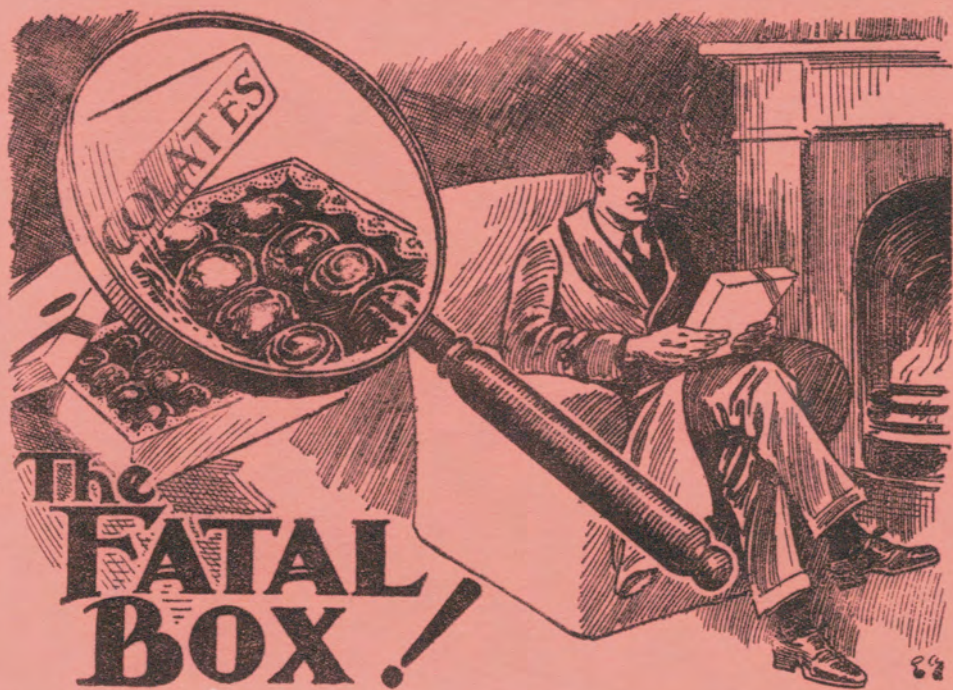


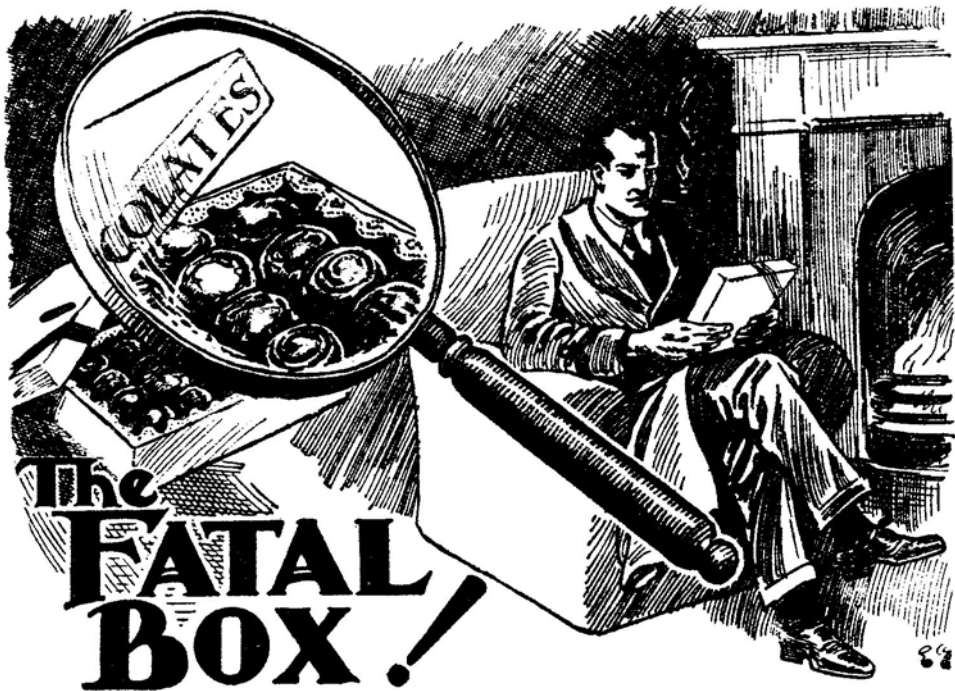


By
OWEN
CONQUEST

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Ferrers Locke by an unknown enemy
merely gave the famous detective a
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THE FATAL BOX !

