http://hallofpeople.com/en/bio/Stendhal.php

Stendhal

THE RED AND THE BLACK

(Chapters 1,2,3,)

Chapter One: A Small Town

Put thousands
together Less
bad, But the
cage less gay.
—HOBBES

The little town of Verrières might be one of the prettiest in all Franche-Comté. Its white houses with their sharp-pointed roofs of red tile stretch down a hillside, every faint ripple in the long slope marked by thick clusters of chestnut trees. A few hundred feet below the ruins of the ancient fortress, built by the Spanish,[3] runs the River Doubs.

To the north, Verrières is sheltered by a great mountain, part of the Jura range. The first frosts of October cover these jagged peaks with snow. A stream that rushes down from the mountains, crossing through Verrières and then pouring itself into the Doubs, powers a

good many sawmills—an immensely simple industry that provides a modest living for most of the inhabitants, more peasant than bourgeois. But the sawmills are not what brought prosperity to the little town. It was the production of printed calico cloth, known as "Mulhouse,"[4] which ever since the fall of Napoleon has created widespread comfort and led to the refinishing of virtually every house in Verrières. Just inside the town, there is a stunning roar from a machine of frightful appearance. Twenty ponderous hammers, falling over and over with a crash that makes the ground tremble, are lifted by a wheel that the stream keeps in motion. Every one of these hammers, each and every day, turns out I don't know how many thousands of nails. And it's pretty, smooth-cheeked young girls who offer pieces of iron to these enormous hammers, which quickly transform them into nails. This operation, visibly harsh and violent, is one of the things that most astonishes a first-time traveler, poking his way into the mountains separating France and Switzerland. And if the traveler, entering Verrières, asks who owns this noble nail-making factory, deafening everyone who walks along the main street, he'll be told, in the drawling accent of the region, "Ah—it belongs to His Honor the Mayor."

If the traveler spends just a moment or two on Verrières's grand thoroughfare, which ascends along the bank of the Doubs right up to the top of the hill, the odds are a hundred to one he'll see a tall man with an air both businesslike and important.

As soon as he appears, every hat is respectfully raised. His hair is grizzled, he's dressed in gray. He wears the insignia of several knightly orders; his forehead is lofty,

his nose aquiline, and taking him all in all there's a certain orderliness about him. At first sight, one even feels that he blends the dignity of mayoral status with the sort of charm still often to be found in a man of forty-five or fifty. But it does not take long for a Parisian traveler to be struck, most unfavorably, by clear signs of self-satisfaction and conceit, topped off by who knows what limitations, what lack of originality. Finally, one is aware that his talents are confined to making sure he is paid exactly what he is owed, while paying what he himself owes only at the last possible moment.

This then is Monsieur de Rênal, mayor of Verrières. Crossing the street with solemn steps, he goes into City Hall and disappears from the traveler's sight. But if the traveler keeps on walking, no more than another hundred paces up the hill he will see a distinguished-looking house and, if he looks through an adjoining wrought-iron gate, a very fine garden. Beyond that, he will see a horizon shaped by Burgundian hills, which seems to have been put there expressly for the purpose of pleasing the eye. This view will help the traveler forget the foul smell of petty financial transactions, which had begun to asphyxiate him.

He is informed that this house belongs to Monsieur de Rênal. The mayor of Verrières owes this fine, just-completed dwelling, built of cut stone, to the profits earned by his noble nail factory. His family, it is explained, is Spanish, ancient, and (as the story is told) settled in the region long before Louis XIV conquered it.

Ever since 1815[5], his status as an industrialist has embarrassed him. It was 1815 that made him mayor of Verrières. The terrace walls around the different parts of this magnificent garden, holding in place each of the

different levels descending almost to the Doubs, are yet another reward for Monsieur de Rênal's iron-trade business acumen.

Nowhere in France can you hope to find the picturesque gardens surrounding Germany's manufacturing towns—Leipzig, Frankfurt, Nuremberg, etc. In Franche-Comté, the more walls you put up, the more your property bristles with rocks heaped one on top of another, the more claim you have on your neighbors' respect. Monsieur de Rênal's gardens, packed with walls, are even more admired because he bought—for just about their weight in gold—the bits and pieces of land on which they lie. For example, the sawmill located so strangely right on the bank of the Doubs, which caught your eye as you entered Verrières, and on which you noticed the nameSOREL, written in gigantic letters on a board protruding over the roof, until six years ago had stood exactly where, at this very moment, they are building the wall for the fourth terrace of Monsieur de Rênal's garden.

