private cabinet.

Locke appeared unconscious of his boy assistant's surprised glance. He finished his examination of the revolver, and replaced it in the drawer, leaving the latter, however, half open, and the weapon ready to his hand.

Then he looked up, and met Drake's glance with a smile. "I am expecting a caller, Drake," he said. "A caller of a rather unusual kind in this house."

"You wish me to remain, sir?"

"Certainly. I want you to make the acquaintance of Count Sazineff."

"A Russian nobleman?" asked Drake.

"Once upon a time," smiled Ferrers Locke. "At the present time, one of the most dangerous criminals in Europe. He has asked me for the interview. I was quite willing to grant it. His object I do not know at present, but it is necessary to be upon one's guard in dealing with a gentleman like the count. Ah, he is here!"

The door opened, and Ferrers Locke's Chinese servant, Sing-Sing, appeared, ushering in the visitor. Drake's eyes turned curiously upon the newcomer.

He saw a young man, barely thirty, rather tall and slim in build, and clad in fashionable elegance. His face was dark, clean-shaven, handsome in feature, his eyes black and full of lustre. Only a certain hardness of the lines, a sardonic curl to the lip, marred what would have been a strikingly handsome face. A rimless monocle glimmered in his right eye.

The count hardly glanced at Jack Drake; he advanced towards Locke, and bowed gracefully. Sing-Sing noiselessly closed the door. Locke rose to his feet.

"An unexpected pleasure, count!" he remarked.

"You had my note?"

"Yes; but the pleasure of seeing you here, under my roof, is unexpected," said Locke. "Will you be seated?"

Drake placed a chair for the visitor, who sat down, and crossed one elegant leg over the other. His manner was perfectly easy and graceful, and Drake, with the detective's words still in his ears, could not help regarding the man with interest and astonishment.

He would have taken Count Sazineff for a wealthy man about town—a lounge in fashionable clubs; certainly not for a criminal, and a dangerous one.

"You are surprised, of course, Locke," continued the count, speaking in perfect English, and without the trace of an accent. "We are, of course, enemies. Between the bloodhound of the law and the quarry he hunts, there can scarcely be even a truce."

"Which makes your call all the more surprising," said Ferrers Locke, his keen eyes on the dark face before him.

"If you are thinking, count, of any desperate attempt to rid your trail of the bloodhound you refer to, I warn you that such an attempt here would be desperate indeed."

The count shrugged his shoulders.

"I am no fool, Locke."

"All the better," said Locke, unmoved. "And now, count, to business."

Count Sazineff made a gesture towards Drake.

"What I have to say is for your private ear alone, Locke."

"My assistant is completely in my confidence," answered Ferrers Locke. "You may proceed."

The count turned his head slightly, and fixed his dark eyes full upon Drake, as if studying the boy. Then he smiled as he turned to Locke again.

"So that is your new assistant, Locke?"

"You know—"

"We know a great deal," said the count. "We keep a wary eye upon so dangerous an enemy as Ferrers Locke. But to come to business, as you suggest; I care not if the boy is here. I am going to be frank with you, Locke, and I will ask the same of you in return. For several weeks now you have been working against us. In more than one direction I have discerned your hand. Are you working in conjunction with Scotland Yard, or unofficially and independently?"

"At present, unofficially and independently," answered Locke.

"Your reason, then, for taking a hand against us?"

"My reasons are my own," said Locke, drily.

"I have a proposition to make to you."

"Now we are getting to business," said Locke, with a nod.

"Leave us to ourselves," said the count. "You are meddling in affairs that do not concern you, Locke, and they are dangerous affairs to meddle in. You are not commissioned by the police to track us, you have no personal interest in the matters. You are risking your life—for what? Nothing."

"I have risked it before, and I am still here, count."

"Believe me," said the count, "you are running the greatest risk in your career, Locke. We do not want you for an enemy. We should be glad if you would go your way, and let us go our own. Cannot we agree to a truce? I have a great admiration for you, Locke; I have followed your career with interest. I should be sorry to harm you, but if you come in my way, one of the most interesting careers of modern times must come to an end."

"If you have come here to threaten me, count, you are wasting your breath. Is there anything else?"

"It is well known," said the count, "that Ferrers Locke is a man of his word. We ask only your word."

"Not to take a hand against you?"

"Exactly."

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"If I gave my word, I should keep it," he said. "I am scarcely likely to give it, count. I will be frank with you. In a short time I hope to have proofs enough against you to place the handcuffs on your wrists. There is still time for you to abandon a life of crime. That is the best offer I can make."

