

ARSÈNE LUPIN VS. SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE HOLLOW NEEDLE

*Inspired by Maurice Leblanc's novel
By Heraclio S. Viteri and Enrique Grimau del Mauro
(1912)*

CHARACTERS

Elena de Thibermesnil
Laura de Saint Veran
Henrietta
Horace Velmont / Luis Valmeras / Arsène Lupin
Georges de Thibermesnil
Abbé Gelis
Inspector Ganimard
Isidore Beautrelet
Jeannot
Gomel
A Servant
Various Policemen, Lupin's gang members

ACT I

A Gothic room in the Chateau de Thibermesnil. It is richly furnished. On one side at the back there is a monumental library in 2 parts separated by a large bracket with the name "Thibermesnil" in relief. There is also a glass showcase with containing various artistic objects including a book with a red velvet cover.

AT RISE, Georges de Thibermesnil, Abbé Gelis, and Horace Velmont are involved in a discussion.

GEORGES (continuing the conversation): What you told them surprised them, really? The famous thief has surprised me in a very eloquent fashion.

VELMONT (gravely): That's a bad sign.

ABBÉ: And how did this Lupin announce his visit?

GEORGES: Three days ago, I picked up a book in this library. Here is the book and here is the hollow of the second page—

VELMONT: Then Arsène Lupin was here?

GEORGES: Indubitably.

ABBÉ: But—was it Lupin—and no other—who made this, er, withdrawal?

VELMONT (affirming): Who else?

GEORGES: But why only this book? I don't see what Lupin could get from it—profitably, I mean.

VELMONT (laughing): Dear Georges! Let me laugh over your situation.

GEORGES: As you please, Velmont. But don't laugh at Abbé Gelis, who is very erudite in historical matters, especially when the stolen book is *The Chronicle of Thibermesnil*. What importance it can have to that thief, I'm unable to say.

ABBÉ: I understand perfectly: This precious chronicle of the 10th century is consecrated in its entirety to narrating the precious deeds of your ancestors—it contains a description of a secret subterranean tunnel—

VELMONT: A tunnel?

GEORGES: We are unaware where its entrance is, but we know it exists. All I know—and this is from tradition—is that its entrance is in the field, and its exit is in this dwelling.

VELMONT (laughing): Then knowing it, it provides an easy solution. All one has to do is to search the whole castle.

GEORGES (interrupting): There's nothing easy about it, friend Velmont, nothing at all. My ancestors, for a century—and I, too—one after the other, tried to locate this invisible entrance. You know how, in the Middle Ages, they made these things. Everyone knows there is a secret entrance that opens in this wing—but no one knows where it is located. In what plane of the wall, in what flagstone of the pavement, is the solution of the problem to be found? What mysterious spring, what little button hidden from sight, should be pressed or uniquely twisted to open the unknown passage in the wall. Before what stone, before what ornament, before what relief in this antique dwelling shall we say the words “open sesame” of the fairy tales?

VELMONT: In effect, if the book says no more than that, it will be of little use to the thief. What a disappointment to have carried it off.

ABBÉ: Who knows? After all the marvelous adventures we hear of this man—or rather, devil incarnate! The stolen book provides in various places provides a very imperfect record—like plans of the tunnel—and these plans could well be useful.

GEORGES: Impossible. These plans throw no light on the underground entrances, and much less the way to open invisible entrances that none mention. In short, these plans can be used to know the form of the tunnel and its approximate location—but nothing more. I've looked at them a hundred times and I wanted to use them myself. I made excavations and yet—nothing. A mysterious success occurred in the middle of the 18th century by a member of my family who died in some war without being able to communicate it to his successor.

VELMONT: You can rejoice that Lupin appears to have made a useless robbery.

GEORGES: Completely useless. And if he is vigorously seeking to find an entrance into my chateau through this subterranean tunnel—I pity him. Don't you feel the same?

ABBÉ: Me? I agree—it is impossible from the mere study of these plans to do so, but in conjunction with the legends that I've repeated to you many times—

GEORGES: You, Abbé, have too much love for these legends—as a historian and collector of rare inscriptions—and obstinately seek in each of them some impossible explanations.

VELMONT (intrigued): And what legends are these?

GEORGES: Two ancient monuments that contain much to be seen in the history of our kings. But nothing to do with secret entrances to the underground.

ABBÉ (a bit annoyed): You are forgetting that these clandestine amours took place in this chateau, and that our kings utilized these tunnels.

VELMONT (with interest): Let's hear these legends.

ABBÉ: One of them is very short. It says only, Thibermesnil 2-6-12.

VELMONT: Hum! That sounds like a multiplication: $2 \times 6 = 12$.

GEORGES: Quite right. Thank you!

VELMONT: Let's hear the other.

ABBÉ: What it says might make us laugh.

GEORGES: It's a childish thing. But go ahead, say it.

VELMONT: Yes, please.

ABBÉ: No—my friend Georges is making it into a joke.