By Owen Conquest



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CHAPTER I UNDER SENTENCE !

FERRERS LOCKE, the famous detective, glanced at the card Jack Drake, his youthful assistant, placed before him, and read :

" Mr. Albert Gurney."

" Shall I show him in, sir ? " asked Drake.

" One moment, Drake. Keep the door closed."

" Yes, sir," said Drake, in surprise.

Ferrers Locke stretched out his hand to the writing-table, and took from a recess a bottle of red ink.

Drake watched him silently, in growing amazement.

The Baker Street detective dipped a quill in the ink, and placed a single spot on the palm of his right hand.

Then he replaced the ink-bottle in its recess.

He glanced up with a smile, catching Drake's amazed eyes upon him.

"I seem to have surprised you, Drake?"

"Ye-e-es, sir," stammered the boy detective. "I—I don't quite see——"

"What would you have supposed had happened, Drake, if you had not seen me handle the ink-bottle?"

"I should suppose you had pricked your hand, with a pin or something," said Drake.

"And that that was the resulting spot of blood?"

"Yes."

"Exactly. That is a natural supposition, Drake. Now show in Mr. Albert Gurney."

Jack Drake went out of the consulting-room, greatly astonished. But the boy detective was too well-trained to allow his astonishment to show in his face. His look was calm and sedate as usual when he showed in the visitor.

A little man, with a dark skin and very bright watchful eyes, entered the famous detective's consulting-room.

Ferrers Locke rose from his chair. He brushed his right palm with his handkerchief as he did so, leaving a faint red streak across the cambric.

"Good-morning, Mr. Gurney!"

"Good-morning, Mr. Locke!" The visitor's bright eyes were on the handkerchief. "You have had an accident, Mr. Locke?"

"Nothing to speak of," said Ferrers Locke with a smile. "Pray be seated. You wished to see me——"

"You must excuse my calling so early in the morning, Mr. Locke. The matter is so pressing," said Mr. Gurney. "I hope I have not interrupted you in dealing with your morning's correspondence?"

"I had just finished," said Ferrers Locke. "But how can I serve you, Mr. Gurney. You have called——"

"Yes, let us come to business," said the visitor. "I know that your time is very valuable, Mr. Locke. I have called with reference to the affair of the brothers Stapleton."

Ferrers Locke raised his eyebrows.

"There was a Stapleton, the poisoner," he said. "I was instrumental in sending him to penal servitude for twenty years."

"That was Richard Stapleton," said the visitor. "He had two brothers—Albert and Maurice."

"I am not acquainted with them," said Ferrers Locke, "and I really fail to see——"

"I will explain. Stapleton, the poisoner, was condemned on evidence chiefly accumulated against him by you, Mr. Locke. But for you he would probably have escaped. As it was he barely escaped hanging."

"That is correct," assented the detective.

"His brothers are greatly attached to him," said the visitor, his bright eyes watching Locke's face. "They are determined that somehow Richard Stapleton shall not remain in a convict prison."

Ferrers Locke smiled.

"I think they will be disappointed," he said. "Stapleton's guilt was clear, and it was my own opinion that he had confederates—in all probability the brothers you allude to. There was no proof of this, however, at the time. Richard was undoubtedly the most dangerous of the three, and society is safe from him now. The turn of the others will doubtless come."

"Possibly. But their view is that you may be induced to intervene in favour of the convict."

"That is not likely."

"They have a powerful inducement to offer."

Ferrers Locke shrugged his shoulders.

"Your intervention, Mr. Locke, would save the prisoner," said the visitor. "It was you who substantiated the case against him, but a lingering doubt existed, as he escaped the death penalty. If you should inform the proper authorities that you made a mistake——"

"I made no mistake."

"That certain facts which you mentioned at the trial now appear to you to be unfounded——"

"We are wasting time, Mr. Gurney."

