THE SECRETS OF MONSIEUR SYNTHESIS

Prologue: Scientists and Policemen

I

That day—it was at the beginning of April 1884—the Prefect of Police seemed to be prey to a violent preoccupation.

Sitting at a vast desk cluttered with papers, he was taking inventory of the contents of a file, frequently interrupting himself to twist his fine moustache, which was already graying, or to run his hand through his curly hair, harmoniously arranged by means of an iron comb.

Then, his impatience having been exasperated rather than calmed by this harassment of his pilose appendages, he got up abruptly, kicking his armchair backwards with his heel, which scraped as it moved, and paced up and down in the office. It was decorated in green rep—the immutable rep, without which there is no decorative art for our modern administrations.

"And that imbecile of an agent hasn't arrived!" he murmured, slyly glancing at his reflection in the big black-famed mirror fixed to the chimney-breast.

For the third time, his finger pressed an ivory button that set off an entire carillon of electric bells. At the same moment a grave, clean-shaven usher with a gleaming head opened the door, took three steps forward with a sort of solemn urgency and seemed ready to take root in the midst of a rose-shaped design on the carpet.

"Number 27?" said the Prefect, curtly.

"Number 27 has just arrived, and is waiting in the antechamber at Monsieur le Préfet's disposal."

"Send him in! Get going—hurry up!" He shoved the still-solemn usher, whose legs only worked with majestic slowness.

Then the Prefect uttered a sigh of satisfaction, sat down in his armchair, covered the open file with a blotting-pad, picked up a nail-file in order to look nonchalant, set his face straight and waited.

"Number 27!" announced the usher.

"Good! I'm not in to anyone." Then, eyeing the new arrival—a man of about thirty, with an intelligent but singularly pale face—he spoke to him rudely, without even returning his salute. "Here you are at last, Monsieur! It's ten o'clock in the morning, and I've been waiting for you since yesterday evening! I give you a very important confidential mission, with an express instruction to employ all possible diligence, and you keep me kicking my heels for twelve hours!"

"But Monsieur le Préfet..."

"Silence! Your mission complete—successfully or unsuccessfully, I don't yet know—you amuse yourself idling instead of coming here, and you allow yourself to be robbed, like a fool, of the portfolio containing the report so dear to my heart, along with my instructions."

The agent, frankly nonplussed by seeing his chief informed of a detail the he had believed to be known only to him and the thief, could not help making a gesture of surprise. That gesture, immediately suppressed, was succeeded, as rapidly as thought, by a sequence of facial expression indicating a mental process that might have been translated as: "What! Is the boss cleverer than I thought? Is he suspicious of me? Was it him who stole my portfolio? But why?"

"Well? Don't you have anything to say? What response do you have to make?"

"That the fact is exactly correct. My portfolio has been stolen. Oh, very subtly—the thief who pulled it off is a cunning one—a villain and a half, and the rogue was the first one robbed, for, on the one hand, the wallet didn't contain a sou, and on the other, my report is written in a code to which only I possess the key."

"You think so?" said the magistrate, ironically.

"Absolutely, Monsieur le Préfet."

"And if I were to show you the document—or, rather, its translation into good French—what would you say?"

"That it's impossible!"

"Well, my lad, here's the original, written by you in pencil, and here's the translation...I'll keep the latter. Read your statement aloud; in the meantime, I'll compare the two."

The agent, however, utterly astounded, thinking that he was dreaming, stood there as if petrified, his arms stuck to his body, without even seeming to see that the chief was holding the paper out to him.

The Prefect savored his triumph momentarily, and then went on, in his harsh voice: “I seem to be waiting!”

Number 27 appeared to make a violent effort, took his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away the sweat that was trickling down his livid face, took the paper, and said in a weak voice: “Synthesis affair. In conformity with my chief’s orders, I sought to edify myself in the matter of a mysterious individual who, for a month, has constituted a sort of living enigma for Parisian society...”

“There, if I’m not mistaken, is the veritable literature of a one-sou periodical,” the magistrate interrupted, sarcastically. “But continue...we’re comparing...there’s a time and a place for criticism.

“The individual, who answers to the bizarre name of Monsieur Synthesis, is resident at the Grand Hotel. Monsieur Synthesis is a tall old man whose age is impossible to estimate precisely, although, his vigor notwithstanding, he is definitely over sixty...”

“More and more like a serial novel,” murmured the Prefect.

“He appears to be Dutch or Swedish in origin,” Number 27 continued, “and his life is very strange. He receives few visitors. His two servants, fearsome-looking negroes, veritable Cerberuses, subject visitors to a sort of examination, demanding passwords from them, and rigorously excluding them when their responses are unsatisfactory.

“It is said of Monsieur Synthesis that he is an obsessive scientist, always occupied in covering blank sheets of paper with chemical formulae and algebraic equations, and that that is the sole motive for his reclusiveness.

“It is also said that his fortune is colossal, that in his apartment the most precious gems—diamonds, sapphires or rubies—are scattered literally everywhere, and that he possesses several coffers filled with these stones.

“There may be some exaggeration in that, but what I can affirm is that he has a credit of a hundred million at Rothschild’s.”

“You really said a hundred million?”

“I got the figure from the chief cashier.”

“Damn! That’s positive. His stones might only be pebbles, but Rothschild’s gold is solid. Go on.”

“It is also said, and it seems superabundantly proven by the affirmations of the hotel staff, that Monsieur Synthesis does not eat and never sleeps. He has only been down to the dining room once and has never been served anything whatsoever in his apartment. His servants have never brought provisions into the hotel, and they say to whoever wants to know that their master does not know what sleep is. Furthermore, there no beds, divans or chaise-longues in the apartment.

“These very strange singularities are perhaps sufficient to recommend the individual to the discreet attention of the authorities...”

“You’re right, and your literature is sometimes worthwhile. Discreet attention...that’s dead right. It’s necessary to be discreet with regard to an eccentric who might have a hundred million at his disposal, and yet it’s a good idea to have information about him...”

“To the discreet attention of the authorities,” Number 27 resumed, glad of his chief’s approval, “if only because of one undeniable fact—for it belongs to the domain of real life—that has traversed that mysterious existence.

“A few days after his arrival in Paris, Monsieur Synthesis put himself in communication with the firm of Rouquayrolle and Denayrousse and placed an order for five hundred diving suits.

“The apparatus in question is of an improved type, provided with a reservoir about the size of a soldier’s kitbag. The respirable air contained in the reservoir under strong pressure can supply the needs of a diver for six hours. The pumps serving to inject the respiratory element, as well as the tubes communicating with the apparatus have, by virtue of that fact, been eliminated, and a man, carrying his air-supply with him, possesses an entire liberty of movement and action. These diving-suits are called ‘independent.’

“Delivery was made five days ago at the Gare Saint-Lazare, paid for in cash and sent to Le Havre by special train. The five hundred sets of equipment are already stowed in the hold of the large steamer *Anna*, moored at the quay of the Eure basin.”

“That’s all, isn’t it?”

“That’s all for the moment, Monsieur le Préfet.”

“Good. Your hieroglyphs are entirely in conformity with my translation. I have no complaint to make about the terms of the report, which compensates me agreeably for the habitual prose of my auxiliaries.

“This is, in any case, only the embryo of an investigation; I have no doubt that you’ll soon be able to extract from this series of mysteries a good and substantial police file, as rigorous as an equation, explaining all these phenomena in a satisfactory fashion. Be extremely prudent, though, and don’t amuse yourself be getting stupidly robbed...”

“Oh, Monsieur le Préfet, it wasn’t for my pleasure that I was relieved of my portfolio and received a solid thrust from a knife....”

“You! A thrust from a knife...where? When?”

"Yesterday evening, at nine o'clock, about half an hour after having been robbed. I was going home, very upset, to write a second report from memory. I live, as you know, on the Quai de Béthune. An unknown man who was following close behind me abruptly went past me, stopped in front of me, looked at me momentarily, then reached out his arm and hit me, hard.

"It seemed to me that I'd received a punch in the middle of my chest. I uttered a cry. I saw the gaslight dancing, and then fell on to the sidewalk. The unknown man ran away at top speed, while two policemen came running in response to my cry. They picked me up and brought me round. I made myself known to them and they took me to the Hôtel-Dieu.

"The intern on duty made me a dressing, and declared that the wound wasn't dangerous, but insisted nevertheless on keeping me there overnight, only letting me out half an hour ago. That, Monsieur le Préfet, is why I couldn't present myself to you at the agreed time."

"Oh! My poor boy, why didn't you say so sooner? What, a knife-thrust! It's true, then, that people get murdered in Paris?"

"It appears so, Monsieur le Préfet."

"That complicates the situation singularly. By the way, there's no point in my keeping you in the dark any longer. Do you recognize this portfolio?"

"It's mine."

"The man who stole it from you was arrested shortly afterwards in a brawl, and taken to the commissaire. He was searched. This wallet was found on him, with your agent's identity card and various papers, which the commissaire was intelligent enough to send to me immediately. I found your report, and had it deciphered by one of my employees.

"All that is elementary, but what I find infinitely less clear, and no less disagreeable for you, is the murder attempt of which you've been the victim. Mustn't there be a correlation between the two events?"

"It seems very probable to me."

"Well, we'll find out.[1] For the moment, take things easy. Rest at home for a few days, for I believe you've been *burned*. In the meantime, this is to compensate you."

With these words, the Prefect opened a strong-box, took out a handful of louis and handed them to the agent, who melted in gratitude.

"One more word before you go. Sit down for a moment, for you must be tired. Let's see, what's your personal opinion about the delivery of these five hundred diving suits? For the moment, that's the key element of the situation. Whether Monsieur Synthesis eats or sleeps is of no importance to us. He's entirely at liberty to recommence Dr. Tanner's experiments and take them further than the American. But the diving suits...!"

"You're right, Monsieur le Préfet. An individual, even if he were the owner of all the fisheries in Ceylon, or crazed by the prospect of one day being the unique shareholder in the Vigo Bay treasure—that is to say, whether he's a multimillionaire or raving mad—would never think of ordering the equipment of that future army of divers..."

"That's true. A regiment, if not an army of divers."

"My opinion, since you do me the honor of asking me to formulate it, is that it would be a good idea to put an embargo on the *Anna*, Monsieur Synthesis' steamer."

"That's serious—I ought to refer it to the minister. On the other hand, it would be necessary to know whether this individual is a foreign national, and not to create diplomatic complications lightly. And yet, we can't let five hundred diving-suits out of a French port without knowing where they're going.

"At present, we're going through a kind of crisis whose manifestations take many forms...political, agricultural, financial, commercial. There are a great many malcontents...individuals conspiring, parties agitating, nations arming. Individuals are jealous of one another, peoples hate one another...

"Might this mystery, which is intriguing us at the moment, be connected by an invisible thread to that stagnation, which is easier to define than analyze? Who knows whether we might not be on the track of a plot against the life of a sovereign or the security of a people?"

The perplexity of the Prefect of Police must have been immense, for him to let himself indulge in such a monologue in front of his modest collaborator. Finally perceiving that he was thinking aloud, he interrupted his tirade abruptly and bid farewell to Number 27, recommending him once again to be very circumspect.

He was about to take advantage of that rare moment of solitude to look at the enigma to which Monsieur Synthesis was the key from every angle when the usher reappeared, still grave and solemn.

"Number 32 is waiting in the small office," he said, unctuously.

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[1] In fact, we never do; this plot-element is a casualty of the story's first change of direction, and the mystery in question is simply forgotten. There are numerous other passages in the text in which elements are introduced to the story with an apparent view to future development, but which are then forgotten or flatly contradicted. Many could be removed by the deletion of a couple of sentences, to the benefit of the coherency the whole, but as the author never did so, I have left them in place.

