The Red and the Black

Part 1 Chapter 1

A Small TownPut thousands together Less bad, But the cage less gay.

HOBBESThe small town of Verrieres may be regarded as one of the most attractive in the Franche-Comte. Its white houses with their high pitchedroofs of red tiles are spread over the slope of a hill, the slightest contoursof which are indicated by clumps of sturdy chestnuts. The Doubs runssome hundreds of feet below its fortifications, built in times past by theSpaniards, and now in ruins.

Verrieres is sheltered on the north by a high mountain, a spur of theJura. The jagged peaks of the Verra put on a mantle of snow in the firstcold days of October. A torrent which comes tearing down from themountain passes through Verrieres before emptying its waters into theDoubs, and supplies power to a great number of sawmills; this is an extremely simple industry, and procures a certain degree of comfort for themajority of the inhabitants, who are of the peasant rather than of the burgess class. It is not, however, the sawmills that have made this little townrich. It is to the manufacture of printed calicoes, known as Mulhousestuffs, that it owes the general prosperity which, since the fall of Napoleon, has led to the refacing of almost all the houses in Verrieres.

No sooner has one entered the town than one is startled by the din of anoisy machine of terrifying aspect. A score of weighty hammers, fallingwith a clang which makes the pavement tremble, are raised aloft by awheel which the water of the torrent sets in motion. Each of these hammers turns out, daily, I cannot say how many thousands of nails. A bevyof fresh, pretty girls subject to the blows of these enormous hammers, thelittle scraps of iron which are rapidly transformed into nails. This work,so rough to the outward eye, is one of the industries that most astonishthe traveller who ventures for the first time among the mountains thatdivide France from Switzerland. If, on entering Verrieres, the traveller inquires to whom belongs that fine nail factory which deafens everybodywho passes up the main street, he will be told in a drawling accent: 'Eh!

It belongs to the Mayor.'

Provided the traveller halts for a few moments in this main street ofVerrieres, which runs from the bank of the Doubs nearly to the summitof the hill, it is a hundred to one that he will see a tall man appear, with abusy, important air.

At the sight of him every hat is quickly raised. His hair is turning grey,and he is dressed in grey. He is a Companion of several Orders, has ahigh forehead, an aquiline nose, and on the whole his face is not wantingin a certain regularity: indeed, the first impression formed of it may bethat it combines with the dignity of a village mayor that sort of charmwhich may still be found in a man of forty-eight or fifty. But soon the visitor from Paris is annoyed by a certain air of self-satisfaction and self-sufficiency mingled with a suggestion of limitations and want of originality.

One feels, finally, that this man's talent is confined to securing the exactpayment of whatever is owed to him and to postponing payment till thelast possible moment when he is the debtor.

Such is the Mayor of Verrieres, M. de Renal. Crossing the street with asolemn step, he enters the town hall and passes from the visitor's sight.

But, a hundred yards higher up, if the visitor continues his stroll, he willnotice a house of quite imposing appearance, and, through the gaps inan iron railing belonging to the house, some splendid gardens. Beyond,there is a line of horizon formed by the hills of Burgundy, which seem tohave been created on purpose to delight the eye. This view makes thevisitor forget the pestilential atmosphere of small financial interestswhich was beginning to stifle him.

He is told that this house belongs to M. de Renal. It is to the profitsthat he has made from his great nail factory that the Mayor of Verrieresis indebted for this fine freestone house which he has just finished building. His family, they say, is Spanish, old, and was or claims to have beenestablished in the country long before Louis XIV conquered it.

Since 1815 he has blushed at his connection with industry: 1815 madehim Mayor of Verrieres. The retaining walls that support the various sections of this splendid garden, which, in a succession of terraces, runsdown to the Doubs, are also a reward of M. de Renal's ability as a dealerin iron.

You must not for a moment expect to find in France those picturesquegardens which enclose the manufacturing towns of Germany; Leipsic, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, and the rest. In the Franche-Comte, the morewalls a man builds, the more he makes his property bristle with stonespiled one above another, the greater title he acquires to the

respect of hisneighbours. M. de Renal's gardens, honeycombed with walls, are stillfurther admired because he bought, for their weight in gold, certainminute scraps of ground which they cover. For instance that sawmillwhose curious position on the bank of the Doubs struck you as youentered Verrieres, and on which you noticed the name Sorel, inscribed inhuge letters on a board which overtops the roof, occupied, six years ago,the ground on which at this moment they are building the wall of thefourth terrace of M. de Renal's gardens.