"How good," said the count, rising. "Well as I know you, Locke, I had never suspected you before of such a gift of humour. So it is war?"

"If you choose."

"Circumstances may arise," said the count, "in which you will be willing to give the pledge I ask."

"Who can foretell the future?" said Ferrers Locke. "But I do not think it likely."

The count's glance lingered on Jack Drake for a second. Then he bowed to Locke.

"Adieu!" he said.

Ferrers Locke touched a bell, and Sing-Sing conducted the visitor to the door. The hum of a motor was heard in the street. Count Sazineff was gone; and he left the detective in an unusually thoughtful mood.

Trapped!

JACK DRAKE sat in a boat on the lake in Regent's Park, pulling idly at the oars. Regent's Park was within a short walk of Ferrers Locke's quarters in Baker Street, and it was one of Drake's favourite resorts in his leisure hours. On this pleasant, warm July afternoon, Drake was taking it easy. It was a week or more since Count Sazineff's visit to Baker Street, and Drake was

thinking of anything but the count at that moment, and his boat drifted idly on the shining water.

He was thinking, indeed, of Greyfriars, and of sunny afternoons on the Sark with his chums there. His thoughts were interrupted by a call from a skiff.

"Hallo, there!"

Drake looked round quickly.

The occupant of the skiff was a lad in messenger's uniform, and it was he that had hailed the boy detective.

"Hallo," answered Drake, wondering what the stranger wanted.

"Is your name Drake?"

"Yes."

"Then you are the bloke I want," said the lad. "I've been looking up and down the lake for you for 'alf-an-hour. I've got a letter for you."

Drake drew his boat alongside the skiff. He concluded that it was a message from Ferrers Locke, and that he was wanted.

"Hand it over," he said, laying in his oars.

The boy tossed him an envelope.

Drake caught it and opened it quickly. There was a brief note inside, in the small, clear caligraphy Drake knew well.

"Return at once. Important.—F. L."

"When was this given you?" asked Drake, glancing at the messenger, who was whistling shrilly.

"Nearly an hour ago," answered the lad. "Gent says I'll find Master Drake somewhere about the lake here, and tells me to take a taxi to the park. I've been asking 'arf-a-dozen blokes if their name was Drake."

Drake smiled.

"Right-ho," he said. "Have you kept the taxi?"

The messenger jerked his thumb towards the road.

"Told 'im to wait there," he said. "Can't come any nearer. I'm going back in it. I've got to be paid for my time."

"Come on, then," said Drake.

He took his oars, and rowed quickly back to the landing place. The messenger followed in his skiff, and they landed together.

Drake hurried away after giving up the boat, and the messenger followed at a more leisurely pace. Drake looked round at him impatiently.

"Hurry up!" he exclaimed.

"What's the 'urry?" inquired the boy.

"If you're coming in the taxi, you'll have to look sharp. I've got to get along at once," said Drake.

"Oh, all right."

The messenger quickened his pace, and they hurried on together. On the road the taxi was waiting.

"Ere you are," said the messenger. "Jump in, sir."

Drake gave Ferrers Locke's address quickly to the chauffeur, and jumped into the taxi, and the messenger jumped in after him and closed the door. The taxi buzzed quickly away towards the exit from the park.

Warm as the day was, the taxi was closed, and both the windows were shut. Drake put out his hand to the strap to lower the window on his side.

As he did so, there was a sudden and unexpected movement on the part of the messenger boy.

Drake was gripped by the collar, and dragged back into his seat. The attack was so sudden, and so unexpected, that he fell back helplessly. As he was turning, in astonishment and wrath, upon his assailant, a cloth was thrown over his face.

He gasped and choked. The cloth was damp, and thick with a pungent odour. Drake's senses reeled.

He struggled savagely to remove the cloth, but it was held firmly, and the two struggled, half on the seat, half on the floor of the cab. But the struggle was brief.

The fumes of the drug were overcoming Drake's senses. He realised, dimly, that he had been trapped—he knew that he was being chloroformed. He struck again and again at his assailant, and his clenched fists crashed on him, the blows answered by grunts of pain. But an arm was round his neck, and heedless of the fierce blows the assailant kept the cloth firmly jammed over his face.

Drake's resistance died away as his senses swam. He sank back helplessly, though for a minute more he resisted feebly. Then his consciousness left him.

He lay still and senseless, and the assailant at last removed the cloth from his face. Drake's face was white and set, his eyes closed.

"Gee!" muttered the young rascal, as he stared at the unconscious face. "That's done it." He spoke through the speaking-tube, quickly. "Sharp's the word, Larry. We've got to get him home before he comes to."