"Send him in," replied the Prefect, in the resigned tone of a man who knows that his time is not his own. "What! You here? I thought you were in Switzerland mounting surveillance on the nihilist refugees."

"I got back last week."

"And I haven't seen you yet?"

"I was following someone who was giving me a great deal of trouble, and as I was being followed myself, without knowing by whom, I thought it would be imprudent to come to Company headquarters."

"That's all right. What's new?"

"Lots, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Do you have a full report?"

"A verbal report, Monsieur le Préfet."

"Why not a written note?"

"Because the proverb *verba volant, scripta manent* is false, like most proverbs. Words are fleeting but so are writings..."

"That's true. Tell me your story, and don't spare me the details. Everything connected with the acts and deeds of the people you're responsible for watching is of the highest importance."

"I was in Geneva for five weeks, and thanks to the agents of the Muscovite police stationed in the city, I was well up to date with what the refugees were up to. My task was easy, anyway, since I only had to pay attention to those who were going to France, or coming back from France to Switzerland.

"I was particularly interested in an individual of bizarre appearance, incoherent conduct and nationality that's dubious, to say the least, but very clearly defined as regards profession. He was a chemist, but a chemist of a kind one doesn't see any more and who seemed to have emerged from one of those laboratories crammed with retorts, alembics, baroque apparatus and stuffed crocodiles in which the alchemists of the Middle Ages elaborated their sorceries. Everything about him is extraordinary, including his name, which struck me immediately. He called—or, rather, calls—himself Alexis Pharmaque."

"But that's not a name—it's a pun. Alexipharmaque, as a single word, signifies, I believe, *antidote*—a remedy for some harmful principle."

"Pierre Larousse's dictionary gave me that information."

"Perhaps it's just a pseudonym."

"That's more than probable. At any rate, my Alexis Pharmaque possessed, in a remote house on the outskirts of a suburb, an admirably-equipped laboratory, in which he fabricated, from dawn to dusk and dusk to dawn, a whole series of familiar and unfamiliar explosives."

"Damn!"

"Fulminates, pyroxyles, nitrobenzene, bellinite, seranine, petrolite, sebastine, panclastite, mataziette, tonite, glonoine, dynamite, dualine, glyoxyline, saxifragine, destructive gelatine and many others whose names I don't know—he experimented with everything, as tranquil as the god Terminus[2] in the midst of all that thunder in bottles.

"In between times, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he taught chemistry to the Russian refugees, especially the part of the science relating to explosive substances. I was, if not one of the most knowledgeable, at least one of the most zealous of his pupils.

"Our professor's existence was going by in absolute calm, without being in the least troubled by studies and experiments that were scabrous, to say the least, when an unexpected event revolutionized it from top to bottom. A letter—a simple letter—that arrived from France one morning, tore Monsieur Alexis Pharmaque away from his laboratory, his formulae and his experiments.

"I've been summoned to Paris," he told us, without any preamble. "A scientist, the most illustrious among us, has sent for me. I'll receive a superb salary, which is of little importance to me, but I'll have the opportunity to do transcendent chemistry in the capacity of assistant to Monsieur Synthesis, whose name..."

"What!" the Prefect interrupted. "Did you say Monsieur Synthesis?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Préfet. What a bizarre name, alongside that of Alexis Pharmaque! Another pseudonym, probably. These scientists can't do anything like the rest of the world!

"And, without further delay, our professor bids us goodbye, lets his laboratory to one of the Russians for a derisory sum, packs his manuscripts into a trunk and takes the first train to Paris.

"Sniffing an adventure, I make myself a disguise in order not to be recognized by the traveler, get on the same train and come back to France with him."

"Very good! That's very good!"

"We arrive in Paris, and I follow my man, who leads me in a carriage to the Rue Galvani—a new street that goes from the Rue Laugier to the Boulevard Gouvion-Saint-Cyr. The carriage stops in front of a vast enclosing wall pierced by a little bastard door and a big coaching entrance with two iron battens. At the first ring, the latter

[2] Stone images of the Roman god Terminus were often used as boundary-markers.

opens wide, then closes again on the carriage, scarcely giving me time to perceive, between the courtyard and the garden, a spacious single-story house and extensive outbuildings.

"I waited for an hour for the fiacre to come out again, in vain. War-weary, I had to go home, promising myself to clarify the matter the following day, as early as possible.

"In principle, that seems quite simple—to enter a Parisian house, to get the people to talk, and obtain information about the inhabitants. It's the ABC of the business, for us.

"I was obliged, however, to reduce my pretentions in confrontation with doors that were pitilessly closed, the exasperating mutism of people who didn't want to unclench their teeth and in flexible orders—the absolute impenetrability of people and things.

"Naturally, my curiosity as piqued, all the more so because I saw the mystery thicken further.

"I used every pretext—I'll say almost every means—to obtain intelligence regarding the place, or at least to get inside. I became, by turns, a commissionaire, a telegraph courier, a city inspector of gas and water...I ran out of disguises.

"Scarcely had I rung at the accursed door than a huge devil of a negro appeared, spoke to me in a language I didn't understand, and, when I tried to speak to him in French, sent me away, grimacing a smile that made him resemble a bulldog.

"I was all the more enraged because I saw, at more-or-less irregular intervals, a coupé harnessed to a black horse, as rapid as the wind, arrive, with its blinds down, and plunge through the gate, which opened and closed, so to speak, automatically. As I never saw it come out, any more than my former professor's fiacre, I concluded that there was an exit to the Boulevard Gouvion-Saint-Cyr.

"It was there that I stationed myself yesterday afternoon, in a carriage drawn by an excellent horse, driven by one of our agents."

"Well done," the Prefect put in, increasingly interested.

"In fact, my patience was rewarded sooner than I had expected. I'd only been there for an hour than a door pierced in a high wall that I had assumed to surround waste ground abruptly opened; the coupé appeared, and took off like an arrow.

"My coachman, given instructions beforehand, set off in its tracks without further delay, ready to break his horse in order not to lose sight of the fierce trotter. After a fantastic race through Paris we arrived at the corner of the Place Sorbonne, facing the large chemical supply company, Fontaine and Son, and I had the honor of seeing Alexis Pharmaque in person get down.

"I let him go into the store, and then started pacing up and down on the sidewalk like an idle stroller. I took advantage of the moment when he emerged, having concluded his business, to bump into him as if by accident.

"'Why, it's you, my dear Master!' I cried, delightedly.

"'Eh! You, here, my dear Monsieur! By what chance?"

"'I've been recalled to Paris because my father's gravely ill, and I've just registered with the secretariat of the Faculty of Sciences.'

"'So you're still working?'

"'In truth, I got a taste for chemistry under your skillful direction, and I intend to continue those studies, having made such a good start.'

"'That's excellent—I congratulate you.'

"'And you, my dear Master—how are you?'

"'Oh, I've got everything I could wish. Can you imagine that I'm in charge of a laboratory as big as those of the Sorbonne and the Collège de France combined, that I have outstanding chemists as auxiliaries, and the most extraordinary man in the two hemispheres for an employer?'

"'Yes—Monsieur Synthesis. I remember the bizarre nickname of the man who summoned you from Geneva last week.'

"'His real name, would you believe?—a marvelous, sublime, incomparable individual, more knowledgeable on his own account than the Bibliothèque Nationale, richer than all the financiers in the entire world, more powerful than all the monarchs and princes recorded in the Almanac of Gotha."

"'You've renounced the special study of explosive substances, then,' I said, taking a chance.

"'Oh, my dear chap, what do such childish things matter when we're on the eve of undertaking a gigantic, unprecedented, improbably project, the very idea of which transports me with admiration, almost with terror. I can't find expressions to describe my sentiments to you, for words are only words, and my tongue is impotent to formulate the thoughts crowding my head. Anyway, the secret isn't mine, and I can't tell you anymore. Simply know that you'll soon hear mention of us, that the names of Monsieur Synthesis and his humble collaborators will shine over the entire world like a meteor when we've realized the Great Work, the conception of genius of the master of us all!

"'But I must leave you...adieu, or rather, *au revoir*. Time's pressing, and I still have a great deal to do to finish our initial preparations."

"'Are you leaving soon?"

"'In a week or ten days, with an immense personnel. Four ships—four big steamers, you understand—literally stuffed with chemical reagents of every sort, unknown machines, marvelous items of apparatus, will transport Monsieur Synthesis and his aides..."

"'That's prodigious!'

"'You've said it—prodigious! Look, to give you a simple and very vague idea of the importance of the enterprise, know that, among other accessories, one of our ships is carrying five hundred diving-suits!'"

II

The Prefect of Police was definitely becoming more intrigued by the mystery surrounding Monsieur Synthesis.

In spite of the very absorbing multiple occupations created for him by his functions as the ultimate head of the Parisian police and his mandate as a député, his thoughts returned involuntarily to that strange man, whose enigmatic identity his agents were unable to discover.

It was not only a preoccupation, but a wholehearted obsession.

Torn between his professional desire to know and the fear of making a blunder, he hesitated, prevaricated, became annoyed and got no further forward.

Attacked for some time by the press of all parties, which did not spare their gibes and jabs, reproaching him for his arrogance, his abrupt mannerisms and his dictatorial style, he felt instinctively that reporters with the eyes of Argus were on the lookout for a false step, a mere lack of tact, or anything at all, in order to nail him once again to the pillory of ridicule and make jokes at his expense that would amuse the public of the two worlds.

Oh, if such a circumstance had presented itself at the beginning of his career, when, full of the ardor of a neophyte, he did not recognize any obstacles, the difficulty would soon have been overcome. Unfortunately for him, he had to his credit a few petty abuses of power, which, after having been hotly raised and envenomed in the daily papers, had earned him, in private, an unkind reflection formulated with a pinched expression by the Minister of the Interior: "No untimely zeal, my dear chap, and above all, be adroit."

Being adroit—there was the catch. Everything to do, everything to say, on the formal condition of avoiding bad publicity. Outside the Chambre, he accosted the minister in the corridor and opened his mouth to acquaint him with his perplexities. Although little susceptible to intimidation, he prudent shut it again, in far of hearing his boss riposte, in his sharp and pointed tone: "Well, my dear chap, you're the Prefect of Police; you exercise unlimited power—clarify the matter, damn it!"

Clarifying the matter was easier to say than to do, in the presence of a situation that the reports of agents only make murkier.

For, in the final analysis, was Monsieur Synthesis definitely living at the Grand Hotel or in the mysterious house in the Rue Galvani? Was this scientist, doubling as a nabob; this original, who neither slept nor ate; who possessed a fleet of steamships and commanded a small army of scientists; who, finally, summoned to his presence, in order to make him his factotum, a man once living on intimate terms with Russian nihilists, even a single individual? Or did the individuality of "Monsieur Synthesis" shelter a collectivity of impersonal beings, acting with a hidden, perhaps criminal, objective?

If not, why that claustration, those inflexible orders, that double residence, those comings and goings of carriages as rapid as the wind, that laboratory hidden from all eyes, those machines without names or apparent purposes? Why, finally, that improbable quantity of diving apparatus?

And the Prefect of Police, increasingly obsessed, allowed himself to formulate an interminable succession of *whys* without arriving at a single logical, or even admissible *because*.

"Very well!" he finally said, in the tone of a resolute man who has just reached a decision, come what may. "I'll tackle the situation myself, and stake everything if I have to. People are always telling me that my job is on the line; I'll do it with a clear conscience. Instead of entrusting the continuation of the affair to timorous or maladroit agents, I'll take it in hand without further delay, and see to it personally. Until now, hat's succeeded, while not displeasing my enemies in the Parisian and departmental press.

"I'll go to see Monsieur Synthesis and get a good look at him, in an interview that he can't refuse, either to the Prefect of Police or to a député."