For all his pride, the Mayor was obliged to make many overtures toold Sorel, a dour and obstinate peasant; he was obliged to pay him infine golden louis before he would consent to remove his mill elsewhere.

As for the public lade which supplied power to the saw, M. de Renal,thanks to the influence he wielded in Paris, obtained leave to divert it.

This favour was conferred upon him after the 182- elections.

He gave Sorel four acres in exchange for one, five hundred yardslower down by the bank of the Doubs. And, albeit this site was a greatdeal more advantageous for his trade in planks of firwood, Pere Sorel, asthey have begun to call him now that he is rich, contrived to screw out ofthe impatience and landowning mania which animated his neighbour asum of 6,000 francs.

It is true that this arrangement was adversely criticised by the localwiseacres. On one occasion, it was a Sunday, four years later, M. de Renal, as he walked home from church in his mayoral attire, saw at a distance old Sorel, supported by his three sons, watching him with a smile.

That smile cast a destroying ray of light into the Mayor's soul; ever sincethen he has been thinking that he might have brought about the exchange at less cost to himself.

To win popular esteem at Verrieres, the essential thing is not to adopt(while still building plenty of walls) any plan of construction broughtfrom Italy by those masons who in spring pass through the gorges of theJura on their way to Paris. Such an innovation would earn the rash builder an undying reputation fot wrong-headedness, and he would be lostforever among the sober and moderate folk who create reputations in theFranche-Comte.

As a matter of fact, these sober folk wield there the most irritatingform of despotism; it is owing to that vile word that residence in small towns is intolerable to anyone who has lived in that great republic whichwe call Paris. The tyranny of public opinion (and what an opinion!) is asfatuous in the small towns of France as it is in the United States ofAmerica.

Part 1 Chapter 2

A MayorPrestige! Sir, is it nothing? To be revered by fools, gaped at bychildren, envied by the rich and scorned by the wise.

BARNAVEFortunately for M. de Renal's reputation as an administrator, a hugeretaining wall was required for the public avenue which skirts the hillside a hundred feet above the bed of the Doubs. To this admirable position it is indebted for one of the most picturesque views in France. But,every spring, torrents of rainwater made channels across the avenue,carved deep gullies in it and left it impassable. This nuisance, which affected everybody alike, placed M. de Renal under the fortunate obligation to immortalise his administration by a wall twenty feet in heightand seventy or eighty yards long.

The parapet of this wall, to secure which M. de Renal was obliged tomake three journeys to Paris, for the Minister of the Interior before lasthad sworn a deadly enmity to the Verrieres avenue; the parapet of thiswall now rises four feet above the ground. And, as though to defy allMinisters past and present, it is being finished off at this moment withslabs of dressed stone.

How often, my thoughts straying back to the ball-rooms of Paris,which I had forsaken overnight, my elbows leaning upon those greatblocks of stone of a fine grey with a shade of blue in it, have I swept withmy gaze the vale of the Doubs! Over there, on the left bank, are five orsix winding valleys, along the folds of which the eye can make out quiteplainly a number of little streams. After leaping from rock to rock, theymay be seen falling into the Doubs. The sun is extremely hot in thesemountains; when it is directly overhead, the traveller's rest is shelteredon this terrace by a row of magnificent planes. Their rapid growth, andhandsome foliage of a bluish tint are due to the artificial soil with whichthe Mayor has filled in the space behind his immense retaining wall, for, despite the opposition of the town council, he has widened the avenueby more than six feet (although he is an Ultra and I myself a Liberal, Igive him credit for it), that is why, in his opinion and in that of M. Valenod, the fortunate governor of the Verrieres poorhouse, this terrace isworthy to be compared with that of Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

For my part, I have only one fault to find with the Cours de la Fidelite;one reads this, its official title, in fifteen or twenty places, on marble slabswhich have won M. de Renal yet another Cross; what I should be inclined to condemn in the Cours de la Fidelite is the barbarous manner inwhich the authorities keep these sturdy plane trees trimmed and pollarded. Instead of suggesting, with their low, rounded, flattened heads, thecommonest of kitchen garden vegetables, they would like nothing betterthan to assume those magnificent forms which one sees them wear inEngland. But the Mayor's will is despotic, and twice a year every tree belonging to the commune is pitilessly lopped. The Liberals of the placemaintain, but they exaggerate, that the hand of the official gardener hasgrown much more severe since the Reverend Vicar Maslon formed thehabit of appropriating the clippings.

