

FRANK M. REIFENBERG
MALEEK

Aristide Ledoux – Master Thief Against His Will

Sample Translation by Catherine Venner

dtv

»There are no doors for me.«

Arsène Lupin in
The Hollow Needle
by Maurice Leblanc

LE NUMÉRO
CINQ CENTIMES
→
ANCIENNE DE COUTURE
→
PAR ABONNEMENT
Veuillez adresser les
commandes à
M. L'ADMINISTRATEUR

Le Grand Journal

SUPPLÉMENT ILLUSTRÉ

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THE »CAT« STRIKES AGAIN!

The Queen's jewels stolen Police clueless

by Emile Bleriot

Last night, »The Cat« struck again. The burglar, known only by this nick name to all of Paris, has been terrorising the city for months. This time, the cunning thief proved he would stop at nothing, since he broke into Count Villeneuve's palace and stole a diadem belonging to Queen Marie Antoinette. She unfortunately lost the head, upon which she wore it, under the guillotine.

Interestingly, at the time of the theft the Prefect of the Police, Victor Huchon, was being entertained as the Count's dinner guest and enjoying a saddle of lamb with a herb crust, served with a side of artichoke and a Château Lafit Rothschild from 1899.

The thief also made off with two bottles of red wine. Reportedly, he left a note, written on the host's letter paper, complaining that the lamb had been dry and the artichokes bitter.

Monsieur Huchon, the Prefect of the Police, quelled suspicions the culprit may have eaten at the same table as himself and the host, stating that he personally knew all the dinner guests.

The next day, one of the guests was found tied up and dressed only in his underwear in the house's coal cellar. His identity shall not be disclosed, the Police Headquarters stated.

TRAPPED





Aristide reached for the book with the golden letters on the spine. It stood discreetly in a row of similar looking tomes, all written by Russian authors. These often sad stories were not quite to his taste, but they allowed Aristide to improve his knowledge of the Russian language.

Before pulling the book a little way out to unlock the secret door in the library, he listened in the darkness. The usual silence enveloped him. No noise from outside could be heard in the room either.

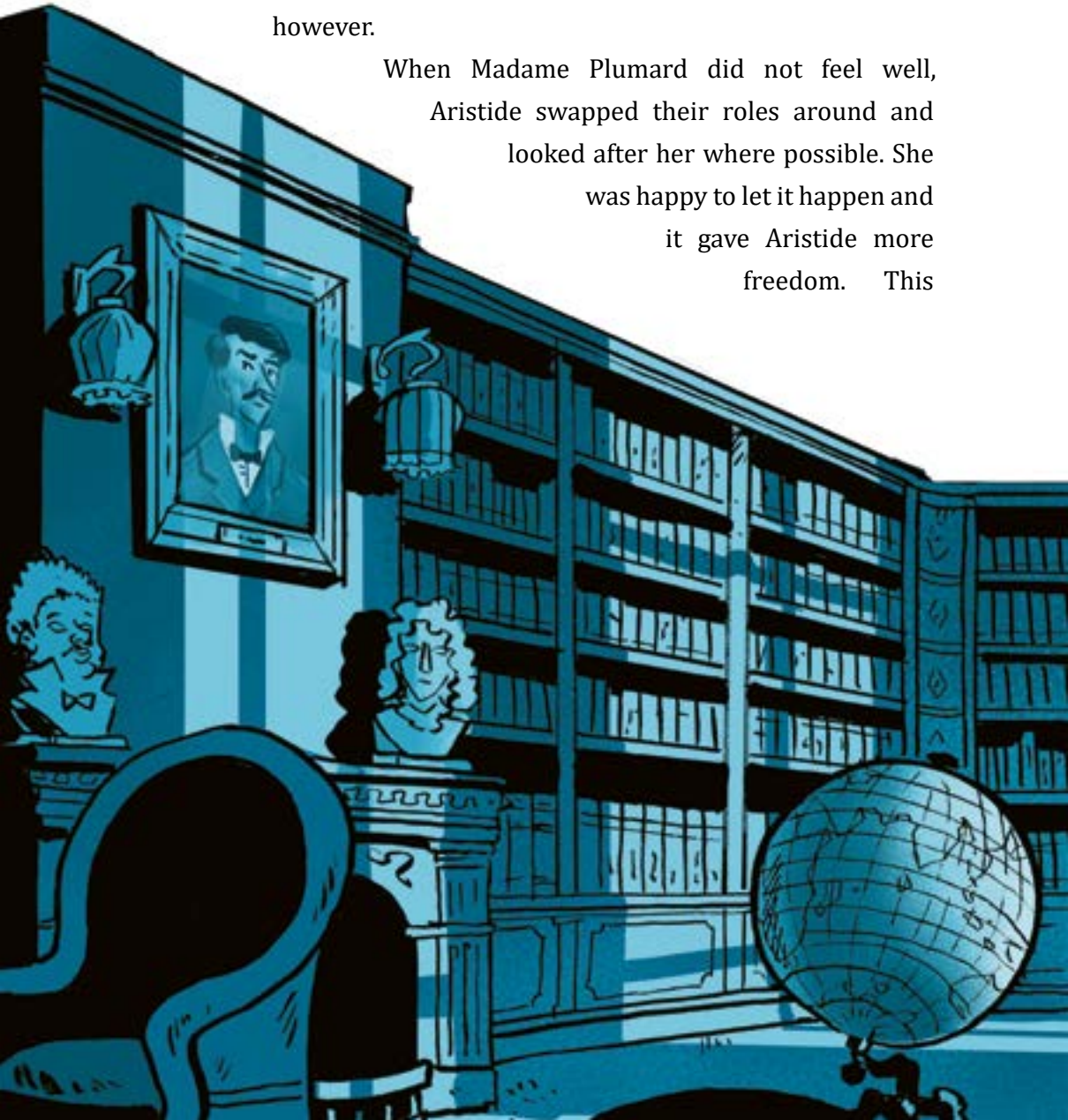
Even during the day, the clip-clopping of cab horses' hooves on the cobbles in front of the house was rarely audible. In the dead of night, nobody would stray on to the secluded street, at whose end the Villa Aurore had been built in 1799 after the chaos of the Revolution. The house was full of nooks and crannies plus numerous extensions.