He rang without respite, as if to avoid giving himself time for reflection, asked for his carriage, and said to the coachman: "Grand Hotel!"

A few turns of the wheel took him to the splendid caravanserai, where a cosmopolitan crowd drawn from all parts of the globe agitates continually.

As a prudent man wanting to leave as little as possible to chance, he summoned the hotel manager, introduced himself, and demanded to see the register in which the names of travelers were inscribed, particularly the page on which mention ought to be found of Monsieur Synthesis's arrival.

He read:

Monsieur Synthese, Élias-Alexander, born 4 October 1802 in Stockholm, Sweden. Previous domicile, Calcutta.

Mademoiselle Anna Van Praet, born 1 January 1866 in Rotterdam, Holland. Previous domicile, Calcutta.

Two negro domestics.

Entered hotel 26 January 1884.

"Good, thank you! That's all I wanted to know. By the way, who is this young person, Mademoiselle Van Praet?"

"She's Monsieur Synthesis' granddaughter."

"Very good. Will you please take me to your guest's apartment."

"It's on the second floor, overlooking the street. Would you like to take the elevator?"

"No thank you," the Prefect replied, distractedly, following the employee charged with escorting him. Then he added, privately: *Eighty-two years old! And Swedish! Perhaps some mystical adept of Swedenborg, some dreamer with a brain clouded by his native mists...*

Like any self-respecting Frenchman fond of philosophy or literature, the Prefect of Police could not be ignorant of the name of Swedenborg, the strange man who was not only a visionary but also one of the most remarkable of scientists. But that was all he knew about Sweden.

In any case, one can be a passable advocate, an occasionally brilliant orator, and not know that Scandinavia, where talents are superabundant, can be proud of, among others, Linnaeus, Berzelius, Santesson, Huss, Acharius, Swanberg, Retzius, etc.—not to mention Elias Synthesis.

One of Monsieur Synthesis's two bodyguards is sitting in the antechamber. He is a Bhil from Hindustan, not a negro, as agent Number 27's report contended, and the hotel register also indicated. The error is excusable, though, for anyone who has not studied anthropology, for the Hindu, with an epidermis the color of soot, coarse features and an almost-flat nose, could easily be mistaken for a black man were his hair not long, straight and smooth and his beard bushy.

At the sight of the unknown man coming toward him, preceded by a man in hotel livery, he rises to his feet as if pushed by a spring and takes up a position in front of the door, pronouncing a few words in an unknown language.

The Prefect takes a card from his pocket, held it out with his fingertips and simply replies: "Monsieur Synthesis."

The Bhil utters a sort of grunt, opens the door and disappears—only to reappear almost immediately.

That brief absence, however, seems to have modified his disposition toward the visitor. His sullen, prickly attitude has given way, as if by magic, to an almost amiable expression. He raises both hands above his head in the form of a cup, bows respectfully and invites the Prefect to follow him with a gesture.

Having gone through two rooms in succession, they arrive in a large, luxuriously-furnished drawing room transformed into a work-room. Then the Hindu withdraws and resumes his sentry duty.

The Prefect of Police then perceives a tall old man, sitting motionless on a cane chair with a very high seat, fixing him with a calm, slightly veiled gaze. His hypnotic expression is singularly troubling.

The old man rises slightly, replies with a nod of the head to his visitor's ceremonious bow, invites him with a benevolent gesture to sit down and resumes his original immobility.

That silence being equivalent to an interrogation, the Prefect of Police thinks that he ought to begin by explaining his purely official step and proffering the usual remarks habitual to a visitor who is neither expected nor, perhaps, desired but who has breached, outside of social convention, the legendary wall edified by Monsieur Guilloutet around the private life of citizens.[3]

While distilling his sentences with the superabundance of an advocate, for whom verbiage is no longer a habit but a need, the Prefect has time to examine the mysterious individual who intrigues him so intensely.

Everything about him corresponds, even to excess, to the idea that he has previously formed.

Monsieur Synthesis's head, a truly expressive head, is reminiscent, with no mistake, of the imposing mask of Darwin, popularized over a long period by illustrated periodicals. He definitely has the immense forehead of the illustrious English physiologist: a slightly receding forehead, like that of a dreamer, abruptly enlarged by two enormous lateral protuberances, which seems to be prolonged all the way to the occiput in a final and more enormous arch—doubling, so to speak, the capacity of the cranial cavity.

Profoundly sunk beneath a strangely preeminent arcade of eyebrows, the dark eyes, immobile beneath their broad lids, slightly lowered and hardly wrinkled, scintillate like globes of burning steel, their incomparable glow undiminished by prolonged sleeplessness, uninterrupted work and the accumulated years.

The long, thin nose with the proud aquiline curvature gives a singular expression of audacity and energy to that octogenarian mask framed by an almost white burgrave's beard, sprinkled with harsh black hairs, which falls into two long points over the breast of a giant.

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[3] The reference is to a celebrated political cartoon by "Cham," published in *Le Charivari* in 1869, parodying an item of legislation associated with an otherwise-obscure député named M. de Guilloutet.

The Prefect's introduction, irreproachable in form although somewhat convoluted in underlying substance, having given rise to a slight smile on Monsieur Synthesis's lips, he observes, with increasing astonishment, that the old man's mouth, like Victor Hugo's, is furnished with regular, perfectly healthy teeth, to whose existence prosthesis is completely unknown.

As with our immortal poet, it seems that that youthful denture is, for Monsieur Synthesis, the subject of coquetry—a perfectly justified coquetry, moreover, for nothing is more gracious, especially in an old man, than the unexpected appearance of those organs, whose persistence in an octogenarian drives away any idea of decrepitude.

The smile soon repressed, Monsieur Synthesis's visage suddenly resumes its habitual expression of austere gravity. With a gesture that seems to be familiar to him, he passes a small, brown, hairy hand with gnarled and strangely stout fingers over the points of his beard. Then he finally replies, in a slow but sonorous, well-tempered voice without any hint of a foreign accent; "Your action causes no injury to my person, nor any infringement of my liberty. I admit that all the more readily because you might have sent me an awkward or over-zealous subaltern that I would have had my Hindus Apawo and Wirama send away."

"Precious bodyguards..."

"And incorruptible, who oppose an unbreachable dyke to the torrent of Parisian indiscretions. I live, as you know, in a very reclusive fashion, for my work, which is the very essence of my existence and my only reason for being demands an almost absolute claustration. It is therefore not astonishing that, on the one hand, that desired and sought claustration, and, on the other hand, the preparations that I am making at present for an expedition, have earned me a certain reputation for eccentricity from which I do not seek to defend myself."

Finally, we're getting there, the Prefect of Police says to himself, delighted by the favorable turn that the conversation had taken.

"Strange things must have been recounted concerning me, I suppose?"

"Strange, in truth."

"Enormities, doubtless?"

"Nonsensical things..."

"And you thought that a conversation with me might dissipate the suspicions that you have probably shared. Oh, don't bother to deny it! Although I'm utterly indifferent to the thoughts, judgments, actions or gestures of contemporaries, I understand perfectly that certain particularities of my life must give pause for thought to the authorities, generally suspicious and sometimes umbrageous. It is, therefore, quite natural that, being a guest in a country, I should comply with the laws, regulations and formalities applicable to nationals as well as foreigners.

"I shall, therefore, do my best to satisfy you. You want to know who I am? An old student who has been seeking, for seventy years, to discover nature's secrets. Where do I come from? I could say everywhere, for there is scarcely a single remote corner of the globe in which I have not sown the shreds of my errant life. Where am I going? You shall soon know.

"Perhaps you desire to be edified regarding my person in terms of my citizenship. Like a simple vagabond to a gendarme, I shall show you my 'papers.' You will see that I am of good composition. I have a great many papers!

"Here, first of all, is a birth certificate establishing that I was the issue, on 4 October 1804 in Stockholm, of the legitimate marriage of Jacobus Synthesis and Christine Zorn.

"Here, in addition, formulated in all the languages of the world, is a fine collection of diplomas awarded to your servant by scientific faculties. There are about two hundred of them. I've thought about getting them bound and forming a rather original folio volume.

"These parchments decorated with multicolored wax disks confer noble status on me in many different countries, of which I've lost count. I'm something of an English baronet, a count of the Holy Roman Empire, a berg in Germany, a Danish prince, a citizen of the United States, the Swiss Republic, etc., etc.

"A few sovereigns have honored me with their friendship and have written me the most flattering letters in their own hand. Would you like to know the terms in which the King of Holland, the old German Emperor, the amiable and knowledgeable sovereign of Brazil and the monarchs of Austria and Italy talk about me? Consult the collection...it's not lacking in interest.

"You can even interrogate the dead. Here...decipher this spidery scrawl scribbled by the late autocrat Nicholas of Russia—a rude man, just between the two of us, who didn't like scientists much! Examine, too, these epic characters picked out by your Bernadotte, who was our king[4] and honored me with his amity...

"The very modern paper that you can see on my desk is a simple bond of a hundred millions, payable on presentation to Messieurs de Rothschild...my pocket money."

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[4] Jean-Baptiste Bernardotte, a Maréchal de France, was elected as heir apparent and regent of Sweden in order to appease Napoléon I, but subsequently joined the anti-Napoléonic alliance. He was king for Sweden and Norway from 1818-1844.

“Your pocket money!” the Prefect of Police finally interrupts, with a start.

“Of course. I have five hundred millions in the Bank of England, as many in the Banque de France, and more than double that in America. I could, strictly speaking, realize two billion in no time at all, if the whim took me. Moreover, that’s not all I possess—far from it; I have many other means of minting money. But let’s continue, if you wish, the examination of my references...look, what do you think of this series of multicolored baubles, pinned in these glass cases like butterfly-collections classified by an entomologist?”

The Prefect of Police, increasingly astonished, perceives the strangest amalgam of decorations of every shape, hue and country of origin: plaques, chains, pins, stars and crosses, scintillating flamboyantly beneath an opulent seeding of precious stones.

“It’s needless to say, isn’t it,” Monsieur Synthesis continues, in his cold tone, “that I don’t attach any importance to these trinkets, which don’t even have, so far as I’m concerned, the value of the stones they contain. I didn’t ask for them; they were offered to me and I keep them out of politeness, as well as the certificates, which form a second folio. What does it matter to me, in sum, to be a commander, a grand cross, a great eagle or a mere chevalier of this or that order?

“In any case, I’ve hardly been awarded any in the last twenty years, for the excellent reason that I have almost all of them already.

“By the way, I forgot to tell you that all these specimens of jewelry—I was going to say scrap iron—have the originality that they are garnished by gems of my own manufacture.”

“What!” cries the Prefect of Police, whose astonishment is growing by the minute. “You really possess the secret of fabricating precious stones? What they say about you is true, then?”

“It’s all true, Monsieur! Everything, you understand! Besides, making diamonds is child’s play. Haven’t several of your compatriots manufactured them too, at least in the state of exceedingly tiny crystals? If they had had the patience or the means of continuing their experiments, doubtless they would have succeeded, like me, in obtaining specimens of any size at will.

“So, I could, if the whim took me, inundate the market tomorrow with gems from my laboratory and sell them at a derisory price—but what would be the point of lowering a solid value, ruining a flourishing industry and throwing the traders and artisans that diamonds provide with an honorable living out of work? In consequence, I keep my secret.

“Look,” Monsieur Synthesis continues, picking up handfuls of white, black and yellow-tinted diamonds, mingled with rubies, from bronze cups, “here are some other specimens.”

“So,” the visitor stammers, stiffening himself against emotion, “all these are real?”

“Did you ever doubt it?” Monsieur Synthesis ripostes, with a slight frown. “Do I seem like a trickster? Are the material proofs that I’ve furnished not sufficient for you? I repeat, though, that all of this is trivial, and remains at ground level, in the mud of the gutter, by comparison with the gigantic dream, the desideratum that forms the unique goal of my thought, and which is my sole reason for existence...” Then, abruptly and without transition, he added. “Come on—do you think that anything is impossible in science?”

