

THE CONFIDENCES OF ARSÈNE LUPIN THE INVISIBLE PRISONER

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ILLUSTRATIONS by ADRIEN MACHEFERT

AT ABOUT FOUR o'clock, one afternoon, Farmer Goussot, with his four sons, returned from a day's shooting. They were stalwart men — all five of them — long of limb, broad-chested, with faces tanned by sun and wind. And all five displayed, planted on an enormous neck and shoulders, the same small head with the low forehead, thin lips, beaked nose and hard and repellent cast of countenance. They were feared and disliked by all around them. They were a money-grubbing, crafty family; and their word was not to be trusted.

On reaching the old barbican-wall that surrounds the Hébertville property, the farmer opened a narrow, massive door, putting the big key back in his pocket after he and his sons had passed into the orchard. Here and there stood great trees, stripped by the autumn winds, and clumps of pines, the last survivors of the ancient park now covered by old Goussot's farm.

One of the sons said:

"I hope mother has lit a log or two."

"There's smoke coming from the chimney," said the father.

The out-houses and the homestead showed at the end of a lawn; and, above them, the village church, whose steeple seemed to prick the clouds that trailed along the sky.

"All the guns unloaded?" asked old Goussot.

"Mine is n't," said the eldest. "I slipped in a bullet, to shoot at a kestrel."

He was the one who was proudest of his skill. And he said to his brothers:

"Look at that bough, at the top of the cherry tree. See me snap it off."

On the bough sat a scarecrow, that had been there since spring, and that protected the leafless branches with its crazy arms.

He raised his gun and fired.

The figure came tumbling down with large, comic gestures and was caught on a big lower branch. There it remained, lying stiffly on its stomach, with a great top hat on its head of rags and its hay-stuffed legs swaying from right to left above some water that flowed past the cherry tree through a wooden trough.

They all laughed. The father approved:

"A fine shot, my lad. Besides, the old boy was beginning to annoy me. I could n't take my eyes from my plate at meals without catching sight of him."

They went a few steps farther. They were not more than thirty yards from the house, when the father stopped suddenly and said:

"Hello! What's up?"

The sons also had stopped, and stood listening. One of them spluttered:

"Sounds like moans from the linen room . . . And Mother's alone!"

Suddenly a frightful scream rang out. All five rushed forward. There was another scream, followed by cries of despair.

"We're here! We're coming!" shouted the eldest son.

As it was a roundabout way to the door, he smashed in a window with his fist and sprang into the bedroom. The room next to it was the linen-room, in which Mother Goussot spent most of her time.

"Good Lord!" he cried, seeing her lying on the floor, with blood all over her face. "Dad! Dad!"

"What? Where is she?" roared old Goussot, appearing on the scene. "What have they done to you, Mother?"

"Run after him! . . . This way! . . . This way! . . . I'm all right . . . only a scratch or two . . . But run, you! He's taken the money," she stammered.

"He's taken the money!" bellowed old Goussot, rushing to the door to which his wife was pointing. "He's

taken the money! Stop thief!" he yelled once more.

His sons followed him, and a mad steeple-chase shook every floor in the house. Suddenly, Farmer Goussot, on reaching the end of the passage, caught sight of a man standing by the front door, trying to open it. If he succeeded, it meant his safety, his escape through the market-square and the back lanes of the village.

Interrupted as he was fumbling at the bolts, the man lost his head, charged at old Goussot and sent him spinning, dodged the eldest brother and, pursued by the four sons, doubled back down the long passage, ran into the bedroom, flung his legs through the broken window and disappeared.

The sons rushed after him across the lawns and orchards, now darkened by the falling night.

"The villain's done for," chuckled old Goussot. "There's no way out for him. The walls are too high."

The two farm-hands returned, at that moment, from the village; and he told them what had happened and gave each of them a gun:

"If the rat shows his nose anywhere near the house," he said, "let fly at him. Give him no mercy!"

He told them where to stand, went to make sure that the farm gates, which were only used for the carts, were locked; and, not till then, remembered that his wife might perhaps be in need of aid:

"Well, Mother, how goes it?"

"Where is he? Have you got him?" she demanded.

"Yes, we're after him. The lads must have colared him by now."

The news quite restored her; and a nip of rum gave her the strength to drag herself to the bed, with old Goussot's assistance, and to tell her story. For that matter, there was not much to tell. She had just lighted the fire in the living-hall; and she was knitting quietly at her bedroom window, waiting for the men to return, when she thought that she heard a slight grating sound in the linen-room next door.

