

Part One:
THE SECRET OF DOCTOR ANTIUS

I. A Scientist in Difficulties

On 13 June 1880, the physicist J. B. Terrier, whose works have cast so much light on the mechanical theory of heat, appeared to be prey to an agitation, betrayed by the disorder of his stride, which was normally calm, slow and measured.

The scientist was walking around his vast laboratory, sometimes stopping abruptly and darting long glances at a piece of paper he was holding in his hand.

“A singular message!” he said, suddenly, in a low voice. “It’s only three words long—*Great discovery, come*—but it nevertheless constitutes an enigma for which I can provide no rational hypothesis. The discovery must be important, for Antius, who is as severe on himself as he is on others, only uses such epithets discerningly.”

And the professor lost himself in conjectures once again.

“Rastoin,” he said to his assistant, “What time is it?”

“Four-seventeen, Monsieur,” the young man replied, after taking out his silver pocket-watch, as large as a pie-dish, and observing with alarm that the first hour of his free time had already been considerably eroded.

After a moment’s hesitation, the professor headed for the door, picked up his hat, which was perched on a galvanometer and pulled it down over his ears. Rejecting his walking stick, and in spite of a clear sky and a temperature of thirty degrees, he picked up a vast umbrella worthy of service in a phalanstery. He stopped again, raising his eyes toward the ceiling, and then went down into the street.

He had not taken ten paces before Rastoin, the laboratory key in his pocket, launched himself briskly in the opposite direction, exclaiming: “Thank God, I still have time to have a dip at the Henri IV baths.”

In spite of the preoccupations agitating his mind, the physicist had adopted the calm and measured stride that is the most apparent indication of professorial dignity. Sagaciously, he walked on the side of the street that was not exposed to the ardent rays of the sun and emerged without hesitation from the labyrinth of bizarrely winding side-streets that furrow the area between the Quai des Grand-Augustins and the Boulevard Saint-Germain.

He went slowly up the Boulevard Saint-Michel and into the Jardin du Luxembourg, which he was proceeding to traverse in a straight line when, surprised by the outburst of a military band that was in the most direct path, he made an abrupt right-angled turn. That maneuver, provoked by the instinctive horror that the scientist had for any kind of noise, took him into the Allée de l’Observatoire, which he cut across obliquely in order to go through the deserted paths that, in that era, overlooked the pot-holes of the old botanical garden.

Five minutes later he went at a deliberate pace into the Rue Carnot. Having arrived at the end of that street, which has the deceptive appearance of a dead end, he turned right and followed the little used sidewalk of the Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs for some distance. Finally, he stopped in front of a door that symmetrically divided an old wall, which was covered in moss and overhung by two vigorous poplars, planted behind it like sentinels.

The professor tugged energetically at a rusty copper bell-pull, which only quit its sheath with an angry grating sound.

Two minutes later, heavy and hasty footsteps caused the sand of the garden path to squeak, and the door opened slowly.

Terrier saw an old woman in front of him, who greeted him with a nod of the head and put her index finger over her mouth—a familiar sign that always announces a mystery. In addition, contrary to the convention practiced on the five continents of the world of letting a visitor in, the woman who was holding the door ajar slipped between the batten and the wall and came out into the street.

The old lady who had just performed that singular maneuver was known by the name of Madame Boquet; for twenty years she had been Dr. Antius’ housekeeper, the glory and providence of the

quarter. Within a radius of three hundred meters it was universally admitted as an undisputable verity that she possessed, to the highest degree, the knowledge, intelligence and organizational ability necessary for the provision of superior cuisine—qualities which, as all bachelors admit, constitute the three theological virtues of housekeeping.

On the day on which this story begins, the physicist was able to observe at the first glance that grave perturbations must have compromised the calm and tranquility of the doctor's house.

Indeed Madame Boquet, who seemed very animated, immediately launched into the following speech: "Thank heaven you're here, Monsieur le Professeur. Personally, I feel as if I'm losing my mind. I'm convinced, you see, that the devil is haunting the house. Can you imagine that Monsieur is no longer recognizable. For some time, he's been shutting himself away all day, and doesn't want to see anyone. At night, he gets up and goes down into the garden, where he wanders around slowly for two or three hours, talking out loud. He scarcely eats anything, and only distractedly. There's some great misfortune behind it, which is a threat to us, I can assure you..."

This exordium on the part of the housekeeper caused the physicist some anxiety.