“In truth, Monsieur, our modern researchers saturate us with so many marvels that in our century of steam, electricity, telephones, phonographs and dirigible aerostats, I’m beginning to believe that science can realize anything.”

“Good! However, while observing the efforts of those researchers, and while applauding their success, I observe that their discoveries, excellent in themselves, apply exclusively to our globe.”

“Eh! Isn’t that enough?”

“No, certainly not. My personal visions extend much higher, much further. One example, among others: would you not—you, who, as the Prefect of Police, need to know about the actions and deeds of your contemporaries—be glad to know what is happening in the other worlds of our planetary system?”

“Certainly—and, profession apart, I’d be delighted from a purely human viewpoint to be edified regarding the intimate life of the planets orbiting our sun.”

“Very good. If you have time, I’ll explain to you, in a few words, my plans for communication between the Earth and Mars. It’s a simple project—in the air, without any wordplay—but whose application has nothing impossible about it.

“We already have luminous apparatus of such power that signals sent from the Earth could not fail to be perceived by the inhabitants of Mars. My intimate conviction is, moreover, that the latter have commenced giving us signs of life, perhaps without anyone on Earth, save for me, having thought about practical means of replying to them.

“But could we succeed in exchanging a few signals, given, on the one hand, the distance between the two planets and, on the other hand, the insufficiency of our optical instruments, in establishing a regular correspondence?”

“I think that’s absolutely impossible.”

“Yes, undoubtedly—and I add: with the present state of our means. But if optical apparatus remains insufficient, if the laws of optics themselves oppose—which I doubt—these interastral studies, it is for the science of the engineer, which has not said its last word, to intervene, at my discretion...”

“But...”

“...In such a fashion as to reduce the existing distance between the sidereal worlds.”

“How?”

“...And permit me to add, then, paraphrasing the celebrated words of the prophet: *If the planet will not come to me, I shall go to the planet!* Or, rather, we shall all go to the planet! For I, whom am speaking to you, expect, with the aid of time and toil, to modify the movement of the Earth through space...”

Hello! thinks the Prefect of Police. *Until now he’s been speaking like an eccentric, but reasonable, man. Now he’s setting off astride a hobby-horse that has probably transported his brain into interplanetary space. Monsieur Synthesis is nothing but a monomaniac, and I’ll make my arrangements to carry out an honorable retreat*.

“Yes,” the strange old man continues, “You think I’m mad because my concepts are several centuries, or several millennia, in advance of those of my contemporaries...even though you’ve just told me that science has no limits! Oh, you’re all the same! Come on, let’s reason it out. How many people do you think there are on Earth?”

“Statistics give an approximate figure of a billion.”

“Your statistics are absurd, and I have good reason for raising that figure to a billion and a half.”

“I’m willing to agree with you on that.”

“Have you ever thought about the formidable sum of work of which fifteen hundred million individuals are capable, aided by the most powerful machines of our industry, both men and machines occupied relentlessly in digging the ground, transporting soil, rocks and mountains—displacing entire continents, if necessary?”

“Formidable indeed. But what would be the objective of that universal earthwork?”

“The objective of modifying the shape of the Earth.”

“Why?”

“To displace its axis, in order to deviate it from its habitual course.”

“All right! I’m willing to regard the realization of that grandiose hypothesis as possible. But have you considered all the difficulties of detail that would emerge at every step? How would sovereigns, whether civilized or barbarian—who are, in sum, masters of their own lands—envisage your project?”

“I’ll buy their land for cash, and they’ll put their peoples to work. Everything is possible, at a price, and I’m theorizing at present on the basis of eventually becoming the landowner of the Earth.”

“If, in the end, everyone work working on the earthworks, how would the question of subsistence be resolved? It’s necessary to eat, and diggers have healthy appetites.”

“They won’t eat! Or rather, they won’t eat as you understand it. I solved that problem thirty years ago. For thirty years, you understand, not an atom of bread or meat has passed into my body, and I’m not unhealthy. On the contrary...but that’s only an unimportant detail. Let’s get back to the nightmare of space that haunts my brain!

“The form of our spheroid having been changed, its axis being displaced, the Earth will no longer obey the laws of intersidereal attraction in the same way. It will deviate from its course, no longer circulating immutably at the same distance from the sun. I shall, moreover, calculate that deviation, which I shall regulate in time and space.

“The Earth will therefore move through space at the whim of my desire, for I intend to steer it, matter being made in order to be vanquished. Then, riding my planet, I shall go to visit my brothers, the tyrants who are ruling the other planets. I shall play my part in the concert of potentates of the sidereal universe, who range constellations in battle and use asteroid-fire in bombardments...”

For some moments, the Prefect of Police had no longer been trying to follow his interlocutor in the capricious frolics executed by his mind. He saw the other suddenly turn his head and stare into a little metal mirror, which, fixed on the pedestal of a rather complicated mechanism, had suddenly stated rotating rapidly.

His body straight and rigid, his head held high, Monsieur Synthesis remained plunged in a sort of ecstasy for twenty seconds, his eyes wide open, without blinking, staring at the mirror, even though it was emitting an intense light. Then a rapid tremor ran through him, and his mouth opened slightly in a yawn.

“What’s the matter, Monsieur?” the Prefect of Police asks, no longer keeping count of his astonishments.

“It’s nothing,” Monsieur Synthesis replies, tranquilly. “My life is regulated like a chronometer, and I will not modify it for anyone. At the moment, I’m sleepy and I’m hungry.”

III

As soon as Monsieur Synthesis had pronounced the enigmatic words “I’m sleepy and I’m hungry,” his fit of lyricism came to an abrupt end. Not, however, that anything in his manner indicates sleep. His pose is still comfortable, his eyes wide open, his gestures free.

Nothing, on the other hand, advertises preparations for a meal, however summary. The servants are still at their post in the antechamber, and there is no trace of food in the apartment.

The Prefect of Police watches, silently.

Without seeming to take any account of his visitor’s presence, the strange old man heads slowly toward a safe built into the wall, opens it, takes out a metallic box and places it on the desk. Then, with the solemnity of a man about to accomplish an important action of a mysterious life of which he is about to reveal one of the secrets, he presses a button and the lid of the box springs upright.

The box, with a steely gleam, ornamented with admirable designs, simply encloses fifteen crystal bottles with ground-glass stoppers, symmetrically arranged like those of a traveling pharmacy.

Monsieur Synthesis, his face expansive and his eyes radiant, picks up a bottle without saying a word, unseals it, inserts the stopper into a little fissure constructed ad hoc, takes a spoon, inclines the bottle over it and dislodges a gray pill about the size of a wild cherry. He then fills up the spoon with a colorless liquid drawn from another bottle, and, turning to the Prefect, says to him curtly: “Will you excuse me? My stomach is incredibly demanding when the time comes for its unique daily meal. Today, I’m a minute late...a fraction more!”

And, without waiting for the assent that his interlocutor hastens to give him, to excuse his indiscretion, he rapidly swallows the contents of the spoon. Then, with a singular dexterity, he unseals a second bottle, shakes a second pill into the spoon, fills it up with the same liquid, ingurgitates the whole with a quiver of the tongue, and starts again...

He repeats the process ten times, then closes the box, replaces it in the safe, and comes back to sit down again.

Restored by that absorption—singularly vivifying, judging by the new energy that he suddenly seems to recuperate—Monsieur Synthesis utters the sigh of a replete man and adds: “Thus concludes my meal: that which I regard as the most essential—I might almost say unique—function of my material life, adequate for twenty-four hours. Mu culinary apparatus, as you see, is scarcely cumbersome, and the time employed in the refection of my organism is strictly economized.”

“What?” says the Prefect of Police, amazed. “You’re not going to take anything but those pills?”

“Absolutely nothing. I’ve already told you that I’ve been living like this for thirty years.”

“That’s prodigious.”

“Less so than you think. In any case, it’s perfectly rational.”

“I’ll no longer be astonished if people claim that you live without eating, since those who are not initiated into the secret of your existence have never seen you take nourishment.”

“Or, at least, nourishment as the vulgar understand it—for, in sum, it’s quite evident that the mere idea of living without eating would be the height of insanity.

“What is organic life? It’s the permanent erosion of the elements constituting all living organisms—a sort of uninterrupted combustion. Cease to put wood or oil in a fireplace and the fire goes out. Cease to make up the losses sustained by an organism by restoring substances analogous to those consumed by that process of combustion, and it withers and dies.

“With regard to myself, I will even confess to you, between us, that, far from living, as the vulgar expression has it, *on air*, I have a very healthy appetite.”

“Really?”

“The proof is that I’ve just absorbed in front of you the equivalent of two kilograms of beef. My meal, you see, to be scientific, has nothing platonic about it, in spite of the exiguity of its volume.”

“So you subject the meat to a sort of preparation, thanks to which you reduce the alimentary matter to a volume whose smallness permits you...”

“You’re on entirely the wrong track, for not a milligram of meat ever enters my laboratory.”

“Decidedly, I understand less and less.”

“It’s quite simple, though. In sum, what is flesh? It’s a substance composed of various elements in variable proportions, according to the nature of the animal that provides it. Take, for example, that of cattle. I’m not telling you anything new by saying to you that it’s formed of albumin, fibrin, hematosine, creatine, insonine, creatinine, gelatine, etc. It also includes, as you know, salts, notably chlorides, phosphates, carbonates and alkaline sulfates, iron, manganese, etc., plus 77.17% water.”

“Water! You say that flesh contains water! That roast beef, cutlets and fillets are impregnated with water!”

“Yes, Monsieur. It makes up nearly four-fifths of meat’s weight—with the result that, in every hundred grams, almost eighty are unnecessary to alimentation. But that’s not all. There are some, among those substances, that are inappropriate to nutrition, and that can be eliminated without inconvenience—notably the chondrine and the gelatine. In consequence, it is possible to reduce further the quantity of alibile matter contained in meat, thus further reducing its mass.

“That very brief explanation is sufficient to indicate to you, in principle, the incredible diminished volume to which the exclusively active element can be reduced which is, as it were, lost in the midst of the other inert elements composing meat.”

“I think I understand, finally, that you isolate these active elements in order to form those pills you have just absorbed.”

“Patience! All these substances that I’ve just designated under the names of albumin, fibrin, creatine and so on are far from being simple bodies. They are all composed, in definite proportions, of oxygen, hydrogen, carbon and nitrogen, and the proportions in which those elements are combined are sufficient to differentiate them.

“Given that, instead of cooking meat of whose provenance I’m unaware, and extracting therefrom with great difficulty materials that might be adulterated, I fabricate my albumin, fibrin, creatine and so on myself, from scratch.”

“You fabricate yourself—artificially—the elements constituting flesh...which is to say, flesh itself?”

“Of course. It is sufficient, for that, to bring together, in the required proportions, hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen and oxygen—which is to say, the simple bodies constituting each of the composite bodies whose combination forms meat.

“By that means, I obtain chemically pure alimentary materials. *Chemically pure*, you hear, Monsieur!—entirely assimilable, without any waste, without the slightest residue.”

“Excuse me, Monsieur, but I don’t see how you can carry out this combination, in definite proportions, of simple bodies that don’t exist in isolation in nature.”

“It’s by means of a series of reactions that only a professional chemist could understand and appreciate. I shall, however, cite you one example, the simplest of all, which might edify you sufficiently by analogy. You know that one can fabricate water artificially, and by what procedure?”

“Very vaguely, I confess, for my course in elementary chemistry was a long time ago.”

