

## Chapter I

The first event that troubled the quietude, so profound until then, of Dr. Albin, the illustrious author of *Biological Chemistry*, occurred in the spring of the year 18\*\*. His only daughter, his adored Jeanne, whose beauty was emerging more radiantly every day from the uncertain forms of childhood, died of typhoid fever at the age of fifteen.

All the leading medical lights in Paris, combined with all knowledge and all devotion, were unable to avert the fatal conclusion. Intoxication, secret troubles or intellectual overexertion? What did it matter? The disease had defied all remedies; death, as if to affirm its invincible power, had struck, in his pride as a healer, in his future projects, and in his dearest affection, the man who had made a game of snatching away its prey.

So, the man whose miracles were proclaimed by renown, the artist of reliable diagnosis, the scientist always guided by logic and prudence, victorious in so many reputedly desperate cases, was unable to save from death the one being he loved with all his heart. The death that he had chased from so many dwellings had settled coldly that day, ironically and implacably, in his own hearth. Why?

He had not found himself in the presence of an incurable disease, a devastating attack, or an irredeemably worn-out organism. Is human science so uncertain that it becomes impotent just at the moment when it is most necessary?

For a long time, the desolate father had before his eyes the drawn features, the ashen lips, and the feverish and imploring gaze of the dying girl. For a long time, as if nursing a rancor against the science that had, so to speak, betrayed and abandoned him, he deserted the school and the amphitheater; then, begged by his admirers and those near to him, solicited by all wishes, he was finally seen—somber of expression, to be sure, with silver threads in his long black hair—to emerge from his solitude, resume his chair and once again hold hundreds of young men from all over the world under the spell and authority of his instruction.

Should not the ardent and positive convictions of Dr. Albin have been above a personal tragedy? No, science was not responsible for his woe; the only true guilty party was him, who, to avoid too heavy a responsibility, had appealed to the enlightenment of others. Why that sentimental weakness? Why had he not cared for his poor Jeanne himself, and alone?

Briefly, the learned professor had thought that his wife, who was much younger than him, would help him to overcome his chagrin; but there were so many misunderstandings between them, so many points of friction, insignificant in appearance but in reality profound, so much divergences in the fashion of envisaging wellbeing, that he had quickly returned to his initial state of conjugal indifference. Madame Albin, a simultaneously worldly and pious Parisienne, an elegant doll who divided her time between the concerns of toilette and works of charity, a quintessential product of an honest but futile bourgeois education, was too distant from her husband for a catastrophe, terrible as it was, to be able to bring them together definitively.

Furthermore, a painful observation had come to offend his self-esteem. His favorite pupil, his protégé, the Dr. Larmezan he had once chosen for his daughter and received into his intimacy, was overtly courting his wife, and appeared to be paid in return. To what degree were they culpable? The certainty of their sin would only have caused him scorn, for the one who had betrayed his confidence and the other who had betrayed her duty. But there was in their attitude, replete with frankness, a kind of reproach for his blind indifference, and a kind of affirmation of the right to amour that wounded his vanity without rekindling the sentiments of old. Their apparent loyalty seemed to legitimate their passion, and the fear of ridicule, and the consciousness of his own faults, obliged him to suffer it.

Gradually resuming the noble occupations of his past life, therefore, he plunged more ardently than ever into the arduous studies that had edified his glorious reputation.

To crown his endeavors, he wanted, before dying, to leave the scientific world a general history of chemistry that would summarize all the doctrines of the past.

Previously, he had judged anterior efforts in accordance with more or less documentary accounts. His need to create, his overly exclusive admiration for the modern era, had caused him to neglect the treasures accumulated over so many centuries. Now that he had to attribute to everyone his just share of genius, he found himself obliged to return to the most distant sources. It was thus that he was led, logically and naturally, to undertake a profound study of the alchemists of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

Arrested to begin with by the symbolic language that hid their works from the intelligence of the vulgar, forced to comprehend and initiate himself into the occult sciences, he was soon astonished and seduced by the profundity of the vision of certain traditional theories. Those first endeavors, veritably conscientious, had the immediate result of causing him to abandon all prejudice. Soon, the corners of the veil were torn. Applying to the study of Alchemy the rectitude and power of modern experimentation, he embarked on a new and fecund path, the horizon broadened, unknown stars shone in his eyes, and inviolate formulae delivered their secrets to him.