"The inducement they offer you is a large one," said Mr. Gurney.

"Not money—you are well known to be indifferent to such considerations—but your life itself, Mr. Locke."

"My life is not in danger so far as I am aware," the Baker Street detective smiled. "Neither do I believe that either of the Stapleton brothers would venture to use knife or pistol, Mr. Gurney."

"There is a still more deadly weapon, and more in their line," suggested Mr. Gurney.

"Poison?"

"Yes."

"You are very good to warn me." Ferrers Locke pressed the handkerchief into his palm again, and the bright watching eyes of the visitor glittered.

"You are in pain?" he said.

"It is nothing."

"An accident with a penknife?" asked Mr. Gurney sympathetically.

"Oh, no! It is a trifling matter," said Ferrers Locke. "I received by the post this morning a small bottle from some unknown correspondent. The screw stopper was very stiff, and there must have been some sharp point on it. That is all."

The visitor smiled.

"That is all I wished to know," he said. He glanced round, to make sure that no one else was in the consulting-room. Then he leaned towards the famous detective, his eyes glinting. "That bottle was sent you by me, Mr. Locke."

"Indeed!"

"I am Albert Stapleton."

"The brother of the poisoner whom I sent to penal servitude?" said the Baker Street detective calmly.

"Exactly! On the screw stopper of that bottle was a tiny point, and the stopper was intentionally stiff. In turning it you were certain to prick your hand with the tiny point. You follow me?"

"Certainly!"

"That tiny point was impregnated with a deadly poison, known only to the Stapleton brothers, and to certain natives of Java, who use it for the tips of their arrows. No antidote is known in this country."

"The antidote is known only to three persons—Richard Stapleton, whom you have sent to prison, and Maurice and myself." The visitor leaned farther forward. "Unless you agree to save Richard Stapleton from prison, Mr. Locke, you are a dead man within thirty minutes."

"Really?" Ferrers Locke was quite calm.

"You think I am bluffing? You have a constitution of iron, but it is coming."

"Not at all," said Ferrers Locke. "I do not think you are bluffing. I think, though, that you have confessed to having sent this poisoned bottle to me, and that you will be charged with attempted murder, and sent to join your rascally brother in a convict prison."

"You cannot frighten me," said Stapleton contemptuously. "We are alone here. Where are your witnesses? And in twenty-five minutes more you will be a dead man, unless you come to my terms."

Ferrers Locke tapped on the writing-table lightly.

It was a signal. The door of a Japanese lacquer cabinet opened, and a figure in uniform stepped out. Stapleton started to his feet.

"Here is your prisoner, Inspector Heath," said Ferrers Locke tranquilly. "You heard all that was said?"

"Every word, Mr. Locke."

The Scotland Yard inspector advanced towards Stapleton, the handcuffs in his hand. The dark-skinned man leaped to his feet, his eyes were blazing.

"Better take it quietly," said the inspector, with a grin. "Wrists, please!"

There was a moment's struggle, and then the handcuffs clicked on the wrists of the would-be poisoner.

He turned his eyes, blazing with rage and hatred, upon the Baker Street detective.

"So you guessed and laid a trap for me, Ferrers Locke?" he said, in a low, panting voice.

"Precisely."

"But you cannot save yourself," said Stapleton exultingly.

"Whatever may become of me you are doomed to a terrible death."

The Baker Street detective laughed.

"You do too much credit to my power of credulity, Mr. Stapleton."



Suddenly Ferrers Locke tapped lightly on the table. The door of a Japanese cabinet opened and a figure in uniform stepped out. "Here is your prisoner, Inspector Heath!" said Ferrers Locke.

My dear fellow, I am not so careless with articles that I receive by post. More than once a bomb has been sent to me. If I had not learned to take precautions, Mr. Stapleton, I should not have lived long enough to send your brother to Portland and you after him."

"You lie—you lie!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "I saw the spot on your hand, the scratch——"

"The spot, but no scratch," said Ferrers Locke. "And the spot, my dear fellow, was placed there from the red ink bottle a few moments before you entered.

There was a quiet chuckle from the inspector.

"You see," continued Ferrers Locke, "I made a very careful examination of the bottle. I discovered the tiny point on the stopper, and I made a careful examination of that in my laboratory. I found that it was poisoned. Then I knew all that I needed to know."