“By making an electric spark passed through a mixture of two volumes of hydrogen and one of oxygen. At the precise moment when the spark passes the two gases combine intimately to form a liquid. That liquid is water. For my own personal needs, I proceed in a manner that is analogous in principle, causing simple bodies to act upon one another to form composite bodies, or other composite bodies to combine with simple bodies, or composite bodies to combine with one another.”

“But in that case, you can create anything!”

“I don’t create anything at all. No one, down here, can make anything from nothing, and for humans, nothing is always nothing! But I combine the simple bodies that are everywhere in nature, judiciously utilizing the forces of nature in moving from the simple to the composite, from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete.”

“If I’m not mistaken, that system is called, in philosophy...”

“*Synthesis*, Monsieur. It’s *Synthesis.*”

“Your name—which struck me from the start.”

“I’m the last scion of a family of chemists whose origin is lost in the obscurity of the centuries. The first of my race, instead of wasting his time with the nonsense hatched by the brains of his contemporaries, conceived the brilliant idea of attempting the reproduction of composite bodies. He invented the system to which modern chemistry has only just lent impetus, and created the Greek work synthesis, by which he designated himself thereafter. He conserved the name, which was as good as any other, and transmitted it to his descendants. That is why my name is Synthesis.

“I have inherited not only the name and the endeavors of my ancestors, but also an irresistible propensity that drives my toward the study of sciences, especially synthetic chemistry—and I will add that if I can now realize these things, which not only stupefy common mortals, but also professional men, I owe it far to the studies of my ancestors than to my own feeble merits.

“I am, in a sense, the living synthesis, the result of all those centuries-long efforts, the incarnation of ten obscure but hard-working generations, whose discoveries I utilize.

“I am, therefore, neither a sorcerer nor a charlatan, but a man of science who can prove everything that he puts forward. Hold on...take some of my alimentary pills. Oh, have no fear! They’re as absolutely inoffensive as they are efficacious, and I guarantee that, for the next twenty-four hours, you won’t experience the vaguest sensation of hunger.”

“No thank you!” the Prefect of Police interjected, laughing. “I confess to you, between the two of us, that I have the vice of being something of a gourmand, and if I’m apprehensive of anything, it’s simply the lack of savor of your mysterious ambrosia.”

“My ambrosia, as you choose to call it, has nothing mysterious about it—and if it is insipid, its absorption will leave you with an easy stomach and a singularly light head. No congestions resulting from laborious digestion, none of the gastric embarrassments so dolorous to sedentary workers, no gout, no obesity, but prompt assimilation, regular reparation, facile absorption...”

“Once again, Monsieur, no thank you! I’m veritably apprehensive, I repeat, of a regime as elementary as it is uniform.”

“But I vary it every day! Tomorrow, I shall absorb un-nitrogenated substances, hydrocarbons designed to furnish my organism with heat and movement—in brief, respiratory aliments to which I gladly add a few extra aliments, like cocaine or caffeine, when I’m slightly overworked.”

“I beg you to accept my refusal. I repeat that I’m replete, and I confess without same that I prefer a vulgar infusion of more-or-less authentic mocha to the best caffeine. And now, Monsieur, before I take my leave of you, will you forgive the indiscretion of this overly prolonged visit.

“There’s nothing to forgive...nothing at all. You wanted to be edified on my account. Are you satisfied?”

“More so than I can express; you really have been very obliging. However, if I dared...”

“Dare, damn it! I’m not so intimidating.”

“You’ve been kind enough to explain the mystery of your alimentation. Would you care to initiate me, briefly, into that of your sleep? For after all, you said just now: ‘I’m sleepy and I’m hungry.’ I’ve seen you eat, but I didn’t notice you sleeping!”

“I do sleep, though. You’re familiar with hypnotism, that artificial sleep provoked in certain individuals, and on which very remarkable experiments have been recently carried out at the Salpêtrière by Professor Charcot, and at Nancy by Professor Bernheim.”[5]

“I know it as everyone does—which is to say, very superficially—by way of a few newspaper articles and a few extracts from scientific journals.”

“That’s sufficient. You know, in consequence, that the sleep provoked by various procedures, notably the contemplation of a brilliant object held a short distance from the eyes, has the result of putting the dormant subject in absolute dependence on the person inducing the sleep. By that I mean, not merely material dependence, but also, and above all, mental dependence.”

“Indeed. The person who hypnotizes another can do anything to his subject—suggest to him the most extraordinary thoughts, absurd ideas or ideas of genius, make him reason imperturbably about questions he knows nothing about, even remove the memory of his individuality and make him enter the skin of another person. It’s said that the subject can even be driven irresistibly to the perpetration of a crime, which he will accomplish under the influence of the suggestion from which he cannot free himself.”

“That’s quite true, but that’s not all. You should also know that the memory of all the actions carried out, all the words pronounced, and all the ideas emitted during hypnosis can be retained by the subject when he wakes up. It is sufficient for the person who has provoked the sleep to want the memory to persist into the waking state. Finally, hypnotism, although long and difficult to obtain at first, can, after a certain number of sessions, be provoked almost instantaneously.”

“All that seems to be proven by experiments carried out by scientists whose affirmation does not seem to me to be suspect.”

“Well, you see before you a man under the influence of hypnotic sleep.”

“You!”

“Of course.”

“But no one has put you to sleep.”

“I provoked the hypnosis myself, as I do every day, by looking into a little metallic mirror for a few seconds.”

“Yourself...on yourself?”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“On the contrary—and the practice, known in the Orient since times immemorial, is employed by Hindu fakirs who hypnotize themselves at will. Some look for a time at the tips of the nose, and thus arrive at the hypnotic state, not without squinting outrageously; others look at the navel and obtain the same result after a contemplation of variable duration. It was the sight of those *omphalopsychics* or *umbilicans* that gave me the idea of hypnotizing myself—except that I make use of a mirror...it’s much more practical.”

“But with what objective do you subject yourself thus to the effects of the phenomenon?”

“How many hours a day do you spend sleeping?”

“About seven or eight.”

“A third of your time is spent in bed, isn’t it? With the result that, in a life of sixty years, you’ve wasted twenty sleeping.”

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[5] Author’s note: “Consult on this subject the very remarkable work of Dr. Bernheim, professor of the École de medicine de Nancy, *De la suggestion*, Octave Doin, publisher, 8 Place de l’Odéon.” The reference is presumably to Hippolyte Bernheim’s *De la suggestion dans l’état hypnotique et dans l’état de veille* (1884), although Bernheim did publish a second book, also with Doin, in 1888 entitled *De la suggestion et de ses applications à la thérapeutique*, and subsequently used the abbreviated version on a book published in 1911.

“That must be the case. Isn’t sleep as indispensable to the body as alimentation, on pain of death?”

“In the same way that, as I’ve just demonstrated to you, there is nourishment and nourishment, I’ll prove to you that there is sleep and sleep. My time being too precious for me to squander it sleeping, I was obliged to search for a method of permitting my organism to rest without ceasing to exist intellectually—to think, to act, to work—in order to do so.

“That method, hypnotism has furnished me for forty-five years, and has permitted me to save the fifteen years that would have been irrevocably lost to me. For, although I’ve already succeeded in solving many scientific problems that were reputedly insoluble, I haven’t succeeded in prolonging the duration of human existence—in delaying that fatal failure known as death—by a single minute. I want, therefore, to profit from every instant of my life.

“To achieve that result, I hypnotize myself with the formal determination of continuing, during my artificial sleep to live intellectually as in the waking state. In that way, nothing is interrupted—neither my communications, nor my work, nor my studies, nor my scientific experiments.”

“And you haven’t suffered any frightful cerebral disturbance?”

“Not of any sort, since, while suggesting to my mind the idea of the continuation of my intellectual life, I suggest to my body the idea of material rest.”

“And that is sufficient?”

“Absolutely. And you know that the results of suggestion are undeniable. Thus, my body rests because I want it to rest.”

“That’s extraordinary!”

“Not in the least. Let’s see, suppose that I hypnotize you, and that, during your artificial sleep, I force you to do some tiring work, lasting for seven or eight hours—the habitual duration of your natural sleep. Suppose further that, on waking you up, I suggest to you the idea that you have simply slept. Would you feel the slightest fatigue from the efforts occasioned by the work carried out during hypnosis? Certainly not. It would seem to you that you had been asleep, and you would be as fresh and fit as if you have just got out of bed.

“That, Monsieur, is to explain the secret of the sleep of a man who has been sleeping wide awake for the last forty-five years. You can see that my case has nothing mysterious about it, and that—this is said without the slightest suggestion of reproach—that the authorities have made a mistake in becoming preoccupied with a worthy old scientist whose eccentricity consists of having neither a bed nor kitchen utensils.”

“You’ll permit me, however, Monsieur, to make the observation that everything in life is connected, and that certain relationships, apparently compromising, to say the least, might serve to distort the judgment that is called upon to make of the most irreproachable individuals. So, your new assistant in chemistry...”

“Alexis Pharmaque? I wonder what you can possible have against that worthy fellow, the most inoffensive of men, and also a peerless scientist.”

“It’s nonetheless true that he was recently in intimate relation with Russian conspirators, whom he educated in certain branches of chemistry, notably the part concerning explosive substances.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it? Are you afraid that I’m going to torpedo the Pont-Neuf or dynamite the towers of Notre-Dame? Know, Monsieur, that I am not given to demolition. My life has been spent in construction, in edification—otherwise, I would not be Monsieur Synthesis!

“To get back to my assistant. I shall restrict myself to telling you that I obtain my assistants where I can, on the condition that they’re honest and exceptional scientists. We foreigners are infinitely less prejudiced than you Frenchmen. Thus, to cite but one example, the Prince of Wales has not been thought to be committing an enormity in giving his children, as a tutor, one of your compatriots, a refugee from the Commune, who was already a professor of French at the University of Oxford.”

All right!” said the Prefect of Police, getting up to take his leave. “Let’s pass over relationships, for you’re a man to cover your honorability, a personality perhaps equivocal from certain viewpoints. But...”

“But what?”

“Look, I’ll be frank, for I shouldn’t leave you with an afterthought.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Simply to ask you what use you intend to make of the five hundred diving suits delivered by the Rouquayrolle company and stowed away at this moment in the hold of one of your ships.”

“Oh! Why didn’t you say so sooner? I’ve never had the slightest intention of hiding the usage for which those suits are destined. I’m on the point of attempting an experiment from which I’ve previously recoiled for very particular reasons. Today, the time has come, and I’m preparing the realization of what is, for me, the Great Work.

“That experiment, about which I’ve been thinking for more than half a century, involves, in principle, the formation of a land that doesn’t exist. It is therefore necessary for me first to carry out the synthesis of a virgin ground, which I want to improvise wholesale and cause to emerge from the depths of the sea. That is why I need a numerous crew of divers.

"As for the usage to which I have destined the land that is still in the state of errant molecules today, disseminated in the immensity of the seas, that's my secret.

"Adieu, Monsieur...I hope that, within a year, you will hear mention of me."

Yes, to be sure, I shall have news of you, the Prefect of Police said to himself, as the Hindu Bhil on duty in the antechamber escorted him back to the corridor, and in far less than a year. *My word, I'm as mystified as a child who's just been listening to old wives' tales. That that devil of a man certainly has a way of telling you his stories, of turning you around, of gripping you, so that one doesn't know when the fable begins and reality ends. I'll have a clear conscience with regard to all that by attaching some discreet and loyal companion to him, who will keep me informed, and tell me whether Monsieur Synthesis, multimillionaire and perhaps raving lunatic, really maintains his existence with ideal nutritive substances, and whether he's really going to attempt, with his infernal methods, the creation of a new land.*

We shall see!

IV

"But that leads you to spontaneous generation!"

"Which is fine by me, of course. Besides which, monogenesis or heterogenesis are just theories...less than theories—words! And words that prove nothing, at least to me."