"I must have left the cat in there," she said to herself.

She went in, suspecting nothing, and was astonished to see the two doors of one of the linen-cupboards, the one in which they hid their money, wide open. She walked up to it, still without suspicion. There was a man there, hiding, with his back to the shelves.



"I'm all right . . . But run . . . He's taken the money," she stammered

"And then, did he go for you?" asked old Goussot.

"No, I went for him. He tried to get away."

"You should have let him."

"Why, what about the money?"

"Had he taken it by then?"

"Had he taken it! I saw the bundle of bank notes in his hands. I would have let him kill me sooner. . . Oh, we had a sharp tussle, I give you my word!"

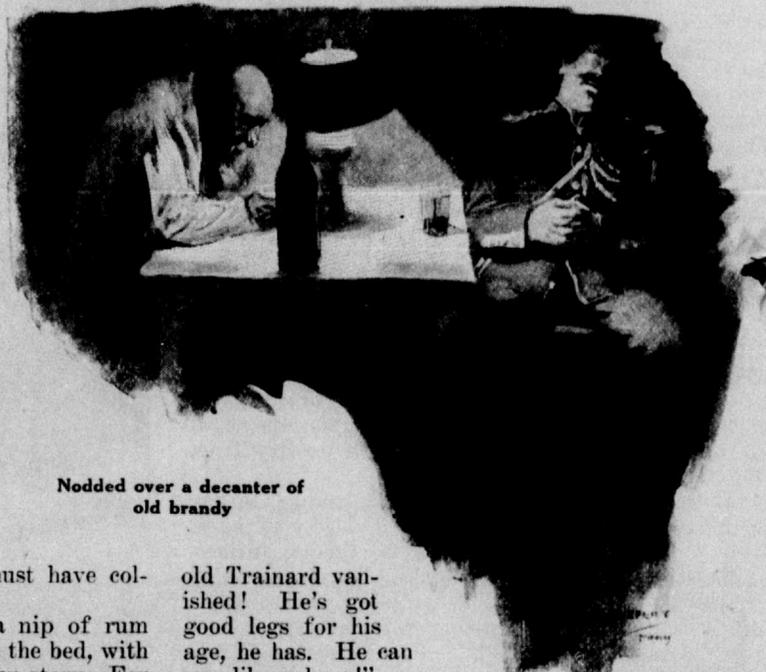
"Then, he had no weapon?"

"No more than I did. We had our fingers, our nails and our teeth. Look here, where he bit me. And I yelled and screamed! Only, I'm an old woman, you see. . . I had to let go of him. . ."

"Do you know the man?"

"I'm pretty sure it was old Trainard."

"The tramp? Why, of course, it's old Trainard," cried the farmer. "I thought I knew him, too. . . Besides, he's been hanging round the house these last three days. The old vagabond must have smelt the money. Aha, Trainard, my man, we shall see some fun! A number-one beating in the first place, and then the police. . . I say, Mother, you can get up now, can't you? Then go and fetch the neighbors. . . Ask them to run for the gendarmes. . . Look here, the attorney's youngster has a bicycle. . . How that



Nodded over a decanter of old brandy

old Trainard vanished! He's got good legs for his age, he has. He can run like a hare!"

Goussot was holding his sides, reveling in the occurrence. He risked nothing by waiting. No power on earth could help the tramp escape or save him from the sound thrashing that he had earned.

Presently, however, one of the sons returned, looking rather discouraged, and made no secret of his opinion:

"It's no use keeping on at it, for the present. It's pitch dark. The old chap must have crept into some hole. We'll hunt him out tomorrow."

The eldest son now appeared, quite out of breath, and was of the same opinion as his brother. Why not wait till the next day, seeing that the thief was as safe within the demesne as between the walls of a prison?

"Well, I'll go myself," cried old Goussot. "Light me a lantern, somebody!"

But, at that moment, three gendarmes arrived; and a number of village lads also came up to hear the latest.

The sergeant of gendarmes was a man of method. He first insisted on hearing the whole story, in full detail; then, he stopped to think; then, he questioned the four brothers, separately, and took his time for reflection after each deposition. When he was told that the tramp had fled toward the back of the estate, that he had been lost sight of repeatedly and that he had finally disappeared near a place known as the Crows' Knoll, he thought once more and announced his conclusion:

"Better wait. That old Trainard might slip through our hands, amidst all the confusion of a pursuit, in the dark; and then, good-night, everybody!"