Madame Plumard's room was in the attic. The housekeeper had already retired there hours ago. She would drink a mug of hot milk in her room every evening.

Today, Aristide had mixed a large spoonful of honey into it. Madame Plumard had complained about a headache, so Aristide had offered to warm the milk for her and bring it to her room.

It was actually Madame Plumard's job to care for Aristide in accordance with Uncle Arnaud's will. She shared the duties stipulated within it with a servant, who did not live in the house, however.

When Madame Plumard did not feel well, Aristide swapped their roles around and looked after her where possible. She was happy to let it happen and it gave Aristide more freedom. This



afternoon, they'd held a séance to contact the souls of the dead as per the latest fashion. First a pendulum sent her into a trance, and then the magic started. Aristide played along with the hocus pocus, as he knew this ritual was providing Madame Plumard a lot of fun. He, however, didn't believe in any of it.

Aristide now pulled the book out from among the others on the shelf, until there was a click. The sound echoed through the darkness, then a quiet creaking filled the room. He really needed to oil the secret door. The mechanism slightly raised part of the book shelf and pushed it a hand span forward, together with the books on it. A small shove was enough to open the entryway.



Aristide stepped inside and pulled the door closed behind him. With the same clicking noise, the shelf locked back into its original position and became part of the spacious and absolutely unremarkable library of a citizen intent on education. Nothing was left to indicate it was an entrance to a labyrinth of secret corridors, which had probably been built by the house's first owner.

The narrow corridor behind the hidden door veered left and then after just a few metres, it turned right into a small chamber.

There, Aristide lit a candle. It flickered a little due to the gentle draft, which was always felt here. Some kind of elaborate ventilation system had to exist in this windowless second building. That's how Aristide thought of it: a building within a building, the first one protecting the second.

Aristide was curious what was waiting for him in the chamber tonight. The small room was furnished with nothing more than a simple clothes stand, a dressing table with a mirror and a wig head on top, a chair and some hooks on the wall to hang his own clothes on.

Sometimes, an ornately made, magnificent head of hair, which he needed for his mission, sat on the wig head, and a couple of times there had also been a fake beard. He knew what to do with these items, as well as with the make-up that lay ready in the drawer of the small table.