The chauffeur nodded, without turning his head. The taxi buzzed on.

Drake lay back in his seat unconscious, and his assailant glanced rather anxiously from the windows. But the brief struggle had passed unnoticed.

As the taxi glided out into the street there was nothing in Drake's look to excite suspicion. He was leaning back in the corner of the taxi as if asleep.

The taxi did not enter Baker Street. It passed through Dorset Square, and buzzed through Balcombe Street. Drake sat without movement or consciousness.

Street after street flashed by, and still the drugged boy did not move or open his eyes. The taxi stopped at last, and the messenger, after a searching look at Jack Drake, stepped out. The chauffeur looked round with a grin.

"All serene, Smiley?"

"Right as rain!" answered the young rascal. "Easiest job I ever took on for the chief."

He opened a gate, and the taxi glided up a gravel path, and stopped before the roomy porch of an old-fashioned house. The door of the house opened before the vehicle came to a halt.

A man stepped out—a handsome, dark-faced man, with a rimless monocle in his eye. Had Drake been conscious, he would have recognised Ferrers Locke's recent visitor—Count Sazineff.

"All serene, guv'nor," said Smiley, his cool, impudent manner changing to one of deep respect as he addressed the count. Count Sazineff nodded.

"Bring him in!" he said.

Smiley and the chauffeur lifted the unconscious boy from the taxi, and carried him between them into the house.

The Ransom!

FERRERS LOCKE glanced at the bronze clock on the mantelpiece, and frowned slightly. It was six o'clock.

Jack Drake was to have returned to Baker Street by half-past five; it was six now, and he had not appeared. Punctuality was a quality that Ferrers Locke required in his assistant; and this was the first time that Jack Drake had failed.

The telephone-bell rang, and Locke stretched out his hand to the receiver.

"Is that Ferrers Locke?"

The famous detective started a little, as he recognised the silky voice of Count Sazineff over the wires.

"Ferrers Locke speaking," he answered quietly.

There was a low laugh on the telephone.

"I have some news for you, Locke. You know my voice?"

"Yes."

"Has your boy returned yet?"

Locke set his lips.

"My boy?" he repeated.

"Your excellent young assistant, Drake. Is he safe under the shelter of your wing?" asked the mocking voice.

"Why do you ask?"

"True, the question is superfluous," said the count, mockingly. "For I know better than you where the boy is at present, Locke."



There was the sound of a footstep at the door; and Drake, acting almost without thinking, laid himself on the sofa again and closed his eyes. The door opened and two men entered the room. Drake heard one of them approach the sofa and bend over him. He could almost feel the keen scrutiny on his face. "Has he come round, Larry?" The silky voice was familiar to Drake.

"If you have dared to harm him—"

"There is little that we do not dare, my friend, as you should know well by this time," answered the count, coolly. "But the boy is not harmed yet. He is in our hands, that is all."

"I do not believe you."

"Keep your disbelief, my friend. If he does not return to-night, you will know that I have spoken the truth. The boy is in our hands, and will remain there for the present. Whether you ever see him again depends entirely on yourself?"

"In what way?"

"You remember my visit, and what I asked of you?"

"I remember."

"If you give the pledge I asked of you, the boy will return home, safe and sound. That pledge is his ransom."

"And if I do not?" asked Ferrers Locke calmly.

"In that case, I fear that you will never see Drake again," said the count, mockingly. "I shall be sorry. I know that you are attached to the boy. But war is war, my dear Locke. I fear that if you are obstinate, one more body will be taken out of the Thames, and you will be called upon to identify your boy assistant."

"In which case, Count Sazineff will be hanged by the neck until he is dead," said Ferrers Locke.

The count laughed.

"I think not. You will not find me so easily, my friend. And even so, what proof will there be of a connection between my humble self, and a body 'found drowned' in the Thames. A talk on the telephone? Bah! Do you agree to my terms, Locke?"

"No. I require proof, first of all, that he is in your hands, and at your mercy," he said.

"You shall have it. And then?"

"Then I shall consider."

"You desire to gain time," chuckled the voice on the telephone. "Take all the time you desire, Locke. I have no objection. To-morrow you will receive a letter from Drake, explaining his position to you. Later, I shall ring you up, and ask you your decision. You understand?"

"I understand."

"In the meantime, you will make every effort to trace the boy. I am very well aware of that. You are welcome. I do not think we have anything to fear even from Ferrers Locke in twenty-four hours. Adieu, my friend!"