"I shall not fail next time!" gasped Stapleton.

"There will be no 'next time' for some years to come, I think," said Ferrers Locke tranquilly. "You have given yourself away very completely, Mr. Albert Stapleton. As soon as I recognised you as the poisoner's brother I concluded that you had come to see how your trick had worked. I confess that I did not then guess that you were thinking of imposing terms upon me for the release of a convict. Quite a cunning scheme if it had worked. But I am a very old bird to be caught with such chaff."

Jack Drake had stepped into the consulting-room. His face was startled as he listened to Ferrers Locke.

"Mr. Stapleton's own taxi waits below," added the detective. "It will serve to convey him from here. I think I had better come with you, inspector."

"I think so, Mr. Locke. Come, my man!"

Stapleton's eyes burned.

"You have me," he muttered. "But beware, Ferrers Locke, there is another, free, who will yet deal with you."

"I shall take my chance of that. Come!"

Jack Drake waited while the taxicab drove away with the inspector and his prisoner and Ferrers Locke. More than once the boy detective had seen his chief in deadly peril, but it was hard to realise that that sunny morning Ferrers Locke had escaped a terrible death in his own rooms by a hair's breadth. Only the habitual care and watchfulness of the famous detective had saved him.

CHAPTER II

LAI D LOW !

DURING the weeks that followed Jack Drake gave a great deal of thought to the case of the Stapletons. Albert Stapleton's trial and sentence came in due course, and the attempted assassin was sent to five years' penal servitude. But Drake's thoughts were of the third man—the avenger who lurked unseen, biding his time.

Ferrers Locke had escaped once, but would he escape when the third man struck, as he was sure to? That was a thought and a fear that haunted Jack Drake's mind—and never had he been so watchful, so keen, as during the weeks that followed.

So far as he could see, Ferrers Locke had dismissed the matter from his mind. The famous detective was busy, as usual ; and he seemed to be giving no thought to the third brother. And gradually, in the interest of successive cases, the matter grew dim in Drake's own mind, and he ceased to think of Maurice Stapleton—though the unknown man lurked, as it were, at the back of his mind, as a dark and threatening shadow.

And then—to drive away all remembrance of it—came Ferrers Locke's illness.

Locke was a hard worker, and he seldom gave himself a holiday that was not combined with business ; but he seemed made of iron. His illness, when it came, took Drake by surprise—it came so suddenly and so terribly.

Inspector Heath, of Scotland Yard, was breakfasting one morning with the famous detective and his boy assistant. The inspector desired to hear Locke's opinion of a baffling case of burglary on which he was engaged, and Locke had asked him to breakfast to discuss the matter. Over the eggs and bacon and coffee the discussion had gone on, Locke's observations as clear and lucid as usual ; and the inspector rose at last with a satisfied expression on his face.

" Many thanks, my dear Locke," he said. " I think you've made it fairly clear. Why—what——"

He made a hasty step towards Locke.

Ferrers Locke had sunk back suddenly in his chair, his chin on his breast, his hands hanging helplessly at his side. His coffee-cup had fallen, and the coffee streamed on the floor beside a cracked cup.

" Mr Locke ! " panted Drake.

He was by Ferrers Locke's side before the inspector could reach him. But Ferrers Locke answered no word.

His eyes, fixed and glassy, stared at the boy detective with no meaning in them.

" Good heavens ! He is ill ! " exclaimed Inspector Heath. " Locke, my dear fellow——"

He raised the inert figure of the detective in his strong arms, and laid him upon a couch.

Drake bent over him.

"Locke—Mr. Locke—speak—a word, for Heaven's sake!" he breathed.

The detective panted.

"A doctor—quick!"

Drake tore to the telephone.

He rang up Dr. Buxton, in Harley Street, and that gentleman promised to come at once.

Drake put up the receiver, and ran back to Locke. Inspector Heath stood beside Locke. The detective was sitting up now, his face drawn.

"He's coming, sir!" panted Drake. "Dr. Buxton—he will be here in a few minutes——"

Locke gave a low groan.

"Thank you, my boy!" His voice was faint. "He cannot help me, but let him come. Inspector, there is no need for you to delay—your duty calls you."