This young cleric was sent from Besancon, some years ago, to keep aneye upon the abbe Chelan and certain parish priests of the district. Anold Surgeon-Major of the Army of Italy, in retirement at Verrieres, whoin his time had been simultaneously, according to the Mayor, a Jacobinand a Bonapartist, actually ventured one day to complain to him of theperiodical mutilation of these fine trees.

'I like shade,' replied M. de Renal with the touch of arrogance appropriate when one is addressing a surgeon, a Member of the Legion ofHonour; 'I like shade, I have my trees cut so as to give shade, and I donot consider that a tree is made for any other purpose, unless, like theuseful walnut, it yields a return.'

There you have the great phrase that decides everything at Verrieres:

YIELD A RETURN; it by itself represents the habitual thought of morethan three fourths of the inhabitants.

Yielding a return is the consideration that settles everything in this littletown which seemed to you, just now, so attractive. The stranger arrivingthere, beguiled by the beauty of the cool, deep valleys on every side,imagines at first that the inhabitants are influenced by the idea of beauty;they are always talking about the beauty of their scenery: no one candeny that they make a great to-do about it; but this is because it attracts acertain number of visitors whose money goes to enrich the innkeepers, and thus, through the channel of the rate-collector, yields a return to thetown.

It was a fine day in autumn and M. de Renal was strolling along theCours de la Fidelite, his lady on his arm. While she listened to her husband, who was speaking with an air of gravity, Madame de Renal's eyewas anxiously following the movements of three little boys. The eldest,who might be about eleven, was continually running to the parapet asthough about to climb on top. A gentle voice then uttered the nameAdolphe, and the child abandoned his ambitious project. Madame deRenal looked like a woman of thirty, but was still extremely pretty.

'He may live to rue the day, that fine gentleman from Paris,' M. deRenal was saying in a tone of annoyance, his cheek paler even than wasits wont. 'I myself am not entirely without friends at Court.'

But albeit I mean to speak to you of provincial life for two hundredpages, I shall not be so barbarous as to inflict upon you the tedium andall the clever turns of a provincial dialogue.

This fine gentleman from Paris, so odious to the Mayor of Verrieres,was none other than M. Appert, 1 who, a couple of days earlier, had contrived to make his way not only into the prison and the poorhouse ofVerrieres, but also into the hospital, administered gratuitously by theMayor and the principal landowners of the neighbourhood.

But,' Madame de Renal put in timidly, 'what harm can this gentlemanfrom Paris do you, since you provide for the welfare of the poor with themost scrupulous honesty?'

'He has only come to cast blame, and then he'll go back and have articles put in the Liberal papers.'

'You never read them, my dear.'

'But people tell us about those Jacobin articles; all that distracts us, andhinders us from doing good. 2 As for me, I shall never forgive the cure.'

A contemporary philanthropist and prison visitor.

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Part 1 Chapter 3

The Bread of the PoorA virtuous priest who does not involve himself in intrigue is ablessing for the village.

FLEURYIt should be explained that the cure of Verrieres, an old man of eighty,but blessed by the keen air of his mountains with an iron character andstrength, had the right to visit at any hour of the day the prison, the hospital, and even the poorhouse. It was at six o'clock in the morning precisely that M. Appert, who was armed with an introduction to the curefrom Paris, had had the good sense to arrive in an inquisitive little town.

He had gone at once to the presbytery.

As he read the letter addressed to him by M. le Marquis de La Mole, aPeer of France, and the wealthiest landowner in the province, the cureChelan sat lost in thought.