For all his haughty pride, Monsieur de Rênal had been obliged to make a good many overtures to old Sorel, a tough, stubborn peasant; he had to count out a stack of handsome gold coins before the old man agreed to move his business elsewhere. As for the *public* stream that had powered the sawmill, Monsieur de Rênal relied on the influence he enjoyed in Paris to have it diverted. This official favor had come to him after the elections of 182-.

To get one acre, he had given Sorel four, situated five hundred paces farther down the bank of the Doubs. And even though the new location was far more advantageous for his trade in pine boards, Père Sorel (as they call him, now that he's a rich man) knew how to play on his neighbor's pressing impatience, and his *land-owning mania,*

squeezing out a sale price of six thousand francs.

To be sure, the transaction was criticized by wiser heads in the area. Once, about four o'clock on a Sunday, coming home from church, dressed in his mayoral robes, Monsieur de Rênal saw in the distance old Sorel, surrounded by his three sons, watching him and smiling. That smile proved fatally illuminating to the mayor: he realized, from then on, that he could have bought the land for less.

To earn a public reputation in Verrières, the essential thing—while of course building a great many walls—is not to adopt some design carried across the Jura gorges by Italian stonemasons, in their springtime pilgrimages to Paris. Any such innovation would earn the imprudent builder the unshakable taint of *rebel;* he would be forever after ruined in the eyes of the wise, moderate folk who parcel out reputation in Franche-Comté.

In truth, these wise fellows wield an incredibly wearisome *despotism,* and it is precisely this wretched word that makes small towns unlivable for those who have been successful in that great republic we call Paris. The tyranny of opinion—and such opinion!—is every bit as *idiotic* in the small towns of France as it is in the United States of America.

Chapter Two: A Mayor

Importance! My dear sir, isn't that worthless? The respect of donkeys, the astonishment of small children, the rich man's jealousy and the wise man's disdain.
—BARNAVE[7]

Happily for Monsieur de Rênal's reputation as an administrator, a huge *retaining wall* was required for the public walkway running along the hillside, roughly a hundred feet above the Doubs. This wonderful location gives it one of the most picturesque views in all France. But every spring the rains had regularly furrowed the walkway, digging out gullies and rendering it impassable. This inconvenience, which affected everyone, placed Monsieur de Rênal under the fortunate obligation of immortalizing his administration by a wall twenty feet high and well over two hundred feet long.

The upper portion of this wall—on behalf of which Monsieur de Rênal had been compelled to make three trips to Paris, because the former minister of the interior had declared himself the mortal enemy of Verrières's walkway—the upper portion of this walkway had now grown to be four feet above the ground. And as if to challenge all the ministers, present and past, at this very moment slabs of cut stone are being put in place.

How many times, dreaming about Parisian balls long left behind, with my chest pressed against those great blocks of stone—a lovely gray streaked with blue—has my glance plunged down into the valley through which the Doubs runs! Out there, along the left bank, five or six valleys go meandering, the eye easily able to distinguish small

streams tumbling through them. Having splashed through one waterfall after another, one sees them pouring into the Doubs. The sun is powerful, in these mountains: when it shines directly overhead, a traveler's daydreaming, as he stands on this raised earthwork, is sheltered by magnificent plane trees. They owe their rapid growth, as well as their beautiful foliage, green tinted with blue, to the earth brought by the mayor and deposited behind his huge retaining wall, for in spite of the Municipal Council's opposition, he had enlarged the walkway by more than six feet—I commend him for this, although he is a monarchist and I a liberal[8]—and indeed that is why, in his opinion and that of Monsieur Valenod, the fortunate director of the Pauper's Bureau in Verrières, this raised earthwork can bear comparison to that of Paris's Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

For myself, I find only one thing to object to, about Loyalty Walkway. One can read this formal title in fifteen or twenty places, on marble plaques that earned Monsieur de Rênal an extra star on his official medal. But what I disapprove of about Loyalty Walkway is the barbarous way the authorities cut and clip those vigorous plane trees, down to the very quick. Instead of looking as if their heads were bowed low, plump and round and debased like the most vulgar of garden vegetables, they ask only to be granted the magnificent shapes one sees them assume in England. His Honor the Mayor is a despot, and twice a year all trees belonging to the town are shorn without pity. Those of liberal belief pretend (though they exaggerate) that the town gardener's hand has become even more severe since Father Maslon decided to impound for church use the profits from this shearing.