"But, my dear Locke, I cannot leave you like this——"

"You cannot help me; and I am in good hands. You are not a specialist in toxicology."

"Toxicology!" ejaculated the inspector. "You do not mean to say that you are poisoned, Locke?"

The detective smiled instead of replying.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the inspector blankly. "Locke, you——"

"The wariest bird is caught at last!" said Ferrers Locke faintly. "Good-bye, Heath, and good luck, in case we do not meet again. Drake, you will help me to my bedroom."

Inspector Heath went out of the house in Baker Street with a pale and troubled face. The tragedy he left behind him stirred him deeply, in spite of his professional hardihood. Ferrers Locke, the terror of evil-doers, laid low at last—and by the basest means—the victim of some cunning and ruthless criminal! It was not like the Scotland Yard inspector to display emotion; but his face was white now, and his features far from calm. And a man who lounged by the railings glanced at his face, and looked after him as he went down the street slowly, like one who has received a stunning blow. And the man—a man with a dark complexion and strangely gleaming

eyes—smiled, and lounged by the railings and lighted a cigarette. And he smiled again when a car dashed up to Ferrers Locke's door and Dr. Buxton leaped out and ran into the house with a haste that was almost undignified in so great a man.

Jack Drake met the doctor in the hall.

"Mr. Locke——"

"In his bedroom, sir," said Jack in a choking voice. "I—I'm afraid he is bad——"

"Take me to him at once!"

"This way, sir."

Drake showed the doctor into Locke's bedroom and then retired, waiting outside the door. He waited with an aching heart.

After what seemed an age, the door opened, and Dr. Buxton came out on the landing, with a grave, set face.

"I shall send a nurse immediately," he said. "You may go in, Drake."

"Is there hope?" panted Drake.



Inspector Heath went out of the house in Baker Street with a pale and troubled face, stunned by the dread blow that had befallen Ferrers Locke. A man who lounged on the pavement eyed the inspector keenly as he left.

"While there is life there is hope, my boy. I can say no more than that."

Drake tried to calm himself.

"Remain with Mr. Locke till the nurse arrives," said Dr. Buxton. "You may give him a little water to drink—nothing else. He is, of course, to see no one."

And the doctor hurried back to his car.

Drake entered the bedroom.

Locke lay still, with his face turned to the wall. He made no sound, no movement, and Drake wondered if he slept. He sat down silently, and waited and watched.

CHAPTER III

TRAPPED !

BUZ-Z-Z !

It was a ring at the bell below, but Drake did not heed it.

But a few minutes later Sing-Sing, Locke's Chinese servant, peered into the room, and signed to the boy detective.

Drake crept out silently to the landing.

"Man wantee see Massa Locke."

Drake made a gesture of impatience.

"He can see no one. Tell the man he is ill !"

"Me tellee. He say must see Massa Locke—he cure him !"

"Nonsense !"

"You speakee."

"Very well."

Drake gave a last glance at Ferrers Locke ; the still figure stretched in the bed had not moved. Then the boy hurried down the stairs.

A man was waiting in the hall, and at the first glance, Drake noted something familiar in the dark face and bright eyes. The man turned to him with a strange smile.

"You are Drake ?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I have heard of you." His eyes scanned the boy's white, drawn face, the eyes heavy with unshed tears.

"Mr. Locke is ill, and can see no one," said Drake. "You must go at once !"

"My name is Stapleton."

Drake started back.

That name told him all; he understood the familiarity in the man's appearance now. He resembled the visitor of a few weeks before—it was the third brother.

"Stapleton!" Drake's eyes blazed and his teeth came hard together. "I understand! You—villain—dastard—poisoner—and——!" He made a spring towards the visitor.

"Fool! I can cure your master!"

Drake stopped.

"Cure him?"

"I—and I alone!"

"You have poisoned him!" said Drake tensely. "I know now—your brother failed, and you—you——" He broke off. The third man had succeeded—Ferrers Locke lay in the shadow of death, at the mercy of the third brother.

"It is not for you to ask questions," said Maurice Stapleton easily. "Let me see your master! He is dying while we are talking here."