Encouraged, he redoubled his efforts.

In the wing of the old princely town house that he had transformed into a laboratory, in the midst of alembics, furnaces, retorts and apparatus; among jars and bottles of every color and form; surrounded by anatomical preparations and folio volumes; equipped with his glass mask, interrogating with his anxious gaze the seething of his crucibles and the effervescence of his phials, he spent the greater part of his time discovering the laws and affinities that link inert and living matter.

His Great Work was not to transmute base matter into pure gold; it was the cell that he wanted to animate, and movement, the secret of God, that he wanted to learn.

That was the enthusiastic work that elevated his soul and scarred over his dolor—and it was that incessant and loyal search for the Truth that caused the second, irreparable, misfortune.

On the eighteenth of June 18\*\*, a decisive experiment, repeated and concluded a hundred times, came to destroy from top to bottom the scientific scaffolding that had won him so much prestige and renown, Dr. Albin's *Biological Chemistry*, the capital work that had provoked so much polemic and caused his name to resound in all the universities of the world. The victorious doctrine that had provided the basis of present knowledge, in the name of which he had denied principles and broken opposition, the glorious monument that he had believed would be transmitted indestructibly to posterity, was built on a false—completely false—principle.<sup>1</sup>

Ingenious deductions, indisputably true relativities, had emerged from it, but the bronze colossus rested on feet of clay, and it was Dr. Albin himself, the creator of the false god, who had discovered it!

Alternately dejected and enthused by that revelation, sometimes wanting to proclaim it and overturn his work, sometimes envisaging fearfully the inconveniences that would ensue, caught between his love of the Truth and his legitimate pride as a venerated scientist, arrested by the memory of ardent struggles and vanquished rivalries, pushed by the voice of his conscience, Dr. Albin was tossed for some time by cruel hesitations. Was there, after all, any first principle that was truly demonstrated? Were not all sciences based on hypotheses? Who could boast of having found the great X, the absolute? A chimera: what did the point of departure matter if the deductions were fecund, if humanity benefited therefrom?

Perhaps, a few months before, the illustrious professor would have clung to those sophisms. Perhaps a paltry but very human cause would have determined him to do so. But today, his beloved daughter was dead, his glory and his power could no longer serve to secure the happiness of his own flesh and blood.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we are not told what Dr. Albin's theory is, the hints dropped in this opening passage allow certain deductions. It is presumably a materialistic replacement for the theory of "vitalism"—the notion that living matter is essentially different from inert matter because it is possessed of a mysterious "vital spark"—which had been seemingly belied by the rapid development of organic chemistry in the second half of the 19th century. Albin's crucial experiments might have indicated the necessity of reintroducing some such crucial energetic factor, conceived in a new way. The author might or might not have been aware in 1902 of the thesis of "élan vital" [vital impulse] that Henri Bergson was developing for eventual publication in *Evolution créatrice* (1907; tr. as *Creative Evolution*).

Ought he not to sacrifice to the Truth the work that he recognized as false and the reputation unjustly acquired?

Even though his dolor was of a purely intellectual order, it was even more poignant than the first; and the scientist, wounded in the heart, returning to the past, wondered fearfully whether, as Azaïs<sup>2</sup> claimed, the sum of our joys must be compensated by an equal sum of distress.