He had found so many different costumes and robes here, all corresponding to the destination of the respective evening's expedition. One time, it had been a page's livery, other times a heavy jacket covered in coal dust belonging to a briquettes supplier or even a harlequin costume. As harlequin, Aristide had attended

a masquerade ball at the Swedish ambassador's residence and pocketed twenty-four bars of gold. They had been so heavy that he'd struggled to escape over the glass roof of the residence's winter garden.

Today, only the familiar, carefully folded black robe was laid out on the trunk. The garment fitted like a second skin and had a hood, which was attached to the robe.

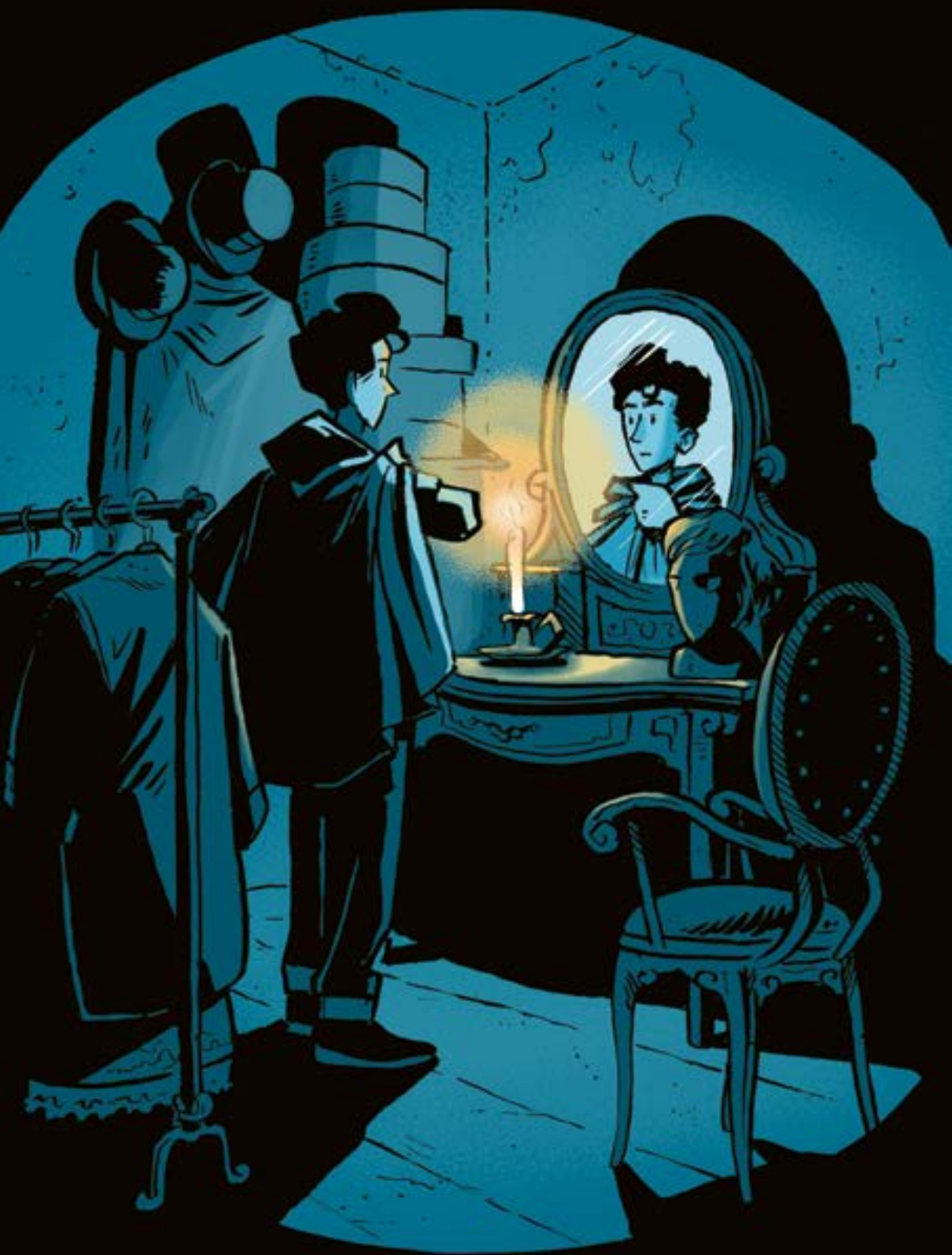
Next to it stood a pair of boots, also black and made of soft kidskin. The soles were made of the same material and just slightly strengthened, almost making Aristide feel as if he was walking barefoot. In the boots, he would slink through the dark of the night like a black cat on velvet paws.