Drake's brain was in a whirl. His tortured feelings showed in his face, and Stapleton watched his varying expressions with a cool, cynical smile.

"I—I will speak to him!" panted Drake at last. "Sing-Sing, if I call, bring this man upstairs."

"Yes, Massa Drake!"

Drake hurried up the stairs again, and into Ferrers Locke's room. He bent over the motionless form on the bed.

"Mr. Locke, can you understand me?"

"Yes," came a faint whisper.

"You remember—you remember what you told me of the Stapletons—the third brother?" muttered Drake.

"Yes."

"Maurice Stapleton has come. Shall you see him? He—he says he can save your life," breathed Drake.

The still figure stirred.

"Let him come up, Drake! It can do no harm." Ferrers Locke turned his head, and the ghastly white of his face startled Drake,

and brought a sob to his throat. "Calm yourself, my dear boy! Only Maurice Stapleton knows the secret of the Java poison—let him come."

Drake hurried away. That ghastly face was still before his eyes as he went, and he made no effort to keep back the tears that rolled down his cheeks.

"Sing-Sing!" he called softly over the banisters.

"Yes, Massa Drake?"

Maurice Stapleton ascended the stairs. He gave Drake a look.

"Your master will live yet, if he hears reason!" he said. "Take me to him. There is no time to lose."

"Follow me."

Maurice Stapleton followed the boy detective into the bedroom. He stood by the bedside and looked down at the prostrate detective, and an evil smile deepened on his dark face. He seemed to be taking in the scene with deep enjoyment as he looked. Drake's eyes burned at him; but the boy stood back silent. This was the man who had brought his chief into the shadow of death—but this was the man who could save him.

"Locke! So it is you!" said Stapleton at last.

The ghastly face looked up at him from the shadows of the bed.

"You are Maurice Stapleton."

"Yes."

"You have done this!"

"Send the boy away and we can talk."

Drake looked at his chief.

Locke made him a sign to go. The door closed behind Jack Drake, and he waited outside in an anguish of apprehension.

Maurice Stapleton looked down on the detective and smiled again. Then he looked round the room. Locke's eyes watched him from the bed.

"I am making sure, my dear Locke, that there are none to overhear," grinned Stapleton. "I do not forget how you trapped my brother Albert."

Locke said no word. Satisfied at last the man came back to the bedside.



The dying detective made a sudden movement, there was a click of metal, and Maurice Stapleton staggered back with a pair of handcuffs fastened on his wrists. "Well caught, you scoundrel!" said Ferrers Locke, smiling.

"You know what has happened to you?" he said. "The Java poison is in your veins."

"So you say!" muttered Locke.

"Fool! What do you think is the matter with you, then? What has your doctor found?"

"He could find nothing."

"Except that you are dying?" grinned Stapleton. "Fool! Yesterday you received by post a box of chocolates."

"That is true," said Ferrers Locke faintly.

"The oldest, commonest trick!" grinned Stapleton. "I scarcely believed that it could succeed. But the sharpest of us are caught off our guard sometimes." He laughed. "By its very simplicity, I suppose, it succeeded. Not that you would have escaped. If the chocolates had failed, I had a score of devices in store—I tried the simplest first, that was all. And you fell to the first attempt!"

He chuckled like a ghoul. "So simple a trick—to deceive the greatest detective of the age! Ah, Locke, you are losing your keenness!"

"You are wasting time!" said the detective in a hollow voice. "Tell me—how long have I to live?"

"That depends. If you ate more than one of the chocolates——"
A feeble shake of the head.

"Only one? Then you might linger for forty-eight hours. But nothing can cure you—only the antidote known to me. It is in my pocket now. I am ready to administer it. Mind, you will be ill—nothing can prevent that. But I can save your life—on the same terms that my brother offered. You must save them both from prison, and give me your written promise so that you will not dare to break your word. Is it a bargain?"

"If I refuse you will leave me to die of the poison you have administered?"

"Without pity!"

"Call Drake! Tell him to bring writing materials!" groaned the detective, and he turned his face to the wall.

Stapleton stepped to the door and opened it. Jack Drake, who was leaning against the banisters, started forward.

"Your master requires writing materials!" grinned Stapleton.