'I am old and liked here,' he murmured to himself at length, 'theywould never dare!' Turning at once to the gentleman from Paris, witheyes in which, despite his great age, there burned that sacred fire whichbetokens the pleasure of performing a fine action which is slightlydangerous:

'Come with me, Sir, and, in the presence of the gaoler and especially ofthe superintendents of the poorhouse, be so good as not to express anyopinion of the things we shall see.' M. Appert realised that he had to dealwith a man of feeling; he accompanied the venerable cure, visited theprison, the hospital, the poorhouse, asked many questions and, notwithstanding strange answers, did not allow himself to utter the least wordof reproach.

This visit lasted for some hours. The cure invited M. Appert to dinewith him, but was told that his guest had some letters to write: he didnot wish to compromise his kind friend any further. About three o'clock, the gentlemen went back to complete their inspection of the poorhouse,after which they returned to the prison. There they found the gaolerstanding in the doorway; a giant six feet tall, with bandy legs; terror hadmade his mean face hideous.

'Ah, Sir,' he said to the cure, on catching sight of him, 'is not this gentleman, that I see with you, M. Appert?'

'What if he is?' said the cure.

'Because yesterday I received the most definite instructions, which thePrefect sent down by a gendarme who had to gallop all night long, not toallow M. Appert into the prison.'

'I declare to you, M. Noiroud,' said the cure, 'that this visitor, who is inmy company, is M. Appert. Do you admit that I have the right to enterthe prison at any hour of the day or night, bringing with me whom Iplease?'

'Yes, M. le cure,' the gaoler murmured in a subdued tone, lowering hishead like a bulldog brought reluctantly to obedience by fear of the stick.

'Only, M. le cure, I have a wife and children, if I am reported I shall bedismissed; I have only my place here to live on.'

'I too should be very sorry to lose mine,' replied the worthy cure, in avoice swayed by ever increasing emotion.

'What a difference!' the gaoler answered promptly; 'why you, M. lecure, we know that you have an income of 800 livres, a fine place in thesun '

Such are the events which, commented upon, exaggerated in twentydifferent ways, had been arousing for the last two days all the evil passions of the little town of Verrieres. At that moment they were serving astext for the little discussion which M. de Renal was having with his wife.

That morning, accompanied by M. Valenod, the governor of the poorhouse, he had gone to the cure's house, to inform him of their extremedispleasure. M. Chelan was under no one's protection; he felt the fullforce of their words.

'Well, gentlemen, I shall be the third parish priest, eighty years of age,to be deprived of his living in this district. I have been here for six andfifty years; I have christened almost all the inhabitants of the town,which was no more than a village when I came. Every day I marryyoung couples whose grandparents I married long ago. Verrieres is myfamily; but I said to myself, when I saw the stranger: "This man, who has come from Paris, may indeed be a Liberal, there are far too many ofthem; but what harm can he do to our poor people and our prisoners?"'

The reproaches of M. de Renal, and above all those of M. Valenod, thegovernor of the poorhouse, becoming more and more bitter:

'Very well, gentlemen, have me deprived,' the old cure had cried, in aquavering voice. 'I shall live in the town all the same. You all know thatforty-eight years ago I inherited a piece of land which brings me 800livres; I shall live on that income. I save nothing out of my stipend, gentlemen, and that may be why I am less alarmed when people speak oftaking it from me.'

M. de Renal lived on excellent terms with his wife; but not knowingwhat answer to make to the question, which she timidly repeated: 'Whatharm can this gentleman from Paris do to the prisoners?' he was justabout to lose his temper altogether when she uttered a cry. Her secondson had climbed upon the parapet of the wall of the terrace, and wasrunning along it, though this wall rose more than twenty feet from thevineyard beneath. The fear of alarming her son and so making him fallrestrained Madame de Renal from calling him. Finally the child, whowas laughing at his own prowess, turned to look at his mother, noticedhow pale she was, sprang down upon the avenue and ran to join her. Hewas well scolded.

This little incident changed the course of the conversation.