The son of a justly esteemed professor, Louis-Jacques Albin, laureate of the general competition at sixteen, intern at nineteen, graduate in physiology at twenty-five, was already almost famous at an age when so many others were still on the benches. Fanatical about science, tenacious in study, although he undermined those qualities by virtue of a crazy avidity to know everything that prevented him from fixing his attention on the same subject for very long, he astonished the scientific world by his prodigious faculty of assimilation. Once, he would have been one of the encyclopedic doctors of the Middle Ages who gloried in knowing everything, and whom the Church hastened to deliver to the pyre.

Devoured by pride, inclined to ostentation, prompt to anger, but good, generous and trusting to the point of naivety, precious to his allies and faithful to his friends, launched in all societies, placed in favorable circumstances and on a road cleared of obstacles, nothing had been able to stop his triumphant march.

The skill, and above all the audacity, of his surgical operations had earned him his initial success. At thirty, gripped by a sudden enthusiasm for chemistry, he had let go of his worldly relations, published his *Research in the Physical and Chemical Phenomena of Life* and justified, by his personal endeavors, the fortune that the curious and his rivals attributed to paternal influence.

In the same epoch he became the son-in-law of a renowned professor, uniting two powerful parties. Three years later, the famous treatise on *Biological Chemistry* consecrated his nascent glory in spectacular fashion, and earned him, at the age of thirty-five, a chair in biology specially created for him.

Since then, the most incredible luck had not abandoned him for an instant. A surgeon in the hospitals, a brilliant clinician whose lectures foreign students flocked to hear, a member of the Institut, a dispenser of positions, a great elector of Academies, the commander of a multitude of medals, a député, even a minister in one of the ephemeral cabinets that are born and die of political intrigue: almost all the favors and titles that human ambition can desire had arrived as if natural and legitimate.

Was he not the man of an entire people: the peerless scholar, the personality that rival nations envied us, the famous author of *Biological Chemistry*? Was not the prestigious operator combined with a grandiloquent orator, a writer of clear and muscular style, and a musician that even artistes praised? Never had governmental and popular favor been more justified!

And all, or almost all, of that surprising fortune derived from a fortunate birth and a false theory that he had developed brilliantly. How could so much power and so much profit have emerged from a hazard, his birth, and an error, his work? It was necessary, for that to have happened, that the influence of the environment in which he had evolved had been singularly unjust and corrupt!

Outside of his spirit of intrigue and the manual dexterity of an operator, a talent of an inferior order compared with that of an executive or a worker, he had only been the expression of an ensemble; he did not owe his elevation to his own value. And yet that value existed; it was undeniable, a kind of genius; his discovery was the proof of it; why should he not destroy his past work? Was it not an advertisement, and indication of destiny? Ought he to remain the product of official mediocrity? Ought he to wait for the hour of justice to chime, for the contradictors driven into the shadows to take their revenge?

Yesterday, even today, anyone who had dared to oppose him would have almost have been reckoned a national enemy, but tomorrow? Someone else, perhaps a foreign rival, might be about to discover what

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<sup>2</sup> The philosopher Pierre Azaïs (1766-1845), author of *Des Compensations dans les destinées humaines* [Compensations in Human Destiny] (1809), which attempts to prove that there is a necessary and strict balance between happiness and misery; not only is that notion very prominent in the present text, but so is one of the principal corollaries that Azaïs drew from it: that inequality is natural and inevitable, and leads inevitably to revolutionary fanaticism.

he had just discovered, to attack the imposing false god, to bring its down irredeemably into the mud. Was it not better that he should at least have the honor of overturning himself?

In the first place, the thing seemed logical and easy; but numerous objections soon came to lay siege to his simultaneously proud and virtuous mind.

His combativeness had made his theories a veritable philosophical and scientific doctrine. A powerful political party had seen them as the confirmation of its anti-religious principles. The confession of his error would be seen, by those prejudiced men, as a shameful retreat, a treason. His most fervent supporters would refuse to follow him and would be in league against him. Then again, would it not be cruel to witness the collapse of his work, to deny the absolute affirmations of the day before, to be the butt of the scorn and mockery of his enemies, to ruin the publishers of the *Rational Encyclopedia* of which he had been the editorial director, to destroy the influence of numerous disciples or allies who had defended his ideas, to see his lectures deserted and his admirers disillusioned? That someone else might carry out the ingrate task in the name of Truth was one thing, but did he really have the right and the duty to do it himself?