This young ecclesiastic was sent out from Besançon, some years ago, to keep watch on Father Chélan and

several other priests in the neighborhood. An old surgeon-major,[9] a veteran of the Italian wars who had retired to Verrières, and who in his lifetime had been (according to His Honor the Mayor) both a Jacobin[10] and a Bonapartist, actually had the nerve to complain to the mayor about the periodic mutilation of these beautiful trees.

"I like shade," replied Monsieur de Rênal with the arrogant tone so appropriate when speaking to a surgeon and member of the Legion of Honor.[11] "I love shade, and I have *my* trees cut so they provide shade, nor can I conceive of any other use for trees, especially when, unlike the useful walnut, they *bring in no revenue.*"

And there you have the mighty words that, in Verrières, decide everything: *bring in no revenue.* This phrase alone is representative of the habitual views of more than three-quarters of the inhabitants.

Bring in no revenue, then, explains every decision taken in this little town, which seemed to you so pretty. The arriving traveler, seduced at first by the beauty of the deep, green valleys all around, fancies that these are people who appreciate the *beautiful;* indeed, they're constantly chattering about the loveliness of their countryside, nor can one deny that they in fact appreciate it—but simply because it attracts outsiders whose money fattens up innkeepers, which in turn, via the local tax system, *brings in revenue.*

One fine autumn day Monsieur de Rênal strolled along Loyalty Walkway, his wife on his arm. While listening to her husband, who addressed her in serious tones, Madame de Rênal's glance anxiously followed the movements of her three little boys. The oldest, who might have been eleven, kept coming over to the stone wall, clearly thinking about climbing up on top. Her gentle voice called out, "Adolphe,"

and the child gave up his ambitious project.

Madame de Rênal seemed to be about thirty, but still quite pretty.

"He's going to regret it, this fine gentleman from Paris," said Monsieur de Rênal, obviously offended, his cheeks even paler than usual. "I'm not entirely without friends at the castle...."

But though I propose to tell you about provincial life for some hundreds of pages, I will not barbarously submit you to the prolixity, the *wise heavy-footedness* of country conversation. This fine gentleman from Paris, so unbearable to the mayor of Verrières, was none other than Monsieur Appert, who two days earlier had found a way not only to push himself into both Verrières's prison and its Pauper's Bureau, but also into the hospital, which the mayor and the principal landowners administered free of charge.

"But," said Madame de Rênal timidly, "what harm could this gentleman from Paris possibly do you, since you look after the welfare of the poor with such scrupulous integrity?"

"He's come here just to *dig up* scandal, and then he'll have articles appearing in the liberal newspapers."

"You never read them, my dear."

"But people talk to us about those Jacobin articles; it's distracting, *and it keeps us from doing good.*[13] And as for me, I'm never going to forgive the parish priest."

Chapter Three: A Priest

You need to know that Verrières's parish priest, an old man of eighty, who owed his health and his iron will to the brisk air of these mountains, had the right to visit the prison, the hospital, and even the Pauper's Bureau at any time he wished. Monsieur Appert, who had been recommended to the parish priest by people in Paris, had the good sense to arrive in this gossipy little town at exactly six o'clock in the morning. And he went straight to the rectory.

Father Chélan read the letter from Marquis de La Mole, a French nobleman and the largest landowner in the province, then sat quietly contemplating it.

"I'm an old man, and well loved here," he finally murmured. "They wouldn't dare!" Quickly looking up at the gentleman from Paris, his eyes were gleaming, despite his age, with a special consecrated fire that showed how delightful he found it, plunging himself into something both good and rather risky:

"Come with me, sir, and in the presence of the jailer and, above all, of the superintendents at the Pauper's Bureau, please express no opinion whatsoever on the things we will be seeing."