"When, Madame Bosquet, did this trouble begin—which, in regard to the chronometric existence of my old friend, is as much of a surprise to me as it is to you?" he asked.

"It began last week, on Thursday evening. At two o'clock, Monsieur left for the Académie. At six o'clock, he still hadn't come back. For the first time in his life, he was late. I was beginning to get angry when Monsieur opened the door and came solely along the path, his eyes fixed on the ground. He went up to his room without saying a word and came back in an overcoat, with no cravat. He stated walking around the garden.

"I went to tell him that dinner was ready. 'Dinner doesn't matter,' he said, abruptly, and kept on walking. I never heard anything like it. I stopped stood in front of him and shouted that it was seven o'clock. He followed me, grumpily, and came to sit down at the table, but like someone whose mind is elsewhere.

"On Monday, his nephew, Monsieur Gédéon, came to see him. He tried to go into the study, but Monsieur flew into a temper and sent him away.

"I've tried everything to combat the mysterious illness. I've prepared the rarest dishes—a waste of effort. I've made all sorts of infusions; Monsieur hasn't touched them. Finally, the day before yesterday, I went to consult the old somnambulist in the Rue Stanislas, who's capable of divining anything."

"Well?" asked the scientist, curiously.

"She assured me that Monsieur was bewitched, and that as soon as the spell is lifted, he'll be much better."

"The diagnosis is more remarkable for its logic than its lucidity," said the professor.

"This morning," the housekeeper went on, "I had a ray of hope. As Monsieur got up from the table, he said: 'Madeleine, didn't Gédéon come here the other day?'"

"Yes, Monsieur," I said, "but you sent him away—the young man was furious."

"Good. Go to his house today and tell him to come to dinner. At the same time, take this telegram to the telegraph office—it's for my friend Monsieur Terrier; I have something important to tell him. The three of us will dine together. Put on a magnificent feast!"

"Imagine my astonishment—Monsieur was talking just like you and me. But it didn't last, alas. Scarcely had Monsieur finished giving his instructions than he went back into his laboratory, and hasn't come out again since."

II. Antius' Nephew

When this picturesque narration concluded, the two interlocutors went into the garden and advanced toward the house. Suddenly, the bell at the entrance door started ringing a formidable carillon.

“Who can be ringing in that savage manner?” exclaimed the old lady, angrily.

The noise suddenly ceased and a hunting call, cleverly imitated and uttered at full blast, resounded in the air.

“It’s Monsieur Gédéon,” said the housekeeper. As she headed for the door, not without muttering some abusive remark addressed to the facetious summoner, she added: “I should have realized. That young man will take ten years off my life.”

But the latter abruptly appeared astride the wall, jumped down into the flower-bed with the agility of a cat and ran toward the old woman, throwing his arms around her.

“Bonjour, Boquet,” he said. “But what’s changed my uncle’s mind? The other day he kicked me out, very impolitely, and today he’s inviting me to dinner!”

Perceiving the immobile professor a few steps away, he came to greet him respectfully, while the housekeeper returned to her ovens. “You’re doubtless here for the feast, my excellent Master,” said the young man. “Your presence here doesn’t surprise me, for you’re a regular guest at the house. As for me, I’d gladly say what the Doge of Genoa said to Louis XIV: ‘What astonishes me more is to see myself here.’¹

“Four days ago, in fact, I came to present my uncle with a perfectly legitimate request. He was in his study, the door of which was locked and bolted—a particularity that immediately gave me sinister presentiments. I knocked. ‘Who’s there?’ he said.

“‘Me.’

“‘Who are you?’

“Stupefaction all along the line—he hadn’t recognized me sonorous voice. *Has he gone mad?* I wondered, fearfully.

“I went on: ‘I’m Achille-Gédéon Cahusac, your nephew, in person, legitimate son of the late Pierre-André Cahusac and the late Julie-Antoinette Antius, your sister. Possessed of a baccalaureate, vaccinated...’

“‘Come back later.’

“‘My dear uncle, it’s a serious matter and I can’t wait.’

“‘Speak, but be brief.’

