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The Red and the Black

Stendhal

From his earliest childhood he had experienced moments of rapture. Then, he would dream with delight that he would one day encounter the beautiful women of Paris, and would compel their attention by some famous deed. Why should he not be loved by one of them as Bonaparte, while still poor, had been loved by the brilliant Mme de Beauharnais? For many years, scarcely an hour of Julien's life passed without his telling himself that Bonaparte, an obscure and penniless lieutenant, had made himself the master of the world with his sword. This idea consoled him for his sufferings, which he thought great, and redoubled his happiness when he had any.

The construction of the church and the Justice of the Peace's judgements suddenly enlightened him; and an idea came to him which made him distraught for some weeks, and seized hold of him with the overwhelming force belonging to the first idea with which a passionate nature believes itself to have been inspired.

'When Bonaparte made people talk about him, France was in danger of invasion; military talent was necessary and fashionable. Today one sees 40-year-old priests with stipends of a hundred thousand francs, that is to say, three times more than Napoleon's famous generals. They need people behind them to support them. Look at this Justice of the Peace, so sensible, such a fine upstanding man until now, so established, who has dishonoured himself for fear of offending a young clergyman of thirty. It is necessary to be a priest.'

On one occasion, in the midst of this new piety, and after he had already been studying theology for two years, he was betrayed into a sudden eruption of the fire that consumed his soul. At M. Chélan's dwelling, during a dinner for the clergy to whom the good curé was presenting him as a prodigy of tuition, he found himself

fervidly praising Napoleon. He bound his right arm across his chest, pretending it had been dislocated in moving a pine trunk, and carried it in this irksome position for two months. After this bodily penance, he absolved himself. This was the young man of nineteen - but so seemingly frail that one would have taken him for no more than seventeen - who, carrying his little parcel under his arm, entered the magnificent church of Verrières.

He found it sombre and solitary. To mark a festival all the church windows had been covered with crimson cloth. The sun's rays shone through to produce a dim light, most pious and imposing. Julien shivered. Alone in the church, he established himself in the pew that had the finest appearance. It bore the arms of M. de Rênal.

On the payer desk Julien noticed a fragment of printed paper, spread out as though to be read. He directed his eyes towards it and saw:

Details of the execution and the last moments of Louis Jenrel, executed at Besancon, on the...

The paper was torn off. On the other side could be seen the first words of a line, which were: The first step.

- Who could have put this paper here? said Julien. Poor devil, he added with a sigh, his names ends like mine... and he crumpled the paper.

Leaving, Julien thought he saw blood next to the holy water stoup - it was holy water that had been spilled: the reflection from the red blinds covering the windows gave it the appearance of blood.

Eventually Julien was ashamed of his secret terror.

- Am I a coward! he said to himself, To arms!

This phrase, so often repeated in the Surgeon-major's accounts of battles, represented the heroic for Julien. He raised himself up and walked rapidly towards M. de Rênal's house.

In spite of these fine resolves, from the moment he saw it twenty paces away, he was seized with an overpowering timidity. The iron grille was open; to him it seemed magnificent; and it was up to him to enter in.