Drake drew a deep breath. Ferrers Locke had surrendered, then, to the demand of the poisoner—to save his life! Drake pushed past the man into the bedroom.

"Mr. Locke——"

"Tell the young fool!" said Stapleton roughly.

"One word first, Maurice Stapleton!" muttered the Baker Street detective. "One word—" His voice sank into a whisper.

"Well?"

Stapleton bent over him.

What followed made Drake wonder whether he was dreaming. The dying man on the bed made a sudden movement, there was a click of metal, and Maurice Stapleton staggered back with the handcuffs fastened on his wrists. Ferrers Locke sat up in bed and smiled at him.

"Well caught, you scoundrel!" he said.

Jack Drake gave a cry.

"Mr. Locke, you are not ill! You——" He stared blankly at the smiling face of Ferrers Locke.

"Show yourselves!" called out Ferrers Locke.

A hidden door in the wall opened with a click, and two men stepped out—one in a police-inspector's uniform, the other in plain clothes. The latter had a notebook in his hand.

"Inspector Pycroft!" ejaculated Drake blankly.

The inspector grinned.

"Well done, Locke! Well done, by Jove! The last of the Stapleton poisoners under lock and key at last!" His heavy hand gripped the shoulder of Maurice Stapleton.

Stapleton panted with rage.

"Tricked!" he muttered. "Yet—— And witnesses! You were prepared for this, Ferrers Locke!"

"I am seldom caught unprepared," said the Baker Street detective coolly. "Your man has taken down every word, Mr. Pycroft?"

"Every syllable!"

"Then you may as well take your prisoner away. Perhaps you will kindly explain to Inspector Heath and relieve his mind?"

"Leave it to me, Mr. Locke!" chuckled Pycroft.

Jack Drake went down the stairs and watched the white-faced, desperate man taken away. Ferrers Locke, fully dressed, came down in a few minutes. Sing-Sing's almond eyes almost started from his head as he gazed at his master.

Locke signed to them to follow him into his study.

"I have to ask your forgiveness, my boy!" said the Baker Street detective remorsefully. "And yours, Sing-Sing!"

"Me savvy now!" grinned the Celestial.

"But——" stammered Drake.

"But I could leave nothing to chance in dealing with so desperate and determined a villain!" said Ferrers Locke gravely. "The poisoned chocolates came yesterday. I analysed them in the laboratory, and found that they contained the Java poison. It was the first blow struck by Maurice Stapleton. I knew that."

"But you might have warned me, Mr. Locke!" said Drake reproachfully.

"I could not, Drake! The man was too cunning to be deceived by a pretence," said Ferrers Locke. "That sudden illness—it was necessary. After sending me the chocolates, I knew, of course, that he would be watching the house, to learn whether he was successful—though he would not venture into it, after the warning he received from the fate of his brother. Inspector Heath felt what had happened to me. I could not spare him, for it was the signs of the shock he had received as he left the house that deceived the spy."

"I—I see!"

"Then the doctor came in a fast car." Locke smiled. "The spy watched that, also. Dr. Buxton I could not deceive; a medical man cannot be taken in as to the condition of his patient. I explained to him, and he willingly consented to help me all he could. When he went I expected momentarily to hear that Stapleton had arrived. Your face, Drake, almost broke down my resolution. I knew that you suffered." Locke pressed the boy's hand. "But I remained firm. The man was as watchful as a cat. He read in your face that the illness was genuine. If he had had any doubts—even the slightest—he would not have betrayed himself."

"I—I understand——"

"Your looks, my poor boy, were more than enough to convince him. He came to my room fully believing that I had eaten of the poisoned chocolates, and a little white powder carefully rubbed into my face helped him to that belief——"

"Oh!" exclaimed Drake.

"I had already posted Inspector Pycroft and his shorthand man behind the secret door. They came here over-night, and have been ready since. And Maurice Stapleton kindly gave them a full confession of having sent poison by post to take my life—a confession that will send him to join his two brothers."

Drake smiled. He could smile now.

"It was the only way," said Ferrers Locke. "But when I saw how you felt, my dear boy, I would have drawn back had it been possible. It was a cruel experience for you."

"That's nothing!" said Drake. "All in the day's work, sir! It's right as rain—and we've got the third brother!"

THE END