“‘This is it, in brief. Can you imagine that I have a friend who’s a medical student, named Jacques Collardon? Yesterday, we were walking along the quay when he perceived in a bouquiniste’s box a superb edition of the works of Bichat, priced at thirty-five francs. *We can get it for thirty*, he said, and indeed, after a short debate, the merchant gave in. Collardon had the books wrapped up, dug in his pocket and exclaimed: *Damn—I forgot that I settled my tailor’s bill this morning. Keep the packet for me till the end of the month and I’ll come back with the cash.* The merchant protested. Always concerned with the interests of science, I took out my last thirty francs and lent them to my friend. You can imagine what embarrassment...’

“‘Do you take me for an imbecile?’ my uncle cried. ‘Your tricks are becoming increasingly unsubtle, my lad.’

“The cat was out of the bag. It’s true that I hadn’t been very clever. Fiction having served me badly, I had recourse to sincerity. ‘You’re barbaric, Uncle,’ I went on, ‘but let’s place the question on its true ground. Do you believe, yes or no, that I need money?’

“‘As to that, yes.’

“‘Well, since you possess the two fine titles of guardian and banker, would you be so cruel as to refuse me a little advance of three louis on next month’s allowance? I promise to tighten my belt.’

¹ Louis XIV met the Doge of Genoa, Francesco Maria Lercaro, in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles on 15 May 1685, when the latter came to confirm his capitulation after a French fleet had bombarded the city for ten days in order to force the abandonment of a commission to build warships for Spain. The Doge was reported to be very impressed by Versailles, but the irony of his widely-quoted remarks to that effect is understandable.

“I know whose belt you’ll be tightening—you won’t get a penny. Anyway, I’ve been very kind to listen to you for so long.’

“‘Come on,’ I persisted, gently. ‘As good harmony results from reciprocal concessions, let’s split the difference: thirty francs might save me from the gulf.’

“‘Go to the devil!’ the heartless fellow shouted.

“And he went away, just like that.

“Knowing that nothing would make him come out of his lair, I turned on my heel in my turn, my head prey to all the complex mathematical calculations capable of resolving the terrible problem against which I’d just broken my nose. Today, I was quite surprised by the arrival of Madame Boquet, who, without any preamble, brought me an invitation to dinner.”

“For my part, my dear friend,” said the professor, “I was invited by telegram. Antius tells me that he’s made a great discovery—and it must be important, for his enthusiasm is rather measured. He doubtless wants to tell you about his invention, in your capacity as his ward and heir presumptive. It’s quite probable that he’ll be better disposed toward you today.”

“Well, Master, you’re opening welcome horizons to me—although not with regard to the direct cause of my invitation, if your anticipations are correct, for that leave me cold, scientific discoveries being of little interest to the profane. The important question for me is the probable softening of my uncle in my regard, and on that point, I share your opinion. The worthy fellow must have reflected, and, ashamed of the atrocity of his conduct toward me...”

The optimist’s sentence was cut short by the housekeeper’s summons. From the threshold, she called to the two interlocutors: “Monsieur has come out of the laboratory, and dinner’s ready.”

The professor and Gédéon headed toward the house, which was half-hidden by a luxuriant frame of flowers and climbing plants.

They had not taken twenty paces when a short man of about sixty came down the five steps of the perron ornamenting the front door at a rapid pace. His entire being appeared to be the seat of an intense activity. In four strides the doctor was with his guests, and he seized the physician’s hand.

“Bonjour, Terrier,” he said. “I’m very glad to see you, for I’ve decided, in view of our old friendship, and especially your great competence, that you shall be the first...but let’s proceed in order. I must tell you, first of all, that I’m truly exhausted. For ten days, my brain has been prey to a continuous seething. I really should have exercised more moderation, for Aesop is right to say that the bow shouldn’t always be kept taut—but the idea pursued me, fixedly, tenaciously, absolutely. Finally, yesterday, I was hopeful, and tonight I achieved certainty. But what day of the month is it?”

“Saturday the fourteenth of June, according to the calendar,” Gédéon replied, having not yet said a word. Sententiously, he added: “It’s true what they say: the calendar doesn’t lie.”²

“Ah! Very good. On seeing you just now I said to myself: *what particular cause might bring my nephew here, who only usually visits me on the last day of the month; is today the thirtieth?*”

“Come on, Uncle, I have neither the pretention, nor, above all, the desire to make scientific discoveries, but in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, as nothing troubles my head, it’s in perfect equilibrium, and I recall perfectly that today, at one o’clock, Madame Boquet came to my lodgings on your behalf to bring me an invitation to dinner.”

