The Confidences of Arsene Lupin

THE INVISIBLE PRISONER

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The stranger took down a small shot gun from the rack.

"Is it loaded?" he asked.

"Yes," said the youngest of the brothers. "I use it to kill the sparrows with, for fun. It's a small shot."

"Capital! A peppering where it won't hurt him will do the trick."

His face suddenly assumed a masterful look. He gripped the farmer by the arm and rapped out, in an imperious tone:

"Listen to me, Farmer Goussot! I'm not here to do policeman's work; and I won't have the poor beggar locked up at any price. Four weeks of starvation and fright is bad enough for anybody. So, you've got to swear to me, you and your sons, that you'll let him off without hurting him."

"He must hand over the money!"

"Well, of course. Do you swear?"

"I swear."

The gentleman walked back to the door that opened on the orchard. He took a quick aim, pointing his gun a little in the air, in the direction of the cherry tree that overhung the spring. He fired. A hoarse cry rang from the tree; and the scarecrow which had been straddling the main branch for a month past came tumbling to the ground, only to jump up at once and make off as fast as its legs would carry it.

There was a moment of general consternation, followed by outcries. The sons darted in pursuit and were not long in coming up with the runaway, hampered as he was by his rags and weakened by privation. But the stranger protected him against their wrath:

"Hands off there! This man belongs to me. I won't have him touched. . . . I hope I haven't hurt you too much, Trainard?"

Standing on his straw legs wrapped round with strips of tattered cloth, with his arms and his whole body clad in the same materials, his head swathed in linen, tightly packed like a sausage, the old man still had the stiff appearance of a lay-figure. The whole effect was so ludicrous and so unexpected that the onlookers laughed uproariously.

The stranger unbound his head; and they saw a veiled mask of tangled gray beard, encroaching on every side upon a skeleton face lit up by two eyes burning with fever.

The laughter was louder than ever.

"The money! The six notes!" roared the farmer

"One moment . . . we'll give them back to him, eh, Trainard?"

And, taking his knife and cutting away the straw and cloth, he jested, cheerily:

"You poor old beggar, what a freak you look! But how on earth did you manage to pull off that trick? You must be clever, or else you had the devil's own luck . . . So, on the first night, you used the breathing-time they left you to rig yourself in these togs! Not a bad idea. Who could ever suspect a scarecrow? . . . They were so accustomed to seeing it stuck up in its tree! But, how uncomfortable you must have felt, lying flat up there on your stomach, with your arms and legs dangling down! All day long, like that! And how you must have been put to it, when you ventured to move a limb, eh? And how you must have feared going to sleep! . . . And then, you had to eat! . . . And drink! . . . And you heard the sentry and felt the barrel of his gun within a yard of your nose! Brrrr! . . . But the best idea of all was your tube of straw!

Farmer Goussot and his four sons grabbed at the disheveled old tramp:

"Now, then, come along, fork out the money."

Dazed as he was, Trainard still managed to simulate astonishment.

"Don't put on that idiotic look," growled the farmer. "Come on. Out with the six notes. . . ."

"What? . . . What notes do you want?"

"Oh, I'm getting sick of you! Here, lads. . . ."

They laid the old fellow flat, tore off the rags that composed his clothes, felt and searched him all over.

There was no money on him.

"You thief! You robber!" yelled Father Goussot. "What have you done with it?"

The tramp seemed more dazed than ever. Too cunning to confess, he kept on whining:

"What do you want of me? . . . Money? I haven't three sous to call my own. . . ."

The rage of the Goussots could no longer be restrained. They rained blows upon him, which did not improve matters. But the farmer was convinced that Trainard had hidden the money before assuming his role of scarecrow:

"Out with it! In what part of the orchard have you hidden it?"

"The money?" repeated the tramp, with a stupid look.

"Yes, the money! The money that you've buried somewhere. . . . Oh, if we don't find it, you'll suffer! . . . We have witnesses, haven't we? . . . All of you, friends, eh? And then, the gentleman. . . ."

Goussot turned, with the intention of addressing the stranger, and was surprised to find that he was not in sight.

"Has he gone?" he asked.

Some one answered:

"No, he lit a cigarette and went for a stroll in the orchard."

"Oh, that's all right!" said the farmer. "He's the sort to find the notes for us, just as he found the man."

"Unless . . ." said a voice.

"Unless what?" echoed the farmer. "What do you mean?"

But he interrupted himself suddenly, seized with a doubt. There was a moment's silence, while the same suspicion dawned on all the country-folk. The stranger's arrival at Héberville, the break-down of his automobile, his manner of questioning the people at the inn and of gaining admission to the farm: were not all these part and parcel of a crafty scheme, the trick of a cracksman who had learnt the story from the papers and who had come to try his luck on the spot? . .

"Mighty smart of him!" said the inn keeper. "He must have taken the money from old Trainard's pocket, before our eyes, while he was searching him."

"Impossible!" spluttered Farmer Goussot. "He would have been seen going out that way . . . by the house. . . . But he's strolling in the orchard."

Mother Goussot, pale as a ghost, suggested:

"The little door at the end, down there? . . ."

"The key never leaves me."

"But you showed it to him."

"Yes; and then I took it back again . . . Look, here it is."

He clapped his hand to his pocket and uttered a cry:

"It's gone! . . . He's stolen it! . . ."

Goussot at once rushed away, followed and escorted by his sons and a number of the villagers.

When they were half-way down the orchard, they heard the throb of an automobile, obviously the one belonging to the stranger, who had given orders to his chauffeur to wait for him at that lower entrance.

When the Goussots reached the door, they saw, scrawled with a piece of chalk on the worm-eaten panel, the two words: "ARSENE LUPIN."

To add to their humiliation, the angry Goussots found it impossible to prove that old Trainard had stolen any money. Twenty persons were obliged to bear witness that, after all, nothing had been discovered on his person. He escaped with a few months' imprisonment, for wounding Mother Goussot.

He did not regret his jail term. As soon as he was released, he was secretly informed that, every quarter, on a given date, at a given hour, under a given milestone on a given road, he would find three gold louis.

To a man like old Trainard, that means wealth.

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