GEORGES: I shall repeat it as I heard it from you fifty times, since you don't want to humor Velmont.

ABBÉ: I'll do it for him, but don't laugh. Listen, this is the inscription: “The axe swings—

GEORGES (with comic seriousness): The axe flies—

ABBÉ: —In the trembling air—

GEORGES: Or the shivering breeze.

ABBÉ: —And the ell opens and one journeys towards God.”

GEORGES: Or goes straight to God. So what? Do you still link this bit of verse to the secret tunnel entrances, Abbé?

VELMONT (aside) Imbecile! I believe it does provide the solution. (aloud, laughing) Congratulations for telling it to us, Abbé.

ABBÉ: Are you laughing, too? Fine! I'm confident in my belief that this legend contains the key to the problem. Sooner or later it will be deciphered, and—

GEORGES (unable to stop laughing): Abbé, for the love of God, I can't—I can't stop laughing—

VELMONT (aside): Idiot! (aloud) And does our friend Lupin know of this inscription?

GEORGES (ironic): Fortunately, I don't believe so. Imagine if he knew it.

ABBÉ (sententiously): Perhaps he does. And you will deplore it, my friend.

ELENA (entering, a small package in her hand): Georges, they just brought this—

GEORGES: On whose behalf?

ELENA: Our cousin, Stephen.

GEORGES: Ah, I know what it is. The notebooks he promised me yesterday.

(He places the package without opening it on the table.)

ELENA: Georges, with the permission of these gentlemen—

(Georges and Elena speak apart)

GEORGES: And who brought them here?

ELENA: It's in your dispatch. Laura has come too.

GEORGES: Well, she'll be satisfied to be in such good company.

ELENA: Yes, she's in her room, changing clothes.

GEORGES (turning to the Abbé and Velmont): Gentlemen, I'm going to give you some news. As of this moment, two guests have arrived, who are preparing a nocturnal surprise for this thief, Lupin. Inspector Ganimard, the famous policeman who once captured him, and a young apprentice, detective by inclination, who gives signs of emulating the celebrated Sherlock Holmes.

ABBÉ: I see that you are well prepared.

GEORGES: Solely, to calm my wife.

ELENA: Who really needs it. A month in continuous uproar! And it's to someone like this Lupin that we owe it.

ABBÉ: Then you can rest easy now.

VELMONT: These preparations you've taken are not bad, Georges, because I suppose that the young apprentice you've just spoken of is—Isidore Beautrelet.

GEORGES: The same.

VELMONT: All things considered, I don't think that Ganimard and Beautrelet are enough to stop Lupin in his triumphant career. Wouldn't it be better to call Sherlock Holmes himself?

GEORGES: You said it, Velmont. And he, too, has been called at the urging of my wife.

ABBÉ: And is he coming?

GEORGES: This very night. At midnight he will come to the Chateau de Thibermesnil. As of tonight, the king of detectives will be our guest here. See this telegram.

(He pulls a telegram from the package and gives it to Velmont.)

VELMONT (aside): Sherlock Holmes, here! (aloud, reading) "Coming—ferry 11:40 p.m." (smiling) Congratulations, Georges!

ABBÉ: Indeed, you can sleep safely.

ELENA: I think so. Thanks to God. We need a bit of tranquility.

GEORGES: With your permission, I am going to show these gentlemen around. And you, Elena, while I'm with our friends, watch over Laura.

VELMONT: Laura?

GEORGES: A relative of mine I brought here. Laura de Saint Veran; a sweet young thing that I commend to you, friend Velmont.

VELMONT (aside) She, here! (he seems visibly vexed.)

GEORGES: Gentlemen, till shortly.

(He leaves with his wife.)

ABBÉ: Good-bye, Georges. (Noticing Velmont's attitude) You look thoughtful, Velmont?

VELMONT (dissimulating) I was thinking about what Georges revealed to us. Sherlock Holmes is coming to capture Lupin. He says that he needs his help—as if all the police in France are not enough, we need also help from England. What a great man this Lupin must be!

ABBÉ: Don't speak foolishly, Velmont. He's simply a thief—no matter how clever he may be.

VELMONT: England against France. The astute Briton against the cleverness of France. And who will win?

ABBÉ: Lupin will fall—inevitably.

VELMONT (energetically): Who knows? He's such an extraordinary man.

ABBÉ: However extraordinary he may be, he'll be defeated. Men as extraordinary as he will persecute him—Sherlock Holmes, Ganimard, Beautrelet.

VELMONT: That's not a bad trinity to overcome him. But I'm sure he'll do the best he can with them. (changing tone) Changing subjects, you who are so erudite, and an aficionado of history, have you ever heard of the secret of the Man in the Iron Mask?

ABBÉ: You mean, the secret of the Hollow Needle?