"You're difficult."

"Let's see—have you even got a half-way passable definition of what you mean by spontaneous generation?"

"Of course. I give that name to any production of a living being that, not being derived from individuals of the same species, has for its point of departure bodies of another species and depends on other circumstances. It is, therefore, the manifestation of a new being, devoid of parents, and, in consequence, a primordial generation: a creation."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"I'm saying that the thing, thus formulated, has long been evident to me. It's scarcely worth the trouble of giving it that name, which I regard as rococo."

"Rococo!"

"Of course! And which has caused discord, for I don't know how many years, between eminent scientists who ought to be able to understand one another."

"And yet, Monsieur Pasteur..."

"Proved, twenty years ago, in the course of memorable experiments, that in all the cases where it was thought that one could observe what you call 'spontaneous generation,' one was dealing with organisms developed at the expense of seeds come from outside."

"Well?"

"That result is doubtless very significant, but it leaves the doctrine itself absolutely intact. That is so true that one of Monsieur Pasteur's most distinguished collaborators, Monsieur Chamberland,[6] declares himself incapable of demonstrating experimentally that so-called spontaneous generation is impossible. But once again, what does that matter? Pile argument upon argument, exhibit texts, produce experiments, make the authors speak, and, since you've stated an argument that I didn't seek, give me a *scientific* explanation of the appearance of life on Earth."

"That's a redoubtable problem...and I didn't put it like that initially."

"Bah! Go on, confess your embarrassment without more ado and get back to dissecting your little animals."

"But, Monsieur...!"

"You're going to tell me that your little animals are worth as much as my crystals, aren't you? In that we're in agreement, since the former proceed inevitably from the latter."

"What! You dare to claim that what lives owes its origin to inert matter?"

"Yes, young heretic."

"Heretic! Me!"

"Undoubtedly, since you seem to be giving the lie to the sacred texts affirming that everything that lives has that same inert matter for its origin. Do you at least know the texts?"

"I confess my complete ignorance."

"Then I'll cite them for you. 'And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after its kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth; and it was so,' *Genesis* 1:11.

"'And God said, Let the water bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life.' *Genesis* 1:20.

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[6] Charles Chamberland (1851-1908).

"'And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.' *Genesis* 1: 24.

"The earth and the water—that signifies, in clear language, the inert matter to which you refuse any generative faculty, and which, however, on the orders of Jehovah, gave birth to animals and vegetables."

"But you asked me yourself for a scientific explanation. I thought I understood by that an explanation that dispenses me from recourse to miracles."

"Eh! You're very difficult, Monsieur, in your turn. It pleases me, however, whom you regard as a veritable scientific revolutionary, as an unbeliever who does not adore the Manitous of Royal, National or Imperial Academies, to put science in accord with *Genesis*. Will you hold that against me?"

"I'm listening.

"I have only to conclude. The Earth, in the beginning, being purely mineral, and overheated to a temperature that no organic compounds could resist, was, by that same token, exempt from all 'germs,' as perfectly sterilized, as one says nowadays, as the bell-jars with which Monsieur Pasteur delivered a rude blow to the doctrine in question. And yet, in spite of that sterilization, that absence of organic germs, life has appeared on the Earth."

"And you're going to claim that the living cell emerged just like that, of its own accord, from a crystal, or several crystals?"

"Absolutely! Not abruptly, as you're insinuating, but by virtue of successive gradations. Thus, in the same way that the animal kingdom is attached to the vegetable kingdom by an uninterrupted chain, to the point that, at a certain moment, one no longer knows where the animal ends or the plant begins, that chain extends all the way to the humble mineral molecule, passing through intermediate states participating simultaneously in the mineral and the plant."

"That latter hypothesis at least remains to be proven."

"Come on, don't try to deny the evidence, or I'll accuse you of bad faith and call a halt to the argument."

"But there aren't only crystals in nature. What about amorphous substances?"

"Amorphism, Monsieur, is another form..."

"Stop there, Monsieur! I like a joke when it isn't anodyne, and can still tolerate it when it reaches certain limits, but when it affects the form that you're lending to it..."

"It's no longer amorphous..."

"If find it out of place, especially in the mouth of a chemist, ignorant by status, and perhaps systematically, of biology."

"In your turn, stop there, Monsieur physiologist! No personal abuse, if you please, or I'll send you back briskly to the oysters, leeches, crayfish and frogs that are your habitual companions."

"And I'll leave you to your vitriol, your oils, your acids, your kitchen utensils, your glassware and your pots and pans."

"Go away, then, you conceited little ass, show off your handiwork to the worldly audience to whom you teach a shoddy science."

"And you, failed apothecary, stay with your ovens, to gargle your infamous drugs."

"Knacker in a black coat!"

"Incendiary!"

"Poseur of the amphitheater! Acrobat of the Faculty!"

"Professor of poisons! Armchair dynamiter!"

Having argued courteously to begin with, things have gradually become heated. Now they are at loggerheads, grabbing one another by the throat in Monsieur Synthesis' laboratory.

The building in the Rue Galvani is full of noise and outbursts of voices, as if half a dozen fishwives were exchanging the salty and tumultuous replies consecrated by tradition.

There are, however, only the two interlocutors present, and a calm spectator, arriving unexpectedly at the moment when the epithets multiplied like as many missiles hurled from two enemy sides, would have difficulty believing that he was looking at two scientific celebrities.

Nothing is truer, however, in spite of the crudity of the expressions springing from those learned mouths, with a picturesque superabundance that only increases, and becomes further embellished.

Gradually, it is reaching the hair-pulling stage.

One of the antagonists seems determined to finish the "conversation" with a boxing match. He is a tall fellow of indeterminate age—perhaps thirty-five and perhaps fifty—as long as a day without bread and as stiff as the neck of a double-bass, on a body that only possesses one dimension—height—ornamented with immeasurable legs and arms like scythe-handles, topped by a strange head to which fury communicates an expression that is simultaneously grotesque and sinister.

On that head writhes a shock of hair as bushy as a clown's, which seems to give off sparks, like the fur of an angora cat during a storm. His only eye, round, dilated and phosphorescent, blazes beneath the brushwood of a frowning eyebrow, animating only one side of that livid, elaborately-carved face, the color of box-wood, from

which emerges, as flat as the needle of a sundial, as hooked as a raptor's beak and as shiny as horn, a nose of exorbitant dimensions—a veritable challenge hurled at the esthetics of all eras and all countries.

The other eye—the left—disappears beneath a swollen violet scar that extends as far as the forehead, replaces the eyebrow with a slash, eats into a portion of the jaw and corrodes a morsel from the cartilage of the ear.

Envelop all that, underneath and laterally, with a beard as tangled as oakum, bizarrely tinted by the acids, gases, fumes, reagents and explosions that have illuminated it with bright yellow, pale blue, russet and ink-black, and you would have a fairly exact description of Monsieur Alexis Pharmaque, former professor of "explosive materials," presently assistant in chemistry in Monsieur Synthesis' laboratory.

He is gesticulating furiously, making his vast shoes clatter on the parquet, cleaving the air like a fencing-master, extending the skeletal fingers of one of his hands, similarly baked, stiffened, shriveled and stained by reagents, as if to grab hold of his adversary's collar.

The latter, however, stands up to him intrepidly, without seeming to be influenced unduly by the trunk-like organ, the basilisk stare and the menacing gesture of the fanatic worthy of figuring with every distinction in the milieu of a *danse macabre*.

The second individual, who presents a striking contrast with the first, is a young man of about thirty, whose rather insipid blond physiognomy might appear insignificant to a superficial observer.

A symmetrical face framed by a pretty, naturally curly beard, a mouth with very red lips, a slightly fleshy but well-shaped nose, and a sanguinary complexion—such are the general characteristics of the head that, without being reminiscent of that of Antinous, is no less correct in its conventional banality. The very high forehead, already balding at the edges and slightly shiny, gives an impression of learning that does not correspond with the whole, and serves as a corrective to the bright baby-faced banality.

The man is of medium height, quilted with a little fat that makes his torso stick to a black frock-coat from a good tailor. His plump hands, well-manicured, emerge from vast dazzlingly white sleeves, and his feet, delicately shot in kidskin, escape, not without elegance, from bright gray trousers that only an artist could have produced.

In sum, that exterior of a diplomat crossed with a bank-teller or a civil servant, would be much appreciated by a minister or a moneylender, and even quite reassuring for a future mother-in-law. A more profound examination, however, would perceive beneath the pale tortoiseshell spectacles, set high on the nose, green-tinted eyes flecked with yellow: eyes with a hard, sharp and fleeting gaze that destroys the bourgeois harmony of the anodyne face.

Before that wild and arrogant gaze, nascent sympathy, or cordiality at least, gives way to suspicion, and the least wary interlocutor soon senses an insurmountable distance from the young man with the unctuous gestures, the honeyed words and the blissful smile, liable to aggravate rather than correct the reflection of the "mirror of the soul."

Such is Arthur Roger-Adams, attached for a short time to Monsieur Synthesis' laboratory in the capacity of zoologist.

Although his attributes are quite distinct from those of the chemistry assistant, Alexis Pharmaque, his envious and domineering nature has not been able to accommodate the proximity of the latter for very long. He began, in order to sound him out, to direct gibes at his unorthodox appearance of a Medieval alchemist, but in vain. Clad in a triple armor-plating of indifference, perhaps scorn, the chemist pretended not to understand the more or less equivocal spice of "young Monsieur Arthur's" jokes, that being the manner in which he is wont to denominate him.

Young Monsieur Arthur, who is far from being stupid, did not take long to perceive that the "alchemist" is a man of incomparable knowledge, a living encyclopedia, acquainted with all questions—a caricaturish Pico della Mirandola able to reason *de omni re scibili...et de quibusdam aliis*[7]...which, naturally, exasperated him and transformed, in a matter of days, the initial animadversity into an irreconcilable hatred.

As has just been seen, a simple scientific argument led to the explosion of that hatred, which was translated by a very animated, very picturesque dialogue, and which is about to be succeeded by physical combat.

Just as Alexis Pharmaque, beside himself on hearing himself described as an "armchair dynamiter," is about to knot his skeletal hands around his interlocutor's neck, the main door of the laboratory opens soundlessly, and Monsieur Synthesis appears.

"Well!" he says, simply, in his grave voice, with a low register but singularly powerful.

At that *quos egos*, which old Neptune would not have disavowed, the two antagonists, like the unleashed winds of old, stifle their fury, cut off their dialogue, and stand still, as if petrified.

There is a long silence; then Monsieur Synthesis resumes speaking, with the same solemn slowness.

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[7] *De omni re scibili* [Of all the things one can know] was the motto of the famed "Renaissance Man" Pico della Mirandola, to which some wit—reputedly Voltaire—added the sarcastic codicil *et de quibusdam aliis* [and even a few others].

“What’s going on, Messieurs? What do these raised voices signify?”

“It’s because,” replies the chemist, choking with indignation, “this drawing-room scholar claims to deny the connective chain that extends from amorphous matter to organic substance.”

“It’s also because I forbade you to make personal remarks, Monsieur Out-of-Date Scientist...” the zoologist puts in.

“You have no right to issue prohibitions before me, who is in sole command here, do you hear?” ripostes Monsieur Synthesis, without raising his voice.

“But, Monsieur...!”

“Here, I’m addressed as *Master*! Have you forgotten that already?”

“But...”

“Silence! You have a tendency to talk too much...it will be necessary for me to correct that. On the other hand, it seems to me that you’re deluded regarding the importance of your person and the functions that you fulfill here. I’ll take advantage of the opportunity to show you what I think of you, to put you in your place and indicate your attributions. Let this be said once and for all, somewhat in your own interests, but above all for the sake of the smooth functioning of my enterprise.”