Ferrers Locke rang up the Exchange at once. Giving his name, which was well known there, he asked for the number of his late interlocutor. He expected little from the inquiry, but it was not his way to neglect the slightest chance. As he expected, he was told that he had been rung up from a public call office. He put down the receiver, and returned to his chair. There was a dark frown on his brow.

He did not doubt, for one moment, that the count's statement was correct, and that Jack Drake had fallen into the hands of the desperate gang of criminals, of which the count was the leading spirit. It was war between the criminal and the crime investigator; and the count had begun by carrying the war into the enemy's camp. There was only one man in London that Count Sazineff feared, and that man was Ferrers Locke. Once the famous detective was pledged not to intervene, the count would feel himself safe, and that pledge was to be the ransom of Locke's boy assistant.

For a short time Ferrers Locke sat thinking the matter out, quietly. To give the required pledge was impossible; but he felt a chill at the thought of Drake's fate, if he was still in the count's hands when the inevitable refusal was spoken.

He quitted the house at last; and for the next few hours he was busy. He learned a good deal, though it did not aid him in tracing Drake. The boatkeeper in the park recalled having seen the messenger boy, who had gone out in a skiff, and had come ashore with another boy who had taken a boat out earlier—who answered to the description of Drake. They had gone away together.

Locke, who was aware how Drake had intended to spend his afternoon, easily divined that the boy had been watched, and followed to the park; and that somehow he had been decoyed by the lad dressed as a messenger. Drake had fallen into the trap—probably a cunning one—a false message, or a false letter, or something of the kind.

Locke did not give up hope immediately, and luck favoured him further. He found a park-keeper who had seen the two boys getting into the taxi. But that was all. From that moment both had vanished.

That it was not an ordinary taxi, but a motor kept by the count for his own purpose to look like one, Locke did not need telling. It was useless to inquire for the taxi.

He left the park at last with a knitted brow. The taxi had vanished into the desert of streets—whether, north, south, east, or west, there was no clue.

Somewhere in the great city Jack Drake was a prisoner in the hands of Count Sazineff, and his life hung in the balance. But where?

Drake's Discovery!

JACK DRAKE opened his eyes. His head was aching; he groaned slightly as he lifted his hand to his burning forehead.

He was lying on a sofa in a well-furnished room, of which the windows were covered with thick curtains, subduing the light that filtered in. It was still broad summer daylight without; but in the room it was dusky.

Drake lay for some minutes, trying to collect his thoughts. He stared about him dizzily in the room. He was alone there. He sat up at last, and there was a faint clink of metal. He felt a jerk on his ankle, and looked down.

A fine but strong steel chain was locked round his ankle, and the other end locked to the heavy leg of the sofa. That article being too heavy for the boy to move unaided. He was a prisoner; but the length of the chain allowed him to move about the room if he wished.

Back in his dazed mind came the remembrance of the struggle in the taxi; of the chloroform that had stolen over him and deprived him of his senses. His mind began to clear. He had been trapped; the letter in Ferrers Locke's handwriting was a forgery, that was certain now; and he had fallen into the clutches of some enemy of the famous detective. That much was certain; and the chain locked to his ankle was proof that his captors did not mean to run any risks with him.

He pulled himself together, and rose from the sofa, the chain clinking a little as he did so.

His first thought was to discover where he was, if possible; though the fact that he had been left alone in the room indicated pretty clearly that there was nothing for him to discover.

He found that the chain did not allow him to reach within two yards of the window. He approached as nearly as he could; but the thick curtains barred the view. Outside the sun was shining, and through the curtains he could make out, dimly, the branches of a large tree; that was all. He could only ascertain that there was a garden without; that the window did not look upon a street.

The furniture in the room was of a massive but ordinary kind; a large mahogany table, several chairs, a big roll-top desk, which was locked, and one or two other articles. On top of the roll-top stood a telephone, and Drake would have given worlds to reach it. But the length of the chain kept him two yards away from the instrument. He examined the chain hurriedly, but though fine it was strong enough to hold a bull; there was no possibility of breaking it or getting loose.

The boy's head was still aching, and his heart was heavy. The motive of his captors he could not even surmise; but he knew that they must have some powerful motive for the trouble they had taken. He had no enemies; but Ferrers Locke had many; through him they hoped to strike at the famous detective; so much he could guess.

He set his teeth grimly.

If the kidnapers hoped to make use of him against his chief, there was a disappointment in store for them. Drake was not of the stuff of which traitors are made.

He sat down on the sofa again, and pressed his hand to his brow. If he could only have reached the telephone, but the thought was vain, for if he could have reached it, his captors would not have left it there. He examined it with his eyes, but there was no number mark on the instrument.