'I am quite determined to engage young Sorel, the sawyer's son,' saidM. de Renal; 'he will look after the children, who are beginning to be toomuch of a handful for us. He is a young priest or thereabouts, a goodLatin scholar, and will bring the children on; for he has a strong character, the cure says. I shall give him 300 francs and his board. I had somedoubts as to his morals; for he was the Benjamin of that old surgeon, theMember of the Legion of Honour who on pretence of being their cousincame to live with the Sorels. He might quite well have been nothing better than a secret agent of the Liberals; he said that our mountain air wasgood for his asthma; but that has never been proved. He had served inall Buonaparte's campaigns in Italy, and they even say that he votedagainst the Empire in his day. This Liberal taught young Sorel Latin, andleft him all the pile of books he brought here with him. Not that I shouldever have dreamed of having the carpenter's son with my children; butthe cure, only the day before the scene which has made a permanentbreach between us, told me that this Sorel has been studying theology for the last three years, with the idea of entering the Seminary; so he is not aLiberal, and he is a Latin scholar.

'This arrangement suits me in more ways than one,' M. de Renal wenton, looking at his wife with an air of diplomacy; 'Valenod is tremendously proud of the two fine Norman horses he has just bought for hiscalash. But he has not got a tutor for his children.'

'He is quite capable of taking this one from us.'

'Then you approve of my plan?' said M. de Renal, thanking his wife,with a smile, for the excellent idea that had just occurred to her. 'There,that's settled.'

'Oh, good gracious, my dear, how quickly you make up your mind!'

'That is because I have a strong character, as the cure has had occasionto see. Let us make no pretence about it, we are surrounded by Liberalshere. All these cloth merchants are jealous of me, I am certain of it; twoor three of them are growing rich; very well, I wish them to see M. deRenal's children go by, out walking in the care of their tutor. It will makean impression. My grandfather used often to tell us that in his youngdays he had had a tutor. It's a hundred crowns he's going to cost me, butthat will have to be reckoned as a necessary expense to keep up ourposition.'

This sudden decision plunged Madame de Renal deep in thought. Shewas a tall, well-made woman, who had been the beauty of the place, asthe saying is in this mountain district. She had a certain air of simplicityand bore herself like a girl; in the eyes of a Parisian, that artless grace,full of innocence and vivacity, might even have suggested ideas of amildly passionate nature. Had she had wind of this kind of success, Madame de Renal would have been thoroughly ashamed of it. No traceeither of coquetry or of affectation had ever appeared in her nature. M.

Valenod, the wealthy governor of the poorhouse, was supposed to havepaid his court to her, but without success, a failure which had given amarked distinction to her virtue; for this M. Valenod, a tall young man,strongly built, with a vivid complexion and bushy black whiskers, wasone of those coarse, brazen, noisy creatures who in the provinces arecalled fine men.

Madame de Renal, being extremely shy and liable to be swayed by hermoods, was offended chiefly by the restless movements and loud voiceof M. Valenod. The distaste that she felt for what at Verrieres goes by thename of gaiety had won her the reputation of being extremely proud ofher birth. She never gave it a thought, but had been greatly pleased to see the inhabitants of Verrieres come less frequently to her house. Weshall not attempt to conceal the fact that she was reckoned a fool in theeyes of their ladies, because, without any regard for her husband's interests, she let slip the most promising opportunities of procuring finehats from Paris or Besancon. Provided that she was left alone to stroll inher fine garden, she never made any complaint.

She was a simple soul, who had never risen even to the point of criticising her husband, and admitting that he bored her. She supposed,without telling herself so, that between husband and wife there could beno more tender relations. She was especially fond of M. de Renal whenhe spoke to her of his plans for their children, one of whom he intendedto place in the army, the second on the bench, and the third in thechurch. In short, she found M. de Renal a great deal less boring than anyof the other men of her acquaintance.

This wifely opinion was justified. The Mayor of Verrieres owed hisreputation for wit, and better still for good tone, to half a dozen pleasantries which he had inherited from an uncle. This old Captain de Renalhad served before the Revolution in the Duke of Orleans's regiment ofinfantry, and, when he went to Paris, had had the right of entry into thatPrince's drawing-rooms. He had there seen Madame de Montesson, thefamous Madame de Genlis, M. Ducrest, the 'inventor' of the Palais-Royal.

These personages figured all too frequently in M. de Renal's stories. Butby degrees these memories of things that it required so much delicacy torelate had become a burden to him, and for some time now it was onlyon solemn occasions that he would repeat his anecdotes of the House ofOrleans. As he was in other respects most refined, except when the talkran on money, he was regarded, and rightly, as the most aristocratic personage in Verrieres.