Monsieur Appert understood that he was dealing with a high-minded man: he followed the venerable priest, went to the prison, the old people's home, the poorhouse, asked a great many questions and, in spite of some extraordinary responses, did not allow himself the slightest indication of criticism.

These visits lasted several hours. The priest invited Monsieur Appert to dine with him, but the gentleman from Paris pretended to have letters to write: besides, he did not want to compromise his generous companion-in-arms. About three o'clock the two men went to inspect the Pauper's Bureau, then returned to the prison. There, they found the jailer standing at the door, a tall, bow-legged giant of a man; fright had transformed his ugly face into something truly hideous.

"Ah! Monsieur," he said to the priest, the moment he saw them, "this gentleman I see here with you, isn't he Monsieur Appert?"

"And?" said the priest.

"It's just that, as of yesterday, I have the most precise orders, sent by the chief of police and delivered by a gendarme who had to gallop all night, that Monsieur Appert mustn't be allowed into the prison."

"Let me inform you, Monsieur Noiroud," said the priest, "that this traveler, here with me, is Monsieur Appert. Remember that I have the right to enter the prison at any hour, day or night, accompanied by whomever I choose."

"Yes, Father," said the jailer, his voice low, bowing his head like a bulldog obliged to do as he is told, but reluctantly, for fear of the stick. "It's just, Father, I've got a wife and kids, and if anyone squeals on me I'll be a beggar. All I've got to live on is my job."

"I'd be just as sorry to lose mine," said the good priest, his voice increasingly emotional. "But what a difference!" the jailer answered quickly. "You, Father, everyone knows you've got an income of eight hundred francs a year, good land under the warm sun...."

These are the things that, for two days—gossiped

about, exaggerated twenty different ways—stirred up malignant passions all over the little town of Verrières. Just now, they were serving as the text for a little discussion Monsieur de Rênal was having with his wife. That morning, accompanied by Monsieur Valenod, director of the Pauper's Bureau, he had gone to see the parish priest, bearing witness to the liveliest sort of dissatisfaction. No one was there to shield Father Chélan; he alone bore the weight of these gentlemen's remarks.

"Well then, gentlemen! At eighty years of age, I'll become the third parish priest to be dismissed in this district. I've been here fifty-six years; I've baptized virtually everyone living in the town, which was no more than a farmers' market when I arrived. Day after day I marry all the young people, just as I've long since married their grandparents. Verrières is my family— but what I said to myself, seeing this stranger from Paris, was: 'Perhaps this man is in fact a liberal, we see all too many of them. But what harm can he do our poor folk and our prisoners?'"

Monsieur de Rênal's harsh words, and especially those of Monsieur Valenod, as director of the Pauper's Bureau, grew more and more strident.

"Well then, gentlemen, dismiss me," the old priest cried, his voice trembling. "I'm still going to live here. Everyone knows that, forty-eight years ago, I inherited land that brings in eight hundred francs. I will live on that. I don't put away anything from my salary, which may be why I'm never frightened when there's talk of taking it away from me."

Monsieur de Rênal got on very well with his wife, but he had not known how to reply when she'd asked, timidly, "What harm can this gentleman from Paris do to the

prisoners?" He was about to grow angry when, suddenly, she choked back a cry. Her second son had just climbed to the top of the wall around the terrace, and was running along it, although it soared more than twenty feet above the vineyard on the other side. Fear of frightening her child, and causing him to tumble down, had kept her from calling out. Finally, laughing at his success, the boy looked over at his mother, saw how pale she was, and, jumping down to the walkway, ran over to her. He got a good scolding. This minor episode changed the whole course of their conversation.

"I've really got to bring that Sorel into the house," said Monsieur de Rênal. "The sawmill operator's son. He'll keep an eye on the children: they're getting to be too much for you. He's a young priest, or very nearly, an expert Latinist, and he'll help the children make good progress, because Father Chélan tells me he's a solid sort. I'll give him three hundred francs and his board.