There was the sound of footsteps at the door; and Drake, acting almost without thinking, laid himself on the sofa again in his earlier position, and closed his eyes.

His plan was to sham unconsciousness until he had seen whom he had to deal with, in the hope of finding out something about his captors, and where he was imprisoned.

The door opened, and two men entered the room. Drake heard one of them approach the sofa, and bend over him. He could almost feel the keen scrutiny on his face.

"Has he come to, Larry?"

The silky voice was familiar to Drake, but he gave no sign. He knew now in whose hands he was.

"No, count, he's still inensible."

"Smiley made a thorough job of it, while he was about it," said the count, with a laugh. "I hope he did not go too far. The boy is more useful to us alive than dead."

Drake felt a hand glide over him.

"His heart is beating, count."

"Good; he will come to, soon. There is plenty of time for the letter to be written."

The man Larry moved away from the sofa. Drake heard the two men seat themselves, and he ventured to open his eyes a trifle, and peer at them through the lashes. The smell of a strong cigar came to him.

The count had seated himself in an arm-chair near the window, and was smoking a cigar. Drake could see his well-cut profile clearly against the light. The man Larry, whom he recognised as the chauffeur of the taxi, sat on a corner of the big table.

Count Sazineff smoked quietly and contentedly. He seemed to be in an excellent humour.

"I will give the boy until I have smoked this cigar," he said. "Then if he has not come to, I will apply restoratives. Ma foi! His letter must reach Locke by the first post in the morning."

"You have 'phoned to Locke, count?"
 "Yes, and he affects not to believe that the boy is in our hands." The count smiled. "He will be convinced when he receives Drake's letter."

"And you think he will give you his word?" said Larry Burke doubtfully.

The count shrugged his shoulders.
 "I hope so. If he refuses, he will never see the boy alive again. It will be one of his assistants gone, in the struggle between us that is coming; so much to the good."

"That's true."
 "If this scheme fails, we shall deal with Locke himself," resumed the count. "It will be a more difficult task; and I would prefer to muzzle him with his pledge not to intervene. But we shall see. Get the writing materials ready for the boy when he recovers."

Larry Burke unlocked the roll-top desk, and laid paper and envelopes on the table. Through his half-closed lids Drake watched him.

"A single sheet will answer the purpose," said the count. "We do not want to send Mr. Locke our address, Larry."
 Burke chuckled. Drake watched, his heart beating. He understood that the notepaper the man had lifted from the desk was engraved with the address of the house. Where the house was, Drake had not the faintest idea; but he could guess that it was one of the count's numerous retreats, where the master criminal passed under an assumed name.

Larry Burke took up a paper knife, and cut through one of the double sheets of notepaper. The second sheet, upon which, of course, nothing was engraved, was to be used for Drake's letter.

As Larry removed the detached top sheet, Drake's eyes fell upon it, for one second, but one second was enough.

In that second he read the engraved address in the top right-hand corner of the sheet.

Glenwood, Waidgrove Road,
 Shepherd's Bush.

Leaving the single, unmarked sheet on the table, Larry replaced the rest in the desk, and re-locked it.

The count finished his cigar, smoking in a leisurely way. He threw the stump into the grate at last, rose to his feet, and yawned.

"Now for the boy," he said.
 He crossed over to the sofa. Jack Drake's eyes were closed again, and he lay motionless and seemingly unconscious.

Bending over the boy, the count shook him roughly by the shoulder. Drake gave a faint moan.

"He's coming to," grinned Larry.
 "Bring some water, Burke."

Drake felt water dashed over his face. He opened his eyes, and stared wildly at the count.

"Where am I?" he gasped, faintly.
 Count Sazineff laughed lightly.

"Do you not remember me?" he asked, stepping back for the boy to get a full view of him.

Drake blinked at him.

"I—I think I remember you," he said faintly, playing his part well. "You—you called on Mr. Locke last week."

"Exactly. You remember my name?"

"A—a foreign name, I think," stammered Drake.

The count laughed again.

"Ma foi! Either the drug has stupefied our young friend, or Ferrers Locke had chosen a fool to be his assistant. I am Count Sazineff, Master Drake. Do you remember me now?"

"Yes," gasped Drake. "Did—did you have me brought here?"

"I did."

"What for?" demanded Drake, sitting up.

"To make some use of you, my young friend," said the count lightly. "Do you see that paper on the table, and the pen and ink?"

"Yes."