As the chemist makes as if to withdraw, discreetly, Monsieur Synthesis stops him. “Alexis, my boy,” he says, with a hint of cordiality, “You’re not out of place—quite the contrary. You, young man, listen to your home-truths, and profit from them. You’re the son of a veritable scientist, whose friend I was, and who raised himself up to the highest rank among the eminent by merit alone. Being your father’s son, very intelligently and very skillfully, constitutes the greatest of your talents.

“Unknown, nameless, reduced to your own resources, you’d be a petty substitute teacher in a provincial faculty, and you’d wear out your shoes running after a chair. Whereas, as the possessor of an illustrious name, you were in evidence from the start, capable of having yourself taken seriously without using and abusing, as you have done, the most violent protests. I do not disapprove of your having climbed casually on to the paternal pedestal, and have been allowed to stay there, but that you expect to blind us with the dust you throw in the eyes of the public, and pontificate in front of us, who have seen through you, I shall not permit. You see, young man, it is not sufficient to be your father’s son to be someone! And you’re scarcely anything at all, with all your negative qualities.

“A coterie man, ambitious, jealous of any nascent reputation, an enemy of talents that are consolidating, trenchant, domineering, closing the door on anyone who is not part of your official world, ever ready to smear the promoter of a new and bold idea, however brilliant, you have a revolting platitude with regard to the great and powerful...”

During this virulent speech, young Monsieur Arthur, increasingly ill-at-ease, visibly annoyed, clenches his teeth and strangles his rage, but does not say a word. Monsieur Synthesis really must possess a strange power, in order to lash the young man so brutally—who is, in sum, not just anyone, and occupies, rightly or wrongly, an important place in the professorial ranks of one of our great faculties.

“But none of that matters,” Monsieur Synthesis goes on, “Because, in spite of your faults or your vices, you are nonetheless a man of science. Oh, don’t swell up with pride! For if you’re what is commonly called a scientist, it’s in the most banal and narrow sense of the word. As learned as a library, knowing all that’s said or written, a hard worker, one might believe that you’re always preparing to take an examination, absorbing and digesting everything—which, made Claude Bernard say about you: ‘that boy has the same effect on me as a rumor.’ You linger over counting the hairs on a human head, measuring the jumps of a flea, cutting a thread of spidersilk into four; you know how to extract a marvelous advantage from such futile labors.

“As you’re a member of all the scientific societies, even the least known and most baroque; as you multiply notes, reports, communications and papers, you always hold the public breathless with your little schemes...

“As your lucubrations are signed with a glorious name, that is calculated as hard cash, and your reputation grows from day to day, without you having innovated anything or found anything useful to science or humankind.

“If, however, you are incapable of rising in audacious flight above the ground-level of run-of-the-mill scientists, if you have no conception of genius, if you do not possess that spark, that *mens divinior*, that makes a Galileo, a Newton, a Lamarck, a Bichat or a Pasteur, you are nonetheless a skillful operator, capable of doing excellent handiwork...”

“Ha...handiwork!” the desolate young man finally stammers.

“Undoubtedly—handiwork! And, I shall add, handiwork that will be better paid than the most illustrious and meritorious scientist ever was. That is because, in default of genius, you possess, to a surprising degree, three qualities essential to my projects.

“Firstly, you know as well as anyone how to use a microscope—rare enough nowadays, in spite of the ever-increasing necessity of the study of the infinitely small.

“Secondly, as, since childhood, you have relentlessly practiced dissections and vivisections, you have acquired an extraordinary skill and dexterity.

“Finally, you are an admirable photographer of microscopic preparations.

“Those are, for me, your three predominant qualities—or, rather, your only qualities.

“I know that, for a faculty professor, being restricted to a little micrography, photography and zoology might seem a trifle elementary, but I don’t need anything else, and won’t ask any more of you. In any case, you’ve accepted my conditions—all my conditions—because you have a prodigious liking for money, and you will be paid, you alone, more than all your colleagues in France, Germany, England and Russia.

“You are, therefore, adequately financed, and for two years, at my absolute discretion, a micrographer, photographer and zoologist—which is to say that, wherever I take you, whatever my orders, desires or whims might be, you must subscribe to them without any observation, without any hesitation, under pain of being sacked. That, young man, is what I mean by handiwork. And I will add, by way of conclusion, that you are, after that declaration of principle, entirely free to withdraw.”

“I’ve signed the contract, and you have my word... I’ll stay. But know that although, as you say, I like money, although the enormity of the sum you offered tempted me, although I have alienated my liberty to the point of becoming your docile instrument, your thing, I do have a goal higher than personal interest.

“However hard you have been on me just now, I will tell you that the idea of collaborating with you, even very humbly, in your work, has also entered into the equation.....”

At this protest, proffered in an emotional tone that is not without dignity, Monsieur Synthesis allows a profound gaze to fall upon his interlocutor that seems to filter beneath his lowered eyelids like a ray of sunlight slicing through a cloud.

For his part, Alexis Pharmaque darts his round eye at the patient and murmurs, to himself: “He’s lying! If he’s coming, it’s primarily out of avarice, and after that to steal some of the boss’s secrets. But we’ll see.”

Then Monsieur Synthesis, without replying to that possibly-sincere declaration, resumes speaking, coldly. “Since you’ve accepted my conditions once again, I also demand that concord reigns in my laboratory, that not the slightest conflict of competence should ever arise between you and your colleague. You ought to be—or, rather, you will be, henceforth—like the two arms of a single body, of which I am the head...without your having any personal initiative!

“You understand, don’t you? Whatever the circumstances might be—the most dramatic, the strangest or the most perilous—you will never pay any attention to anything but my orders, and will follow them blindly.

“Now, I don’t command you to like one another, or even to have the slightest sympathy for one another—that’s irrelevant to my work. You are two instruments with different natures and attributes, acting unconsciously with an identical goal, under the sole impulsion of my will.

“One more word: although you belong to me henceforth, body and soul, and will be at my disposal day and night, I ought to inform you that we will be leaving in a week.”

As the two men, surprised but not daring to ask questions, content themselves with looking at the old man curiously, he adds, as if to recognize that discreet submission: “Prepare yourselves for an absence of about fifteen months, including the voyage, but only take the effect with you that are strictly reserved for your personal use. The rest is does not concern anyone but me. Those effects should be appropriate to the demands of the climate of the torrid zone: heat and rain. A broadly sufficient credit will be open to you as of tomorrow. Is that understood?”

The chemist and the zoologist nod their heads simultaneously, without daring to proffer any other response than that mute assent.

“That’s all that I have to say to you for the moment,” the old man concludes, “but I shall give a commencement of satisfaction to your curiosity, which is, after all, quite legitimate. First, we are going to Macao to find five or six hundred Chinese coolies; then we shall sail to the Coral Sea. That’s where I intend to install a gigantic laboratory, whose purpose can no longer be a secret for you.

“The ground that will bear that laboratory will be improvised in its entirety by me...at my behest it will emerge from the bosom of the waters. Then, in a special apparatus, and by means of methods that are mine alone, I shall attempt to reproduce the entire sequence of animal evolution, from Moneron to Man.”

“To Man!” exclaims the zoologist, involuntarily, utterly amazed.

“Absolutely,” replies Monsieur Synthesis, as if the astounding proposition were the simplest thing in the world. “I intend to take a simple organic cell, put it into a developmental environment essential to its evolution, stimulate that evolution with energetic and specially appropriate agents, so as to reproduce, in less than a year, all the phenomena of transformation that have taken place since the moment when organic life, represented by that cell, became manifest upon the Earth, all the way to the appearance of humankind.

“What does that require? The replacement by a methodical and scientific means of the slow modification produced in the succession of beings by the millions of centuries that have elapsed since or planet became habitable. I see nothing impossible in that.

“You will recover your liberty when that human being—artificial, in a sense, since he will have neither a father nor a mother—will emerge from my apparatus alive. And when I say *alive*, I do not mean merely as a frail

infant whose body is devoid of vigor, but as an adult in the full force of age: a man susceptible of entering into life with a firm foot, and of taking part victoriously in the struggle for existence."

V

However busy and hard-working the population of a merchant port might be, it is nonetheless exceedingly curious and much given to gossip. No ship comes in or goes out, coming into harbor or passing into dry dock, of which the name, cargo or destination is unknown, the captain and crew of which are unknown, and the speed, the gauge and tonnage are uncalculated—and about which, if necessary, stories are told, which are sometimes implausible, singular and puerile.

Those ships which are arriving from far away, and are about to return there, have an additional savor of exoticism particularly favorable to the development of the most varied gossip.

Thus, notwithstanding the exhalations of steam, the whistle-blasts of machines, the rumbling of cranes, the collisions of innumerable bales and the cries of people responsible for the loading of merchandise, the rumors spread, information is exchanged and legends are formed—in such a fashion that in a port, whether it is as populous as Le Havre or as immense as Marseilles, an interested or merely unemployed individual can be edified slightly or fully, well or badly, but in no time at all, about anything that concerns him or merely piques his curiosity.

Now, by a phenomenon rather unusual in such circumstances, it happens that four ships that had sailed into Le Havre one morning under the Swedish flag, are standing motionless and somber on the tranquil waters of the Eure basin, like four enigmas of iron and wood, before the curious and loquacious population of the docks: superb steamers, of some fifteen or sixteen hundred tons, reminiscent, the in sleekness of their form, of the magnificent liners of the Transatlantic Company.

What are these ships? Where do they come from? To whom do they belong? For what usage are they destined? Those are as many questions that have been intriguing the entire population for a month, the shipwrights, harbormasters and simple shipping clerks as well as the officers and matelots of other ships in the harbor, the stevedores, and even the idle bourgeois whose only occupation is to examine with an understanding expression the mysterious maneuvers of semaphores.

All this curiosity has, thus far, been unsatisfied.

On the four steamships moored side by side, service is executed as at sea, with a regularity worthy of a warship. The officers do not leave their vessel, and the crewmen, admirably disciplined, only come ashore to pick up food supplies, without every frequenting the noisy pleasure-spots where matelots make up, with their legendary turbulence, for long days of abstinence and the hard labor of previous days.

It is impossible to discover anything about those men, moving with the gravity of soldiers under arms, observing an absolute mutism and probably obeying rigorous orders. Perhaps they do not even understand the questions addressed to them as they pass by in the majority of the languages in use among civilized peoples, by marines who have become polyglots in the course of their peregrinations around the world. That is quite possible. Although they are dressed in classic costume: beret, reefer-jacket and marine-blue cotton trousers, it is easy to see at first glance that many of them are neither Europeans nor Americans. Their more-or-less bronzed complexions, the impassivity of their manner and the slenderness of their extremities render them recognizable as members of the Hindu race.

It must be assumed, on the other hand, that the maritime authorities have been edified in advance, that the formalities relative to the entry of ships have been completed, and that all the papers are perfectly in order, since their station in the basin has been duly authorized for a time of which no one, save for the interested parties, knows the duration.

A week has gone by in that fashion, without the slightest incident and without the ever-increasing curiosity of the people coming and going receiving the slightest aliment.

Then, one morning, a goods train stops on the quay exactly opposite the ships. A lively animation suddenly replaces the bleak silence of previous days. The four steamships wake up under repeated whistle-blasts whose shrill notes vibrate in all directions.

The four crews—around five hundred men—gather on the steamer that is the first in line, responding to the summons, and stand still, arranged in two files on the deck.

Another blast of the whistle resounds, and immediately, one of the two files descends on to the quay. The men composing it open the wagons, while their comrades who have remained aboard remove the panels serving to seal the hatches.

As is only to be expected, rumor of the incident spreads immediately, and people come running in search of news, ready to savor the joy that he unveiling of the mystery ought finally to procure.