VELMONT: Yes, of this strong lair supposedly located in this region, that remains a mystery to all the world, except for the throne of France—a fortified tower that hid fabulous treasures—a mystery that cost the life of Joan of Arc, the infamous an in the Iron Mask, Captain Laberge—

ABBÉ: My dear Velmont—this is another secret like that of the entrance to the tunnel of Thibermesnil. Except that, in the mystery of the Hollow Needle, there are two unknowns. Everyone is ignorant of the place where this natural refuge exists, and the means to take it. The last member of the royal house that possessed this secret was Queen Marie Antoinette, who had it written on a parchment that Louis XVI sent to her before dying by an officer of the Royal Guard. And this parchment contained—or so I'm told—a mysterious inscription consisting only of points and signs, and in the final line, a hieroglyph which is supposed to contain precise instructions for finding the Hollow Needle.

VELMONT (with interest): And this inscription, this parchment—where is it?

ABBÉ: It's lost. I've read about it in a pamphlet that said that Marie Antoinette sent it in a book of devotions to Count Fersen before leaving for the scaffold. But I don't believe it—because a book of devotions contains no hiding place and, moreover, this devotional is here in this library. I've seen many things in it, but not that inscription. It has, on its first page, a dedicatory sentence written by the Queen in her own blood to Fersen. The authenticity of the book is indubitable.

VELMONT (going to the showcase): So then—this book is the devotional! O bloody relic! And with what veneration I contemplate you. What's certain is that in little more than a century many great, magnificent, curious things have been lost.

ABBÉ (assenting): The lack of curiosity of men defeats some, kills others. The prodigies of our times have been wasted.

(Georges enters with Ganimard and Beautrelet.)

GEORGES: Gentlemen, I'm going to present to you Inspector Ganimard of the Sûreté and Monsieur Isidore Beautrelet. Abbé Gelis—my best friend—and Horace Velmont, an incomparable artist in pastels.

VELMONT: I really wanted to meet you both. The newspapers have mentioned your names many times—more than once in conjunction with Arsène Lupin.

GANIMARD: Phooey! Let's talk of other things—

BEAUTRELET: This time, there won't be much of a fight. We've got the thread that will lead us to him.

VELMONT (aside): Idiot!

ABBÉ: God grant that it may be so.

GEORGES: I'm sure they will get him.

VELMONT (ironic): Are you of the same opinion, Mr. Ganimard?

GANIMARD: I affirm that we will find him out.

VELMONT: You heard him, Georges—will you allow me to examine the notebooks that your cousin sent you?

GEORGES: With a thousand pleasures. They are magnificent, I think they are by Rubens. (untying the package) You will see, Velmont, if indeed— (suddenly disconcerted) It's my book—the stolen chronicle!

ABBÉ (approaching): But—

VELMONT: What cynicism!

GANIMARD: Arsène Lupin is like that—he steals and boasts of the robbery. But this time—

GEORGES (finding a card in the leaves of the book): Here's a card. (reading) "My dear sir, I have the honor to return to you this precious chronicle. Keep it carefully, because it is a jewel of the art of typography, and pardon me for having borrowed it for a few days. I no longer need it. Please accept this testimony of my appreciation—Arsène Lupin."

VELMONT: Is he bold!

BEAUTRELET (ironic): Ah, we have a complete thief there.

ABBÉ (indignant): And one that no one is able to put a hand on.

BEAUTRELET: He'll be free for a short while longer—but there's not much time left for him.

GANIMARD: A few hours, no more! (waving his fists threateningly) Ah, Lupin, how you will repay me when I get my hands on you. I'll recognize you under some cheap disguise, and then, Lupin, you won't brag anymore!

GEORGES: After all, I'm delighted to have the book back so soon. Ganimard, Beautrelet, let's examine the wall and see if we can find the tunnel. It probably won't be of any use, but—

GANIMARD: Agreed, let's have a look at it.

(They examine the wall, as Velmont contemplates the showcase.)

VELMONT (aside): Oh—the mystery of the Hollow Needle.

ELENA (entering with Laura): Here she is, Georges.

GEORGES (caressingly): Ah, Laura, sweeter every day.

LAURA (smiling): Thank you, Georges. I'm glad to see you.

VELMONT (aside, vexed): That's her. She's here. GEORGES (presenting): Abbé Gelis—

LAURA: I remember —

ABBÉ (saluting): I am delighted to see you again.

GEORGES: My friend, Horace Velmont whom, I am sure, will be an excellent friend to you.

LAURA: My dear— (turning) Him! Could it be him?

VELMONT (bowing): Mademoiselle—

ELENA (noticing Laura's upset): You're pale?

GEORGES: Do you know Laura? Do you know Horace?

VELMONT (who has made his way to the door): I believe so; this young lady ought to remember—

LAURA (as if thinking): Here. Arsène Lupin, here!

(All turn to Lupin questioningly)

LUPIN (arrogantly): Well, yes! I am Arsène Lupin. Bye-bye! Till later! Toodaloo!

(He goes out and closes the door.)

GANIMARD (stupefied): Him! Curses!

(He rushes to the door with Beautrelet, but it is locked.)

CURTAIN