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Elements of the Theory and Practice of Chymistry: 5th ed. (English Edition)

Pierre Joseph Macquer

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An hundred and fifty years are scarce elapsed since the clouds of prejudice, which had long overspread the world, began to clear up, and men were convinced, by cultivating the Sciences, and attending to Nature, that no fanciful hypotheses would ever lead them to the true causes of those various phenomena that incessantly and every where meet the observer's eye; but that the narrow limits of the human understanding confine the course of our researches to one single path; namely, that of Experiment, or the Use of our Senses. Yet, in this short period, Natural Philosophy hath risen to a high pitch of improvement, and may with truth be said to have made much greater advances towards perfection, since the experimental method was introduced, than in the many ages before.

This is true with regard to every branch of Natural Philosophy; but more particularly with regard to Chymistry. Though this Science cannot be said to have ever existed without experiments, yet it laboured under the same disadvantages with the rest; because those who studied it made all their experiments with a view to confirm their own Hypotheses, and in consequence of principles which had no foundation whatever, but in their wild imaginations.

Hence arose that enormous heap, that incongruous jumble of facts, which some time ago constituted all the knowledge of Chymists. Most of them, and especially those who assumed the pompous title of Alchymists, were persuaded that all the Metals were no other than Nature's rude unfinished essays towards making Gold; which, by means of due coction in the bowels of the earth, advanced gradually towards maturity, till at last they were perfectly converted into that beautiful and precious Metal.

On this principle, which, if not demonstrably false, is at least utterly destitute of proof, and unsupported by a single observation, they attempted to finish what Nature had begun, by procuring to the imperfect Metals this much desired coction. To attain it they made an infinite number of experiments and trials; which all conspired to detect the falsity of their system, and to satisfy men of sense, that the methods they employed were very far from answering the purpose.

However, as facts always promote the knowledge of Nature, it happened that those experiments, though quite useless with regard to the end for which they were originally made, proved the occasion of several curious discoveries.

These lucky consequences of their mistaken labours raised the courage of the Chymists, or rather Alchymists, who looked upon every such instance of success as a new step towards the Grand Work, and greatly increased the fond opinion they entertained of themselves, and of their Art, which, on that account, they set up very high above all other Sciences. Nay, they carried this notion of superiority so far, as to hold the rest of mankind unworthy, or incapable, of rising to such sublime knowledge. In consequence thereof Chymistry became an occult and mysterious Science; its expressions were all tropes and figures, its phrases metaphorical, and its axioms so many enigmas: in short, an obscure unintelligible jargon is the justest character of the Alchymistic Language.

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