He looked around. There was the wide belt with several loops and pockets, which he could not do without. Aristide wrapped it around his hips and tightened it. His tools were already hanging in the loops.

From a small box, embossed with the entwined initials A and L, he took the golden pocket watch, which he stowed in its intended place: the chest pocket of the black suit. Before doing so, he glanced at it quickly.

There was a small crown on the delicately worked face and the logo of the first-class clockmaker, Droibeaux. Aristide particularly liked this little piece of art, which always laid ready for him here. But just like everything else, he was not permitted to keep the watch and had to leave it in the chamber after completing each of his missions.

Aristide quickly changed into the suit, then took the black cape from the clothes hook and threw it over his shoulders.



It was about time. The carriage cab was surely already waiting for him.



Aristide pulled his hood low over his brow so that his face almost completely disappeared into its shadow, and then headed on his way. After the next corner, the tunnel led past the masters' private rooms. Nobody had slept there for years and the furniture had been covered with white linen sheets. Then a narrow staircase led down to where the salon and other living quarters were situated on the other side of the wall.

Aristide could look into each room through small peepholes. Nowhere in the house were you completely safe from being spied on in this way.

However, it appeared that nobody but Aristide knew about this labyrinth behind the walls – apart from one unknown person, the one who laid out the items for him.

Apart from the entrance hidden in the book shelf, Aristide had only found one other door, and that one led outdoors directly. Through a hatch, you landed in a horse box in the stables, which was no longer being used.

Aristide slipped through the unassuming door at the back of the stable into a back alley, through which barely anyone came at this time. He only had to walk a few steps before reaching the nearest illuminated street.

Even in this district, it was not advisable to hang around in any of the pitch-black passages for all too long. During the day, you could use these alleys as shortcuts, but at night they quickly turned into black holes, where dark figures were just waiting to put a knife to your throat. There were many corners in this city where you could lose your life for a few coins.

The beating of hooves announced the arrival of the cab that would take him to his destination. A closed landau carriage, whose outline appeared like a silhouette against the lantern light, stopped on the quiet click of the driver's tongue. The carriage driver was wearing a wide cloak with a cape over the shoulder and a top hat. The cloak's collar was turned up, almost reaching the brim of the hat. It was a shady business the driver was involved here. Shadows and danger accompanied this trade, nobody wanted to be recognised as part of it and the less you knew about each other the better.

So far, Aristide had never seen the face of the driver, but now the man relit the burned out cigarette between his lips. For one or two blinks of the eye, his face was illuminated.

Aristide recoiled.

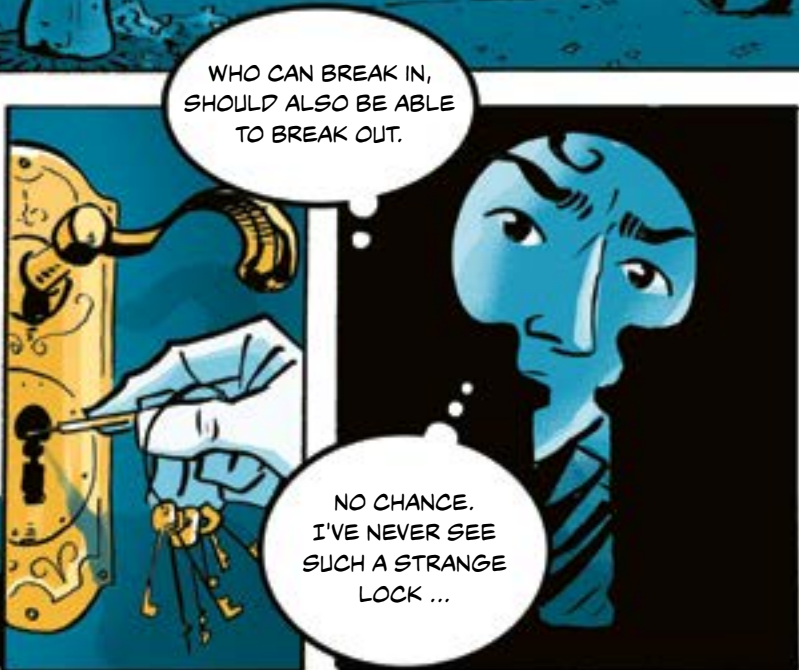
The light of the match briefly flickered over a ghostly, entirely scarred and down right fear-inducing face. As if the man had jumped from the pages of one of the horror novels Aristide enjoyed reading in secret.