"You are to write a letter to Ferrers Locke, which I shall seal and post," said the count. "Tell him anything you like, but tell him that you are in the hands of his enemies, and that unless you are ransomed, in the way he understands, you have only one more day to live. Tell him that if he values your life, he is to insert an advertisement in the personal column of the 'Daily Mail' on Friday morning, in these words: 'I give my pledge.' Do you understand?"

"I understand!" breathed Drake.

"Do as you are bid, then."

"Never."

"Never is a long time," drawled the count. "I think you will do as you are commanded, Drake. You see the chain that is attached to your leg? Would you care to have it twisted round your forehead until your eyes burst from their sockets?" The black eyes glittered at the boy. "Do you think you can trifle with me? I shall leave you here now—and I will return in a few hours. If the letter is not then written, you will wish for death as the greatest boon that can fall upon you."

Without waiting for an answer the count turned away, and quitted the room, Burke following him. The door closed, and Jack Drake was alone again.

The Hidden Message!

THE daylight was fading, and Jack Drake sat at the table, pen in hand—thinking, thinking.

The effects of the drug had worn off now; Drake's head was clear, and he had never been cooler or more collected.

Though the count's savage threat had sent a chill to his heart, it had not shaken his nerve, or damped his courage.

Ferrers Locke had shown his usual judgment when he had selected Jack Drake for his confidential assistant. Young as he was, Drake had the courage to face even death in the service of the famous detective. Not for a moment would he have moved a hand against Ferrers Locke, to save himself from torture and death in the house of the master of crime.

He was thinking—thinking hard. He knew the address of the house he was in—Glenwood, Waidgrove Road, Shepherd's Bush, was engraved upon his memory. His trick of feigning unconsciousness had served him well, so far; he knew where he was, and if he could but convey that knowledge to Ferrers Locke, rescue would be possible; at least, Nemesis would be on the track of the count and his confederates.

He had to write to Ferrers Locke, to tell him of the danger he was in; and the letter, of course, would be read carefully by the count before it was posted.

Unless its wording satisfied Sazineff, the letter would be destroyed, and Drake would be commanded to write another—with torture in the background in case of a refusal.

It was evident that the count expected him to make an appeal to his master, and such an appeal would not have been without weight. Keen as he was, Count Sazineff did not realise the undaunted courage and steady determination of the boy detective. No threat would have induced Drake to write the letter, but for the hope that by its means he might convey information to his chief.

The room grew more and more dusky as the sun sank lower. The door opened suddenly, and Larry Burke came in. He glanced grimly at Drake.

"Have you written the letter yet?"

"No."

The ruffian switched on the electric light, and drew the blinds over the window. Then he came towards the table where Drake sat.

"The count is not an easy man to trifle with," he said. "I advise you, for your own good, to have the letter written by the time he comes back. Write, you young fool, if you value your skin."

Drake dipped his pen in the ink with a trembling hand. There was no fear in his heart—only bitter anger and grim determination. But he had already resolved upon the part

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he was to play, and it was his cue to appear scared by the count's threats.

"If—if I write to Mr. Locke, will you let me go?" he stammered.

"That depends on Ferrers Locke," grinned Burke. "I don't think he's the man to leave you to your fate. But if you don't write the letter, you heard what the count said."

"Did he—did he mean—"
"Every word of it," said Burke grimly. "This room has seen things of that kind before, my boy. You would not be the first. If you've any sense, you'll do as you're told. Once that chain is round your head—twisted—"

"After all," said Drake, as if arguing with himself, "there's no harm in writing to Mr. Locke. I—I think I—I've a right to make an appeal to him. It's for him to decide."

"You're getting a bit more sensible, I see," said Burke, with a sneer. "Get on with it."

Drake started with "Dear Mr. Locke." He paused. He had already decided, in his own mind, what he would write—the letter was composed and imprinted upon his memory—but it suited his purpose to appear to be making it up slowly and reluctantly under the ruffian's eyes.

There was a footstep, and the elegant figure of the count stood in the open doorway.

"Well?" he said laconically.

Drake quivered.
"I—I'm writing," he panted. "I—I was only waiting for the light to write by."

The count laughed genially. Never was there a picture more lifelike than that displayed by Drake at that moment.

"I thought you would come to your senses, my boy," said Count Sazineff. "I will smoke a cigar while you write. If you are not finished by the time I throw my cigar away, I pity you. You will be ready with the chain, Burke."