“I suppose that’s quite possible,” said Antius. “I was in such a good mood that I might have invited the entire universe.”

“I thank you, then, for the preference.”

“Oh, damn!” said the doctor. “Last Thursday I should have chaired the meeting of the Biological Society. Never mind—some other vice-president will have taken my place, and I must admit that they could all do it perfectly well—especially Mirbel, in spite of his absurd theory of neural polarity. But our cook seems to be getting angry, and she’s about to head our way. To avoid the squall, let’s go to the dining-room.”

² Given that the narrative voice informed us in chapter one that today is the thirteenth, a smidgen of unreliability seems to have crept in somewhere.

III. A Retrospective Glance at the Three Heroes of the Story

The guests went into the house and into a rather large, comfortably furnished room. Long green velvet curtains, extending to the floor, regulated the entry of daylight. An assortment of pewter, crystal and polychromatic faience, skillfully grouped behind the glazed front of an immense dresser in carved oak, gave off a resplendent gleam. Four paintings, very honorably signed, representing the gastronomical treasures to which nature gives birth in the four seasons, decorated the walls. On the chimney-breast, mounted on a black marble pedestal, an enormous bust of Hippocrates in Florentine bronze appeared to have been set in that place of honor in order to watch over the scientific repasts that Antius hosted periodically. Finally, in the middle of the room, a stout oval table, supported by an enormous sculpted leg, presented an enchanting spectacle.

In front of each place-setting, a group of crystal glasses of various dimensions was arranged in battle order. At the sides, two large dusty bottles, corpulent and solidly coiffed in red, were reminiscent of two dragons set to mount guard on a magnificent silver soup tureen sitting in the center of the table—which, in spite of its thick lid, was emitting vigorous jets of odorant vapor.

The three men took their places.

We shall take advantage of the relative silence that reigns at the doctor's table to sketch rapid and faithful portraits of the three individuals who occupy the most important roles in this story.

Dr. Antius was a short man of sixty, plump, active and indefatigable; his face, always animated, always mobile, was illuminated by two bright eyes, keen and endowed with rare powers of penetration.

Scarcely had he emerged from the benches of the Faculty than his savant research on alkaloids had attracted attention. Four years later, after a brilliant competitive examination, he was counted among the graduates of the École and launched himself on a brilliant career in organic chemistry. Being rich, he had devoted himself entirely to pure science. Nevertheless, general rumor credited him with knowing the way to all the mansards in the neighborhood, frequently opening his purse beside sick-beds and leaving at the first word of gratitude. In consequence, the benevolent boor was the object of general sympathy. When he left the house, all hats within a radius of three hundred meters were raised to him.

The laboratory of chemistry and physiology that he had constructed, at great expense, in a separate building at the end of his garden, would have honored a Faculty, as much by the abundance as the choice of its materials and instruments. For a long time, he had devoted himself to the profound study of the nerve centers, and his remarkable work had won him a considerable reputation in the scientific world. No other anatomist had investigated the brain with as much skill, patience and interest.

Several times, his colleagues, in citing him in their reports, had not hesitated to add to his name the epithet "eminent," although some, it is true, disputed his theories passionately. It is necessary to add that few adversaries dared attack him directly with words, for contradiction caused him to lose his temper and provoked an explosion of comical sallies, some of which were legendary in the academic world.

The aphorism that claims that opposites attract seems particularly well-verified by the amity that had united the physician and Professor Terrier for thirty years. The latter, in fact, was essentially calm, grave, punctilious and measured. Possessed of an impassive temperament, he would not have been more emotional in the midst of a cataclysm than in the presence of a simple experiment in hydrostatics. His pupils were no less appreciative of the honorability of his character than the depth of his knowledge. More than one of them, without resources, had been able to pursue his transcendent studies thanks to the support of the master, who, in those circumstances, hollowed out formidable breaches in the modest edifice of his savings with an antique simplicity.

Gédéon Cahusac, the third guest, was a hearty fellow of twenty-four, with an alert appearance. He was able to live up to the title of "good companion" everywhere—and that, for the time being, was his sole worldly ambition. At the age of twenty, after three successive attempts, he had secured the palms of the baccalaureate in letters, and thought he had done sufficient merit to the fatherland. At fifteen, he had lost his father, a very honorable retired justice of the peace. When he had attained his majority, his

mother had put him in possession of the paternal heritage, but the new capitalist found so many side-tracks along his path that after two years his notary had been obliged to warn him that henceforth, he would have to fight a rearguard action.