The face disappeared back into the darkness and the carriage driver sat on the box motionlessly until Aristide had climbed into the cab and closed the door behind him. A barely audible slap of the whip set the nervously prancing horses in motion.

The vehicle clattered off, driving slowly to avoid notice.


A lantern dimly lit up in the inside of the cab but gave enough light for Aristide to look at the content of the envelope that lay before him on the tatty seat. Aristide would find such an envelope here on each of his missions. Sometimes, it contained a site map, often a photograph of the booty, but always the exact instructions for how he was to proceed.








WELL, THEN
I'LL TRY IT WITH
FORCE!



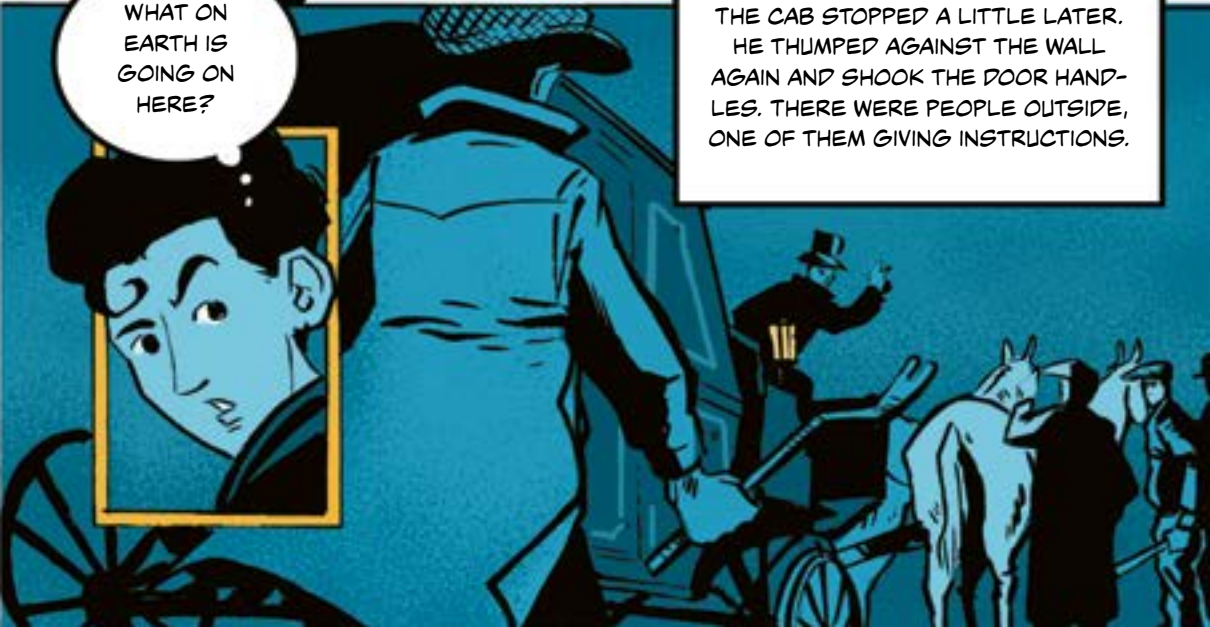
THAT DOESN'T FEEL
LIKE WOOD. MORE LIKE
METAL. SOUNDS LIKE
IT, TOO ...



BENEATH THE
MATERIAL, THE WALL
IS MADE OF LEAD ...



WHAT ON
EARTH IS
GOING ON
HERE?



THE CAB STOPPED A LITTLE LATER.
HE THUMPED AGAINST THE WALL
AGAIN AND SHOOK THE DOOR HAND-
LES. THERE WERE PEOPLE OUTSIDE,
ONE OF THEM GIVING INSTRUCTIONS.

DAMN,
IT'S HEAVY.

CLOSER TO THE
RIVER BANK!

STOP MOANING,
YOU'RE BEING PAID
WELL. LIFT THE THING
ON TO THE TIMBERS,
THEN IT'LL BE LIGHTER
AND YOU ONLY NEED
TO PUSH.