"You bet, guv'nor."
Drake's pen moved rapidly over the paper, and the two rascals exchanged a grin. The letter ran:

"Dear Mr. Locke,—When you get this miserable letter, I half expect you will not please this wicked man by obeying his order. Only if you do not, he will kill me. Advertise on Friday in Personal Column, 'Daily Mail.' I give my pledge. Remember I am only fifteen. This villain means to execute his threat. Remember that I only left school a month ago. Don't try to search for this house, you couldn't ever find it. Please, Mr. Locke, have pity and end my imprisonment. Rescue is impossible. Don't try it, sir: I shall be killed. Relying upon your kindness, sir,

"I remain, hopefully,

"JACK DRAKE."

Larry Burke burst into a loud chuckle as he read the

letter over Drake's shoulder, and his chuckle was echoed by the count, as Burke read the letter aloud to him.

"Ma foi! We shall see what Mr. Locke says when he has read that!" chuckled the count. "He will not leave a boy of fifteen to die—especially one who whines to him for pity." The count threw a sardonic glance of contempt at the boy sitting at the table. It was evident that that piteous letter was all that he desired, and more, perhaps, than he had expected to obtain, even by his savage threats. "Give him an envelope to address, Burke."

Drake silently addressed the envelope to Locke's house in Baker Street.

Count Sazineff examined both the letter and the envelope: not because he suspected any trick, for Drake's assumption of fear and apprehension had quite deceived him, but from the habit of caution.

But there was nothing written on either letter or envelope save what the count's keen eyes had already seen.

Drake's heart beat quickly as the count folded up the letter, to place it in the envelope.

For a moment he scarcely breathed.

That there was a hidden message in that apparently piteous and terrified letter, had evidently escaped the count and his confederate.

Drake could scarcely believe in his good luck.

That Ferrers Locke would read the letter aright he felt almost certain; and, in any case, it had been his only chance, and he had used it. Many a time since Drake had entered Locke's service, the two had studied cryptograms and secret ciphers together, Drake learning all he could from the experience of his chief. He depended upon Ferrers Locke not taking the letter at face value, but divining that there was a hidden message in it, and searching until he found it. Upon that Drake's life depended.

His anxiety was so intense, as the count folded up the letter, that it made him feel quite faint, and the colour faded out of his cheeks. He leaned heavily on the table, breathing in a gasp.

The count looked across at him, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"Pull yourself together, boy," he said mockingly. "You have nothing to fear, at least, until Ferrers Locke has answered this letter. I cannot believe that he will leave you to die."

He damped the gum of the envelope, and closed down the flap. Drake leaned his face in his hands, fearful that his looks would betray the joy he felt that the message was safely going on its way.

"A miserable coward!" said the count, contemptuously. "His death would be no great loss to Ferrers Locke, I should imagine. But Locke seems attached to the boy, and coward as he is, he will serve our turn."

Sazineff stamped the letter, and rose.

(Continued on next page.)



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THIS WINS OUR TUCK HAMPER. OH, FOR A PUNCH!

"You are lying, sir," said the little man calmly. "What?" roared the big man, who was just twice his size. "Do you dare to tell me that, you poor, puny, little whipper-snapper?"

"I do!" was the defiant reply. "And if you speak another word, you hulking great lump of pork, I'll cut you short!"

"Cut me short, you cheese-mite!" shouted the enraged giant, clenching his big fist.

"Yes; so here goes!" snapped the poor, puny, little whipper-snapper. And even before the burly one could utter another word, he hung up the telephone-receiver.—Tuck Hamper filled with delicious Tuck has been awarded to Donald Carmichael, 22, Abbotsford Place, Glasgow.

His Biting Reply.

Schoolmaster: "Jones, how do you tell the age of a fowl?"
John Jones: "I can always tell by the teeth, sir."
Schoolmaster: "Nonsense, boy! A fowl has no teeth!"
John Jones: "No, sir, but I have!"—Money Prize awarded to James Robertson, 11, Union Street, Kilmarnagh, Ayrshire.

THE HIDDEN MESSAGE!

(Continued from previous page.)

"I will take this myself," he said. "It must be posted in another district, of course. Get out the car, Larry."

Burke left the room, and the count lingered to speak a few words to Drake.

"You will sleep here," he said. "I will have food sent to you. I do not mean to starve you. Sleep on the sofa to-night as well as you can. And you may pray that Ferrers Locke's pledge may appear in the 'Daily Mail' on Friday; if it does not, your blood will be on his head."

Count Sazineff shrugged his slim shoulders scornfully, and quitted the room, closing the door after him.

Then Drake rose from the table.

The apprehension was gone from his looks, there was no trace of fear about him now that he was alone. He smiled grimly as he looked at the door that had closed behind the count.

"You scoundrel!" he muttered. "Once the letter is posted—if you only knew the message you are carrying, you villain."