"I had some doubts on the question of morality, because Sorel was the favorite of that old surgeon, the one who was a member of the Legion of Honor and who came to live with the Sorels, under the pretense that he was actually related to the family. The man might very well have been, after all, a secret agent for the liberals. He used to say that our mountain air was good for his asthma, but who knows if that was true or not? He was with *Buonoparté*[15] on all his Italian campaigns, and once, I've heard, he even voted against the Empire.[16] This liberal taught Latin to young Sorel, and left him all the books he'd brought with him.

"Also, I would never have dreamed of having someone right out of a sawmill here in the house, around our children, but Father Chélan—actually, just the night before

the quarrel that has estranged us forever—told me Sorel had been studying theology for three years, planning to enter the seminary, so he's no liberal: he's a Latinist.

"This would be a sensible arrangement in more ways than one," Monsieur de Rênal continued, while watching his wife with a diplomatic air. "Valenod's terribly proud of that pair of Normands he just bought, for pulling his fancy carriage. But his children don't have a tutor."

"He might very well steal ours."

"So you like my plan?" said Monsieur de Rênal, thanking his wife, with a smile, for the excellent idea she'd just had. "All right, then. It's decided."

"Ah, good Lord! My dear, how quickly you make up your mind!"

"It's because, me, I know what I'm doing—and our parish priest has seen that. Let's be completely open about it: we're surrounded by liberals, here. All these calico dealers are jealous of me, I'm quite sure of it; two or three have gotten rich—well now! I'm going to be powerfully pleased when they see Monsieur de Rênal's children passing by, on their way to the walkway, accompanied by *their tutor.* That's going to make an impression. My grandfather always used to tell us how, in his youth, he had a tutor. This one will cost me a hundred gold crowns,[17] but we must see this expense as something necessary to preserve our social standing."

This sudden decision left Madame de Rênal distinctly pensive. She was a tall, well-made woman, who had been the local beauty, as people in these mountains put it. There was a distinct straightforwardness about her, and in the youthful spring of her walk: indeed, to the eyes of a Parisian such unspoiled charm, as innocent as it was lively, might even have seemed suggestive of a sweet sensuality. Had she been told this was the sort of effect she

produced, Madame de Rênal would have been deeply ashamed. She had never in her life been tempted either to flirtation or any manner of affected behavior. Monsieur Valenod, the wealthy director of the Pauper's Bureau, was said to have tried making advances to her, quite without success, which threw her virtue into high relief, for he was a tall young man, strongly built, with a florid face and great black whiskers—one of those coarse creatures, shameless and loud, that they call, in the provinces, good fellows.

Madame de Rênal, terribly shy and equally moody, was above all else disturbed at Monsieur Valenod's incessant moving about, and the blaring of his voice. Her antipathy to what Verrières called pleasure had gotten her a reputation for snobbishness. No such thing had ever crossed her mind, but she'd been perfectly happy to see fewer and fewer townsfolk calling at her house. Nor should we hide the fact that, in the eyes of the town's *ladies,* she was an outright fool, since with not the slightest regard for proper management of her husband, she passed over the loveliest opportunities for buying beautiful hats from Paris or Besançon. But if they just let her wander about in her fine garden, she never complained.

This was, in short, an artless soul who had never so much as thought of passing judgment on her husband and admitting to herself that he bored her. It seemed to her, though not in so many words, that no relationship between husband and wife could be any better. She was especially fond of Monsieur de Rênal when he spoke to her about his plans for their children, the first of whom he meant to make a soldier, the second a judge, and the third a priest. That is, she found Monsieur de Rênal less boring than any other man she knew.

Nor was this marital opinion an irrational one. His Honor the Mayor of Verrières owed his reputation for wit and, above all, for good breeding to half a dozen jokes he had inherited from an uncle. Old Captain de Rênal, before the Revolution, had served in an infantry regiment commanded by the Duke d'Orléans, [18] and when he'd been in Paris had been entertained in the prince's drawing rooms. There, he had seen Madame de Montesson,[19] the celebrated Madame de Genlis, and Monsieur Ducrest, who had redesigned the Royal Palace.[20] These personages kept popping up, over and over, in Monsieur de Rênal's stories. But little by little this echo of events exceedingly ticklish in the telling became laborsome for him, and after a time he repeated his anecdotes about the House of Orléans only on great occasions. Besides, since he was extremely polite, except when the topic was money, he was very properly thought of as the most aristocratic person in all Verrières.