That day, Maître Desiflard had summoned his client and had delivered this sage speech: "My dear Gédéon, on examining your accounts, I have been horrified. I was your father's friend, as you know; I therefore owe you some advice. I will admit, first of all, that in your case I have been slightly at fault, for I should have kept a closer watch on you. But who could have imagined that you would conduct yourself in such a reckless fashion? Without either of us noticing it, you have arrived within two steps of ruination. Believe me, look after the remaining wreckage. Convert the five thousand francs that remains to you into an income, and go to live with your mother—who will, I'm sure, receive you with open arms."

Gédéon, who was not stupid, understood the wisdom of this advice, thanked the notary, and asked him to obtain an income of seven hundred francs for him. "So, on the brink of being ruined, I'm becoming a *rentier*," he said, simply. Resigned on that point, he said goodbye to his entresol, and, with his heart full of the most magnificent intentions, he also asked Maître Desiflard to go to his mother to ask her for bed and board for him.

The good lady wept with joy on learning that her son wanted to behave sensibly from now on, and prepared the best room in the house for him. She even increased the size of her apartment by renting a vast room that had previously served as a painter's studio; the prodigal son was therefore able to rehouse his collection, which consisted of sabers, fencing foils, masks, gloves, canes, horns, rifles, daggers, knives, bows, arrows, clubs, nets, sculls, a hammock, pipes, etc.

Since then, Gédéon had lived a relatively tranquil existence. After a year, his imagination, his whims and his habits had seemed to be regularly channeled, when, in spite of his uncle's cares, assisted by his most illustrious colleagues, Madame Cahusac had been carried off by a sudden illness. The far-sighted mother, however, with the sureness and power of prescience that sometimes animates the dying, taking her son's hands in hers, had said to him in her brother's presence:

"My child, I'm doomed; they're hiding it from me, but I sense it. The moment has come; listen to me carefully. You've already spent a small fortune; I've mourned the fact, but I've never reproached you for it, and that was perhaps a mistake. You'll be in possession of what remains to us. Everything has been converted into an income from the State. Entrust your titles to your uncle, and he'll give you your pension regularly every month. It will be sufficient for you to live honorably, if you exercise a little order. In addition, my child, think about a profession for the future. Now I can die without regrets, if you promise to follow my advice."

Gédéon, with tears in his eyes, swore solemnly to his mother that he would obey her last wishes, and the doctor, no less emotional, had made a formal engagement to maintain his nephew on the right track. A few hours later, Madame Cahusac had rendered her last sigh.

A month later, Gédéon got rid of the apartment, only keeping the studio, to which he annexed two rooms in which he accommodated all the family furniture. The doctor, strictly preserving the cost of the rent, which had been considerably exposed, began to dole out a monthly pension of two hundred and fifty francs.

At first, the young man had had several fits of serious reflection and successively envisaged all the professions to which he might aspire, but all of them had presented him with inhibitory circumstances. *In fact, I have plenty of time*, he said to himself; *let's not rush into anything. A wise man assures us that, in serious matters, it's necessary to think long and hard. A classical author has formulated the festina lente; I therefore have the right to hide behind these authorities, if ever I'm taken to task on the matter. After all, I'm faithful enough to my oath not to remain inactive. Only yesterday, I took my canoe from Asnière to the Râpée, and I don't believe that there are many ditch-diggers who did as much work. The day before, I spent all afternoon fencing at Lecour's, and on emerging therefrom, I could certainly claim, like Titus, that I hadn't wasted my day.*

We ought to add that Gédéon had recently conceived a fine passion for painting, and had made several attempts to develop a talent still in its rudimentary state, but his art had only translated itself thus far in the composition of a whimsical fresco applied surreptitiously to a whitewashed wall, whose incendiary shades made all the art students in the neighborhood roar with laughter. In addition, he gladly sacrificed to Euterpe, by frequenting a horn class, which was held in the second basement of a

café in the Boulevard Saint-Michel. Finally, thanks to a special disposition, he was able to imitate to perfection all the comedians in the capital.

This whimsical existence was not a veritable solution to living cheaply, so, by the middle of the month, Gédéon was generally harnessed, for a good fortnight, to Lucifer's tail. He had even got ahead of that fatal epoch, on the day when we saw him failing to make a breach in the doctor's inflexible blockade.