A few minutes later Drake heard the buzz of a motor without. Count Sazineff was on his way to post the letter, in another district, so that the postmark should not give a faint clue to the detective, little dreaming that concealed in the wording of the letter itself was all the information that Ferrers Locke would need.

Jack Drake slept uneasily on the sofa that night, the chain on his ankle clinking when he moved. He had already realised that escape was impossible; all depended on Ferrers Locke and the chance of rescue. The light of dawn penetrated the windows at last, and Larry Burke brought him breakfast. In the presence of the ruffian Drake assumed the apprehensive manner that had already deceived his captors.

"Is there an answer from Mr. Locke yet?" he asked, in a quavering voice.

Burke laughed gruffly.

"The letter's not delivered yet," he grunted. "Do you think it would go by special messenger, you young fool?"

"But—but Mr. Locke will get it this morning?"

"First delivery," said Burke.

"And—and then—"

"To-day's Thursday," said the ruffian. "If the message appears in the 'Daily Mail' to-morrow morning, you're safe. If not—" He shrugged his burly shoulders, and quitted the room without finishing the sentence.

Drake breathed hard.

Ferrers Locke had one day to work in. Surely that was enough for the famous detective; surely it would not take him long to read the true meaning of Drake's letter, and to act upon it!

Keeping up Tradition!

First poet: "What became of your poem entitled 'The Lost Cat'?"

Second poet: "It promptly came back."

First poet: "Well, name your next effusion 'The Borrowed Umbrella,' and you can stake your life it will not be returned."—Money Prize awarded to C. Gibbs, 22, Hannell Road, Fulham, S.W.6.

Slightly Misunderstood.

An exceedingly stout school-mistress, anxious to convey some idea of the relative sizes of different countries.

"Cambodia is just about as large as Siam," she said. "Will you all make a note of that in your exercise-books?"

One girl produced this piece of information in a written exercise as follows:

"Cambodia is just about as large as our teacher!"—Money Prize awarded to K. Hanson, 17, Westry Street, Sheffield.

That Razed the (H)air!

Husband (shaving): "Bother this confounded razor!"

Wife: "Whatever's the matter now, Jack? You seem dreadfully ill-tempered this morning!"

Husband: "This razor is abominably dull!"

Wife: "Dull? Why I ripped up three of my old carpets with it yesterday, and it cut beautifully!"—Money Prize awarded to Walter Lynch, 8, Greenhough Street, Ancoats, Manchester.

The minutes dragged by on leaden wings. The sun rose higher—light glimmered through the curtains in the dusky room where Drake waited wearily. The house was very silent. Once or twice he heard a footstep pass the door of the room where he was confined; that was all. It was about half-past ten when there was a sudden commotion in the building, and Drake's heart leapt in his breast as he heard it. Hurried footsteps sounded in the passage outside the room, and he heard the count's staccato tones demanding what was the matter; and the reply came in Burke's gruff voice—startled and shaken with alarm:

"The police!"

There will be another of these splendid detective stories next week. Get next Tuesday's "Boys' Herald," and see what happens to Jack Drake.

STRINGER & CO.'S STRANGE MISSION!

(Continued from page 8.)

Next morning Jack left the precious wallet with the local bank, and the Norchester fellows amused themselves with some cricket practise on the heath during the day.

The wallet was duly handed to Derrick Trent at Ruthwelly House at eight o'clock that evening. Roger, a handsome, bronzed young fellow, was there with the detective, the lawyer, and the witnesses.

Major Carfew did not put in an appearance. Subsequent inquiries proved that the unscrupulous manager and secretary had decamped with the contents of the factory safe. Derrick Trent merely smiled.

"Leave him to me," he said. "I'll have the bracelets on him in a week, Jack. Everything now is in Roger's hands, and Carfew's plans have been entirely upset—thanks to you, Jack, and your chums."

Jack Denyer laughed.

"We've had a jolly exciting time," he said, "and excitement, you know, is one of the things that keeps us fellows alive."

"Hear, hear!" boomed Stringer. "Things would have been very tame in Petrol Villa had it not been for Nick Scudd and his merry confederates!"

"Not to mention your cooking, Stringer, you coughdrop!" laughed Monty Selhurst.

The Norchester fellows departed in their motor-caravan from Ruthwelly the richer by £1,000. That went to swell the club funds, and to pay the expenses of the caravan tour. So, on the whole, they had plenty to congratulate themselves upon. What reprisals the Garratt Alley Gang took remained to be seen.

Another splendid, long complete story of Stringer & Co. in next week's "Boys' Herald." Don't miss it!