A triple circle of gawkers surrounds the wagons, the contents of which soon appear to hundred of eyes ardent with covetousness—but a long murmur of disappointment goes up on all sides at the sight of small greenish-brown bags symmetrically stacked in each of the wagons. There are hundreds upon hundreds of

them...thousands...and on each of them can be read, in capital letters: PORTLAND CEMENT. D. & L. BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.

What! These fine, sleek ships, which lovers of the marvelous love to see as blockade-runners, Chilean or Peruvian corsairs, or future warships destined for the Celestial Empire or Japan, are mere cargo-vessels! Instead of powder and bullets, the so-called blockade-runners are simply going to transport hydraulic cement! But in that case, why all the mystery? Why those exotic crews? Why that iron discipline, that strict claustration?

It's a veritable hoax!

Insensible to the flood of words unleashed by this incident—which, far from resolving the enigma, seems rather the complicate it—the matelots of the fleet work with a veritable fury. The sacks, each weighing twenty-five kilograms, are unloaded with a vertiginous rapidity, laid on wooden guttering disposed in an inclined plane, and slide without interruption into the hold, where they are symmetrically stacked.

The two crews work so hard and efficiently that after four hours of uninterrupted labor the train is empty and the hold three-quarters full. The panels of the hatches are immediately replaced, the men go back to their ships, a locomotive comes to collect the wagons, and everything falls silent again.

A week later, another train suddenly arrives, the contents of which are reserved for ship number 2, on which the four crews gather, as on the first occasion, to proceed with the unloading of the wagons and the stowing of the merchandise.

The flux is less considerable this time than before. By way of compensation, the curiosity-seekers receive a commencement of satisfaction—a very slight satisfaction, in sum, but sufficient, for the moment, to people for whom even commentaries have been forbidden.

The wagons are filed to bursting with crates, not every voluminous, but extremely numerous. On these creates, very solid and perfectly accommodated, the same two words can invariable be read: *chemical products*.

Chemical products...yes indeed! That gives you, right away, a suggestion of dynamite, which causes a frisson to run over the least impressionable epidermis. It is a long way from vulgar Portland cement, the banal material employed by masons.

Chemical products! Damn! If some of them are inoffensive, others are formidable, and their knowledge, as well as their usage, reserved to a relatively restricted number of adepts, is far from being within everyone's reach.

Furthermore, the very special precautions taken by the crews to avoid bumps and jolts is sufficient indication that among the packages composing this cargo there are at least some whose handling is perilous.

So the spectators do not seek to hide their contentment, as if a great truth has suddenly been revealed to them. Their anticipations are, in any case, fully justified when, after a long and very careful stowage, they see the red flag suddenly floating at the top of the mizzen mast.

According to the international code of signals, a red flag signifies *explosives aboard*.

In the days that follow, the commentaries are fervently renewed by the sight of jolly 14-centimeter cannons and Nordenfelt machine guns arriving in numbers more than sufficient to procure each steamship a redoubtable armament. The impression of disenchantment produced by the cargo of hydraulic cement is suddenly effaced, and the affectation, if not probable, at least possible, becomes the object of new and sometimes incoherent suppositions.

Then cargoes succeed one another without interruption. Crates of immense dimensions and enormous weight are seen to appear, which make the winches grind and the slings creak: probably apparatus and machinery, whose carefully and solidly fitted wrappings bear neither the manufacturers' names not those of the recipients. All of that is briskly removed, and disappears as if into wells into the depths of ever-open hatchways.

Soon, the loading of three ships is complete. All three have even taken aboard their provisions of food and fresh water. Only one has not yet received anything, save for its armaments. It is the smallest of the four, but also the most elegant in form and the most luxuriously fitted-out: the one that the curious designate familiarly between themselves as "the flagship." It is also the only one whose name is known, flamboyantly displayed at the stern in golden letters on a white background: *Anna*.

The others, for the time being, only bear numbers.

The loading panels of the *Anna* finally open to receive an interminable series of numbered whitewood crates, each marked with a rough design representing a diving-suit. There are about five hundred of them—and the idlers, who know the approximate price of a diving-suit, become ecstatic about the enormous value of that previously-unprecedented freight.

Finally, all the preparations seem to be complete. The activity that formerly reigned on the four vessels is succeeded by the calm and mutism that dismays the increasingly-disappointed curiosity-seekers to the point of anger—for public curiosity, temporarily alimented by the arrival of the multiple objects comprising the various cargoes, if far from being satisfied.

There is resentment of the fact that these foreigners, these unknowns, have done all the work themselves, politely but energetically refusing the collaboration of the port's stevedores. It is similarly held against them that

they have resisted all solicitations from the correspondents of French and foreign newspapers, who, contrary to the habit of reporters, have all gone away muttering, in search of other news.

The resentment extends to the agents of maritime insurance, who have been rigorously turned away, in spite of offers of service reiterated with a tenacity worthy of a better fate. And yet, none of the four ships is insured against the rigors of navigation. The telegraphic responses expedited by the correspondents of the two worlds have confirmed that. To neglect such an essential precaution seems to everyone to be the ultimate in disdain, or rather aberration. People wonder, once more, who the man can be who is rich enough, or mad enough, gaily to run the risk of a disaster, neglecting to guarantee the possession of such a fortune.

Finally, war-weary, and confronted by the absolute impossibility of obtaining the slightest clarification, people pretend no longer to be interested in the four steamships, which remain isolated, like ships in quarantine.

That lasts for twelve full days from the date when the *Anna* has received her cargo of diving-suits. On the morning of the thirteenth day, however, the question recovers a sudden dose of actuality. Thick smoke escapes from the four funnels and slight tremors agitate the hulls, still maintained by their moorings. The steamers are firing their boilers, and their departure seems imminent. Besides which, the ones that had previously seemed deprived of civil status, in the sense that they bore no names, are no longer designated by mere numbers

The first vessel, the one laden with Portland cement, is called the *Indus*; the second, more specially dedicated to chemical products, is named the *Godavari*; and the third, stuffed with monumental crates, is the *Ganges*.

The Indus, the Godavari and the Ganges are three rivers of Hindustan—but that is scarcely compromising. Why have those names, which only have a simple geographical significance, been hidden, until the last moment, beneath strips of canvas? Some further fantasy of the mysterious ship-owner, who is definitely determined to maintain a rigorous incognito.

Soon, however, all these reflections cease, in the presence of a completely unexpected incident: the incident of the final hour.

A whistle-blast resounds on one of the railway lines dedicated to the service of the docks, and a passenger train—something absolutely unprecedented—advances slowly, and then stops opposite the *Anna*.

It is a special train composed of four goods-wagons, a sleeping-car, a saloon-car and two first class carriages. Scarcely has the engine come to a halt than four gentlemen, correctly dressed in black, slowly cross the gangplank that links the *Anna* to the quay and advance to the door of the sleeping-car. It is the Swedish consul, accompanied by the chancellor and the two vice-chancellors.

The door opens with a bang; two black men leapt to the ground and assist a tall old man with an imposing physiognomy to get down, before whom the four functionaries bow respectfully.

The old man returns their salute courteously, exchanges a few words with them, and holds out his hand to a young woman of dazzling beauty, who leaps to the ground with the graceful agility of a gazelle and cries, joyfully:

“Oh, dear Papa! So this is your surprise! I’m going back to sea—the sea that I love so much. Are we leaving soon?”

“Right away, my child. Everything’s ready, isn’t it, Monsieur?” The question is addressed to the consul.

“Yes, Excellency. All the formalities have been completed, and the flotilla is ready to sail.”

“That’s perfect. Accept my thanks, and give this on my behalf to the staff of the consulate.”

“*Adieu*, Excellency and *bon voyage*.”

“*Au revoir*, Monsieur. I shall not forget your services.”

After this rapid dialogue, the old man offers his arm to the young woman, goes over the gangplank, covered with a magnificent carpet, and goes across the deck to where the captain is standing.

“Well, Christian?” he says, simply, like a stroller returning home after a short absence.

“Nothing new, Master,” the officer replies, taking off his gold-braided cap.

“When can you sail?”

“When the luggage is loaded. A matter of a quarter of an hour.”

In the meantime, five women—two white women and three black women—emerge from one of the first-class carriages, similarly file across the gangplank, followed by four men of European origin, among whom a visitor to the house in the Rue Galvani would have recognized the two irreconcilables, Alexis Pharmaque and young Monsieur Arthur.

The old man and the young woman, desirous of escaping the indiscreet gazes of the curiosity seekers who have made their way between the wagons, have already retired to a little saloon situated beneath the poop deck.

The captain makes a sign. The boatswain blows a few shrill notes on his whistle, and immediately, twenty matelots rush to the goods-wagons, upon which they seem to be mounting an assault. In the blink of an eye, with the agility, vigor and skill particular to seamen, they carry out the transfer of trunks and packages, forming a veritable heap on the deck and awaiting further orders.

As the tide is high, there is not a moment to lose. The floodgates are opened. The *Anna* casts off her moorings; the Swedish colors are run up the flagpole, and the ship, cautiously swaying on a cable fixed to the bow, slowly moves off.

The train goes backwards at the same time, blowing its whistle madly in order to warn the curious crowd that has invaded the track and are watching, as if the spectacle were new to them, the *Ganges*, the *Godavari* and the *Indus* preparing to follow the *Anna*'s example.

In spite of the whistle-blasts, a man dressed as a stevedore seems at this point to be so absorbed in contemplation that a blow from a bumper almost knocks him down on the rails.

"Are you mad?" says a comrade dressed in the same fashion, pulling him away vigorously.

"Damn it! I will be, at least," replies the man, seemingly nonplussed.

"How's that? Is it because you see our suspicions confirmed—that the ships really belong to Monsieur Synthesis...and that Monsieur Synthesis himself has just embarked on the *Anna*. But we expected all that, my dear chap."

"Vaguely, since we only knew the *Anna* and didn't know the name of the owner of the other three."

"What does that matter now?"

"What indeed! I agree with you entirely, and it's not worth the trouble of letting myself get run over."

"What is it, then?"

"You'll think I'm mad."

"Well?"

"May the Devil, our common boss, wring my neck if the prince isn't aboard!"

"The prince! You really said *the prince*?" cried the other, a sudden emotion causing his voice to quaver. "What will *the other* say?"

"The *other*, who thinks he's dead...will think that we've betrayed him."

"Then we're doomed."

"That's true—we're doomed, and we'll never find a corner of the Earth in which to hide."

"It's a matter of fleeing and abandoning the game! After all, if death is inevitable, it's better to fight to the last."

"Pay attention, Messieurs, pay attention!" shouted an employee, who was standing on a footplate waving a red flag while the train, still moving backwards, made the turntables clatter noisily and drive back the spectators, into the midst of which the two mysterious individuals disappeared.

Monsieur Synthesis' ships, which left the harbor of Le Havre an hour ago, are sailing in convoy, heading for the open sea.

The captains have received precise orders relative to the course, in case bad weather, fog or any other incident disperses the flotilla.

For the moment, the *Anna* is in the lead by about a mile, and the other three, more-or-less regularly spaced, are advancing through waves that cause them to pitch rather rudely.

Insensible to that movement, which renders the first hours of navigation so painful to people devoid of sea-legs, the old man and the young woman, quite alone in the bow, are filling their lungs with the sea-breeze and conversing animatedly.

The conversation, although entirely intimate, has an involuntary listener—the man at the helm, whom certain fragments of sentences reach directly.

By way of discretion, the mariner emits two or three sonorous grunts, as if to say: "I'm here, and I can hear that which doesn't concern me."

And Monsieur Synthesis interrupts himself immediately, after having pronounced the following words, not very enigmatic given the goal of the expedition:

"...And that being, endowed with all the physical qualities and all the moral perfections, will be your fiancé."