THE GOOD
GENTLEMAN MIGHT
ALSO CARE TO
LEND A HAND!



WHEN HE HEARD A STEAM-
POWERED BARGE HOOTING,
ARISTIDE HAD AN INKLING.




? IIIK!

DANG
DANG
DANG

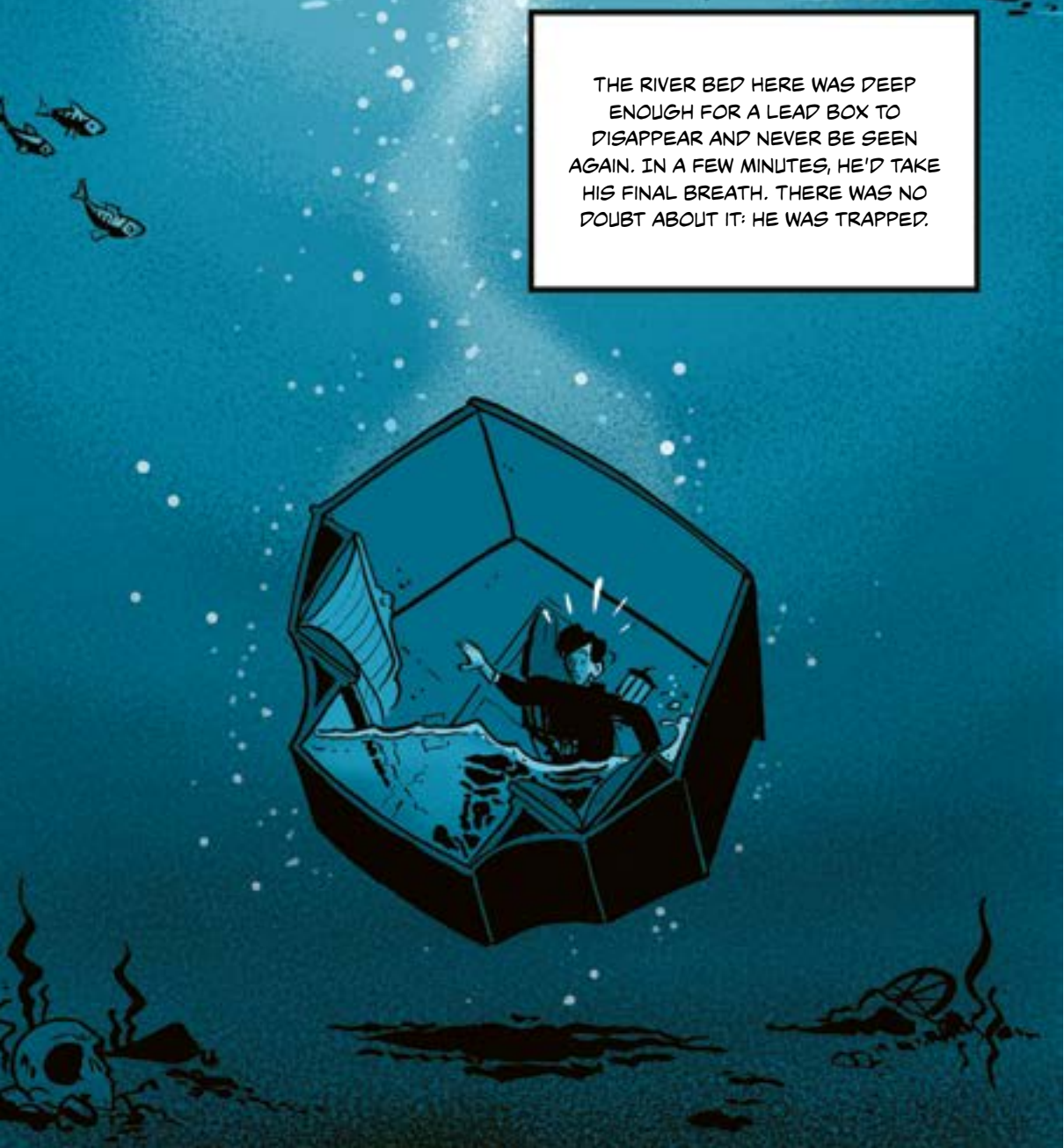
TROÖÖT!

AT LEAST HE KNEW WHERE HE WAS NOW:
SOMEWHERE AT THE PORT DE L'ARSENAL.
THE HARBOUR NEVER SLEPT.