If he had been able to build immediately, on the ruins of his *Biological Chemistry*, a new theory that would victoriously replace it, hesitation would not have been permissible; but the principle he had discovered, while destroying his work, was only as yet a point of departure; it would take years to crown the new edifice and acquire—legitimately, this time—an indisputable and more durable renown.

The eminent professor thus found himself facing a dilemma: either to live in a cowardly compromise, to continue publicly to teach the error while shamefully pursuing the truth in the shadows, at the risk of seeing a fortunate rival do what he did not have the strength to accomplish; or, to destroy himself, without delay, to his own detriment and that of his partisans, the work on which his reputation and power were based. The spirit of truth told him that the latter course was the only one worthy of a true scientist; his sentimentality and everything that attached him to the past persuaded him to keep quiet.

It was then that, seeking a middle way, his pride, an insatiable wild beast that had just found a prey, caused a madly grandiose idea to germinate in his bold mind, which began by seeming paradoxical and only worthy to serve for amusement, but which then ripened and became imposing, materializing day by day in order to conclude in the most audacious and strangest of projects.

Dr. Albin, he said to himself, can die without regrets; he has nothing more to expect from this world. He can disappear in full glory, surrounded by all homages and all sympathy. His party, which holds the best political positions, will not reproach him for having caused its ruin.

Thus, since there are two men in me, let the official man, the hesitant individual linked by friendships, entangled in the past, weakened by self-esteem and sentimentality, disappear; and let the other, the strong man, the just man, the free man, the true scientist, survive, destroy the false work, and proclaim the Truth!

In brief, I duplicate myself, I witness my own funeral, with all the respect that I owe to my first personality; then, once the doors of the tomb close, I inaugurate a second life, I become the scientific enemy of Dr. Albin, and I annihilate his false glory! I'm forty-six, it's true, but I'm educated and rich, I won't have to waste time acquiring a fortune and knowledge; in ten years, I'll reach the goal.

What do I have to lose? Nothing. The being that I loved the most is dead; the one for whom affection might reattach me to life doesn't understand me, and no longer even takes the trouble to hide her love for someone else. I'm weary of honors, I'd be ashamed to teach what I no longer know to be the truth. The intellectual and moral strength that remain within me can be utilized in a new incarnation. Nothing more remains for me to do, therefore, except die...in order to be resuscitated!

What do I have to fear? More ardent struggles, greater obstacles and sharper suffering! But it's doubtless because I haven't suffered and struggled enough that the truth has taken so long to appear to me. Dr. Albin was nothing, in reality, but the perfect expression of the *aurea mediocritas*<sup>3</sup> that leads to everything; I shall be able to say: I am the man of genius!

What mortal has ever had a destiny like mine: two existences of honors, combats and glory?

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<sup>3</sup> The golden mean.

I shall make arrangements for posterity to learn, without being able to doubt it, the marvelous adventure. I shall be the man with two faces whose audacity and genius will astonish the world!

“Unless,” he murmured, “death really does come to interrupt me... Bah! Everything leads me to suppose the contrary.”

He stood in front of a mirror, as if to observe the still-powerful vigor of his vitality. He was a man of slightly above medium height, with a broad forehead, a dominating gaze, a jutting chin and a pale face framed by abundant black and slightly curly hair.

“And that’s good for another ten or fifteen years,” he said, thumping his chest. “And as Meng-Tze<sup>4</sup> said, ‘It’s never the strength that’s lacking, but the will.’”

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<sup>4</sup> The Confucian philosopher more usually known by the Latinized form of his name, Mencius. He was a great believer in the power of Destiny.