

The farmer shrugged his shoulders and, cursing under his breath, yielded to the sergeant's arguments. That worthy organized a strict watch, distributed the brothers Goussot and the lads from the village under his men's eyes, made sure that the ladders were locked away, and established his headquarters in the dining-room, where he and Farmer Goussot sat and nodded over a decanter of old brandy.

The night passed quietly. Every two hours, the sergeant went his rounds and inspected the posts. There were no alarms. Old Trainard did not budge from his hole.

At break of day, the thirteen acres of land within the walls were searched, explored, gone over in every direction by a score of men who beat the bushes with sticks, trampled over the tall grass, rummaged in the hollows of the trees and scattered the heaps of dry leaves. But old Trainard remained invisible.

"Beats me altogether," declared the sergeant.

And, indeed, there was no explaining the phenomenon. For, after all, apart from a few old clumps of laurels and spindle-trees, which were thoroughly beaten, all the trees were bare. There was no building, no shed, no stack — nothing, in short, that could serve as a hiding-place.

As for the wall, a careful inspection convinced even the sergeant that it was physically impossible to scale it.

In the afternoon, the investigations were begun all over again in the presence of the examining magistrate and the public prosecutor's deputy. The results were no more successful. Nay, worse, the officials looked upon the matter as so suspicious that they could not restrain their ill-humor and asked:

"Are you quite sure, Farmer Goussot, that you and your sons have n't been seeing double?"

"And what about my wife?" retorted the farmer, red with anger. "Did she see double when the scamp had her by the throat? Go and look at the marks, if you doubt me!"

"Very well. But then, where is the thief?"

"I swear I'll lay hands on him, true as I stand here!" shouted Farmer Goussot. "It shall not be said that I've been robbed of six thousand francs. Yes, six thousand! There were three cows I sold; and then, the wheat crop and the apples. Six thousand-franc notes, which I was just going to take to the bank."

"I wish you luck," said the examining magistrate, as he went away, followed by the deputy and the gendarmes.

The neighbors also walked off; and, by the end of the afternoon, none remained but the Goussots and the two farm-laborers.

Old Goussot proceeded to explain his plan. By day, they were to search. At night, they were to keep a constant watch. It would last as long as it had to. Old Trainard was a man like other men; and men have to eat and drink. Old Trainard must needs, therefore, come out of his earth to eat and to drink.

"At most," said Goussot, "he can have a few crusts of bread in his pocket. He might even pull up a root or two at night; but how will he get water to drink? There's only the spring; and he'll be a clever dog if he gets near that."

They kept watch for fourteen consecutive nights. And for fourteen days, while two of the men and Mother Goussot remained on guard, the five others explored the Héberville grounds. There had been no sign of Trainard.

The farmer stormed. He sent for a retired detective inspector who lived in the neighboring town. The inspector stayed with him for a whole week. He found neither old Trainard nor the least clew of his whereabouts.

Shocking days passed. Farmer Goussot could no longer sleep, but lay shivering with fever. The sons became morose and quarrelsome and never let their guns out of their hands.

It was the one topic of conversation in the village; and the Goussot story, from being local at first, soon went the round of the press. Newspaper reporters came from the assize-town, from Paris itself; they were rudely shown the door by Farmer Goussot.

Old Trainard had now been hidden within the walls of Héberville for something like four weeks.

The Goussots continued their search as doggedly and confidently as ever, but with daily decreasing hope. The idea that they would never see their money again began to take root in them.

One fine morning, at about ten o'clock, an automobile, crossing the village square at full speed, broke down and came to a dead stop.

The driver, after a careful inspection, declared that the repairs would take some little time; whereupon, the owner of the car resolved to wait at the inn and to lunch. He was a gentleman on the right side of forty, with close-cropped side-whiskers and a pleasant expression of face; and he soon made himself at home with the people at the inn.

Of course, they told him the story of the Goussots. He had not heard it before, as he had been abroad; but it seemed to interest him greatly. He made them give him all the details, raised objections, discussed various theories with a number of people who were eating at the same table and ended by exclaiming:

"Nonsense! It can't be so intricate as all that. I have had some experience of this sort of thing. And, if I were on the premises. . ."

"That's easily arranged," said the innkeeper. "I know Farmer Goussot. . . He won't object. . ."

The request was soon made and granted. Old Goussot was in one of those frames of mind when we are little disposed to protest against outside interference. His wife, at any rate, was very firm:

"Let the gentleman come, if he wants to."

The gentleman paid his bill and instructed his driver to test the car on the high-road as soon as the repairs were finished:

"I shall want an hour," he said, "no more. Be ready in an hour's time."

Then he went to Farmer Goussot's.

He did not say much at the farm. Old Goussot, hoping against hope, was lavish with information.



The stranger produced the straw that he had picked up

He took his visitor along the walls down to the little door opening on the fields, produced the key and gave minute details of all the searches that had been made so far.

Oddly enough, the stranger seemed not to be listening. He merely stared, with a rather vacant gaze. When they had been round the estate, old Goussot asked, anxiously:

"Well?"

"Well, what?" murmured the stranger, absently. "Do you think you know?"

The visitor stood for a moment without answering. Then, he said:

"No, nothing."

"Why, of course not!" cried the farmer, throwing up his arms. "How should you know! Shall I tell you what I think? I think that old Trainard is lying dead in his hole."

The gentleman said, very calmly:

"There's only one thing that interests me. The tramp, when all is said and done, was free at night and able to feed on what he could pick up. But how about drinking?"

"Out of the question!" shouted the farmer. "Quite out of the question! There's no water except this spring; and we have kept watch beside it every night."

"Where does the spring rise?"

"Here, where we stand."

"Is there enough pressure to bring it into the pool of itself?"

"Yes."

"And where does the water go, when it runs out of the pool?"

"Into this pipe here, which goes under ground and carries it to the house, for use in the kitchen. There's no way he could have got water."

"Has n't it rained during the last four weeks?"

"Not once; I've told you that already."

The stranger went to the spring and examined it. The trough was formed out of a few boards of wood joined together just above the ground; and the water

ran through it, slow and clear.

"The water's not more than a foot deep, is it?" he asked.

In order to measure it, he picked up from the grass a straw which he dipped into the pool. But, as he was stooping, he suddenly broke off and looked around him:

"Oh, how funny!" he said, bursting into a peal of laughter.

"Why, what's the matter?" spluttered old Goussot, rushing toward the pool, as if he thought a man could have lain hidden between those narrow boards.

"He's neither in the pool nor under it," replied the stranger, who was still laughing.

He made for the house, eagerly followed by the farmer, the old woman and the four sons. The innkeeper was there, also, as were the people from the inn who had been watching the stranger's movements. There was a dead silence, while they waited for the extraordinary disclosure.

"It's as I thought," he said, with an amused expression. "The old chap had to quench his thirst somewhere; and, as there was only the spring. . ."

"Oh, but look here," growled Farmer Goussot, "we should have seen him!"

"It was at night."

"We should have heard him. . . and seen him, too, as we were close by."

"So was he."

"And he drank the water from the pool?" gasped Goussot.

"Yes."

"How?"

The stranger produced the straw that he had picked up:

"There, here's the straw that he used to get his long drink. You will see, there's more of it than usual; in fact, it is made of three straws stuck into one another. That was the first thing I noticed, those three straws fastened together. The proof is conclusive."

"But, hang it all, the proof of what?" cried Farmer Goussot, irritably.

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