ARISTIDE HEARD THE WAVES AS THEY CRASHED AGAINST THE EXTERIOR WALLS AND THEN THE OILY SMELLING WATER OF THE SEINE GUSHED IN.



THE RIVER BED HERE WAS DEEP ENOUGH FOR A LEAD BOX TO DISAPPEAR AND NEVER BE SEEN AGAIN. IN A FEW MINUTES, HE'D TAKE HIS FINAL BREATH. THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: HE WAS TRAPPED.



Leontine dribbled orange marmalade on to a crusty piece of baguette. That was good English manners as Miss Davenport claimed: orange marmalade for breakfast and tea at five o'clock. Leontine hated the tea, but she loved the marmalade and wolfed down the bread with a satisfied grunt.

»Leontine, you'll never become a lady like that,« her English governess warned. »If your father heard your noisy chomping, he'd chase me out of the house as my lessons in good manners have born no fruit at all with his daughter.«

Conspiratorially, Leontine leaned towards the woman, who was barely older than herself and whispered, »And that's a good thing.« She flopped back and laughed. »The most important thing is that my English is getting better. To get by in America, I have to speak and understand it fluently. By next year at the latest, I want to board a fast steamer in Le Havre and cross the Atlantic, and then ride a horse from New York to San Francisco.«

Miss Davenport sighed, like always when Leontine romanticised about her plans.

»You don't need to make such a doleful face. I read an article about ...«

»Good God!«, Miss Davenport called out. »I don't want to know. Who puts such crazy ideas into your head? A woman! Riding across America!« She hid her face behind the napkin of exquisite damask. »Your father would never allow such a thing.«

Leontine rolled her eyes. Her father would love to send her off to a Swiss finishing school. He allowed her to do nothing at all and she had to use all her wits to at least occasionally break free from his clutches. Since her mother's death, the situation had become downright smothering.

Leontine shrugged her shoulders and rang for the maid.

»Oh, Mademoiselle Leontine,« Miss Davenport lamented. »The books, the newspapers – none of it is good for your little head. For a young lady, it is more than enough if she ...«

»Oh no!«Leontine blurted out much louder than she had intended. »It's not enough when a young lady does beautiful embroidery, can smile sweetly and can accompany the children on the piano at Christmas.« It drove her absolutely wild that nearly all the people around her believed a young woman belongs in the salon of a noble home and not in the auditorium of a university. »Have you heard of Emmeline Pankhurst? She's one of your compatriots, Miss Davenport. She wants women to get the right to vote. We woman can do anything, she says.«

Now, Miss Davenport had to fan herself, but before she could answer, Ninette, the maid who Leontine had rung for, scurried into the breakfast room.

»I beg your pardon that it took so long Mademoiselle Leontine,«,

she said with her eyes lowered. »Visitors came and I had to take the hats and sticks from the gentlemen.«

»You shouldn't apologise all the time,« Leontine said. »If papa hadn't so strictly forbidden it, I would get my breakfast myself.«

Outside the door, heavy steps thudded through the hall. Hushed voices could be heard.

»So there are visitors in the house, Ninette?« Miss Davenport asked. The maid nodded.

»Don't make us interrogate you,« Leontine said.

Miss Davenport gasped for air, but Leontine ignored her displeasure over her manner of expression.

»Who is it?« Leontine probed.

»I only recognised Monsieur Huchon. Can I do anything else for you, Mademoiselle?«

Victor Huchon, the Prefect of the Police and sworn enemy of her father was in the house?

But as Chief of the Sûreté, her father was always at work. The many snoopers in his secret police didn't know the meaning of evenings and weekends. The agents, generally dressed all in black, often stood with one foot in prison themselves. Their work methods seldomly aligned with the laws of the French Republic.

»Umm, no,« said Leontine. »I don't need anything else.«

»But you rang the bell,« Miss Davenport said.

»I've changed my mind. I want to rest a little in the winter garden now.«

The governess and the maid looked at each other in surprise, perhaps because Leontine had never in her life felt the desire to ›rest‹, neither in the winter garden nor anywhere else. Rest was a

foreign concept to Leontine de Cardonnel.

Leontine didn't wait for any reaction from the two women. She was in a hurry to get to the winter garden. Only there could she hear what was being said in the smoking salon, where Ninette had surely taken the gentlemen.

