JULIEN
This play takes place in the town of Verrières.¹ My name is Julien Sorel² and I’m the main character. I was born here in Verrières. My status is that of peasant, even though my father owns the sawmill, and pays enough taxes to have the vote. I hate Verrières, lock, stock and barrel, peasants, upper classes and bourgeoisie. You’d have to live here to know how awful it is. Me, I was born here, and I’ll die here. I have no education—no, that’s not true. An army officer retired here, and he took a liking to me. He used to pay my father my wages so he could spend the day tutoring me. When he died, he left me his books. My favorite is the Memorial of Saint Helena, Napoleon’s memoirs. The man sitting behind me is the village priest, Father Chélan. He’s the other reason I’m not a complete ignoramus. He taught me Latin. You should know something about Father Chélan: he is a truly pious, honorable man. For a priest, that’s unheard of.

* * *

JULIEN (to us)
Under the Emperor, a man could make his way by his talents. Bonaparte, poor, with no friends, made himself master of the world with his sword. But nowadays the army’s for the rich, and a priest makes three times as much money as one of Napoleon’s generals.

(He crosses to the church.)
This is our church. It’s as big as a cathedral. When this huge church was built in our little town, I began to realize that a career in the church made more sense. I’ll pray in the de Rênal pew. It’s the best. Somebody’s left a piece of paper in it.

(picks it up and reads)
“Details of the death and last moments of Louis Jenrel,³ executed at Besançon—” Poor devil, his name ends like mine. Where’s the rest of it?

(He turns the paper over.)
“The first step.” . . . Time for me to go.

(He begins to sob. He stands, crumples the paper, tosses it away. Looks around.)
They put up red cloth for the saint’s day. The light coming through it makes the holy water look like blood. It’s stupid to be afraid.

* * *

¹ Verrières = very-AIR
² Sorel = sor-RELL.
³ Louis Jenrel = lou-EE zhan-RELL
JULIEN
My name is Julien Sorel, madam, and this will be the first time in my life that I’ve ever been in a strange house, and I’m trembling with fear. I ask for your protection and forgiveness for all the mistakes I’m going to make in the beginning. I’ve never been to school; I was too poor. I’ve never spoken to any other men but my cousin the surgeon, who was an army doctor, and a member of the Legion of Honor. The priest, Father Chélan, will vouch for my character. My brothers hate me and if you ask them they’ll lie about me. Pardon my faults, madam; they won’t come from bad intentions. I will never strike your children, this I swear before God.

* * *

JULIEN (to us, reciting a letter)
“I woke up filled with you. Your image, the portrait of you that I carry in my head, and the memory of yesterday’s intoxicating evening had never left me.” Napoleon was twenty-six when he wrote that. He misspelled portrait. I’m nineteen—shouldn’t I seduce one of these women? Don’t I owe it to my self-esteem? Louise is prettier—she’s an angel—but I’d rather have Madam Derville. She doesn’t know I’m a peasant, son of a carpenter. She wouldn’t despise me for my low birth. Well then, Madam de Rênal it must be. That way if anybody ever throws the fact that I was a tutor at me, I’ll be able to reply that it was because of love. It’s so dark that you can’t see your own hand in front of your face. Suppose I take Madam de Rênal’s hand—oh, God—the thought terrifies me. What if she won’t let me? What if she screams? What if I’m dismissed? Will I have all these cowardly emotions when I fight my first duel? How can I dream of being another Napoleon? It’s nonsense. All right. I’ll give myself until ten o’clock. When the chateau clock strikes ten, I’ll take her hand. Either I’ll take her hand, or I’ll go to my room and blow my brains out.

* * *

JULIEN
Good morning, mademoiselle.

(ELISA runs out. JULIEN speaks to us.)
Fouqué was still up when I arrived. We had supper at one in the morning, as if we were in Paris, not up in the mountains. We talked about women—Fouqué talked, anyway. I don’t have any experience, and he’s had a lot of experience, even though he’s only three years older than I am. He offered me half his profits if I stay and do his bookkeeping for a few years. He says I could save six thousand francs, or at the very least, three thousand. I could stay with him for seven years and go to the seminary with a nice bonus, like the money they give a convict when he gets out. I might even have enough money to go into the army. Fouqué has so much influence with the archbishop that he could get me the best parish in the diocese. He sells hearts of oak to the archbishop and only charges for pine . . . Should I trick my friend? Fouqué told me he doesn’t intend to get married. He’s lonely. If he brings me into the business—me, with no money to invest—it’s because he wants a friend and a partner for life. He didn’t tell me that—he probably doesn’t know it himself. Should I trick my friend? And after I live as a bourgeois for seven or eight years,
will I have any ambition left? . . . What am I thinking of? I’d lose seven or eight of the best years of my life, the years when Bonaparte was winning his greatest victories. I’ll tell Fouqué that I have my vocation and that I can’t postpone it. He’ll think I’m crazy. Ah! I haven’t thought about Madame de Rênal for three days.

* * *

JULIEN (to us)
Her new dress frightens me. I’ve never seen anybody look so pretty. And apparently it’s on my account. It doesn’t matter. Soon she’ll remember that I’m not well-born. I suppose I ought to take advantage of her, though, while I have the opportunity. I wish I had some of Fouqué’s experience.

(JULIEN, preoccupied, drops Louise’s hand.)
Oh, what a coward I am! And I have no principles. I’m still thinking about accepting Fouqué’s offer, even though it would wreck everything I want to do in my life.

(LOUISE gropes for and takes Julien’s hand.)
What do I know about this woman? She knows I’m a peasant and the son of a peasant. So she must despise me, but she takes my hand when I let go of hers. Well, then, this is my chance to get even with her. And she’s very beautiful. That ought to count for something. God knows how many lovers she’s had. She’s probably only paying attention to me because I’m part of the household, like the pet rabbit.

* * *

JULIEN (to us)
Not a word, not a look. I never dreamed that this woman, whom I once despised, could make me so miserable. When she was in love with me—not even a week ago—I took it for granted—it was just another one of the odd features of living in a society I don’t understand. Why couldn’t I have been content with her friendship? That was real. But I listened to Fouqué and I envied his success with women, and then—this is humiliating!—I got that all mixed up in my head with Napoleon’s victories. I thought I had to make a conquest of this woman. I got her confused with the battle of Austerlitz. I forgot that I have no experience with women, and I don’t know anything about them, not that way. No, that’s not right. Before I met Madam de Rênal, I’d never even had a ten-minute conversation with a woman. I don’t know anything about women at all! Or men either! I’m not sure I’m even human! . . . I’m not fit for anything—not the army, not the church—good Lord, not the church—what a disaster I’d have been as a priest—and as far as being a great lover, a seducer of women, what a joke. In the morning I’ll write to Fouqué, and tell Monsieur de Rênal I’m leaving. At least I know what his reaction will be. He’ll offer me more money. I suppose I could drown myself.

* * *

THE RED AND THE BLACK I  © 2012 by Deloss Brown
JULIEN (to us)
Louise was right about the revolution. It came in 1830. It only lasted three days, and it
didn’t change much. We traded the Bourbon king for one from the house of Orleans.
Nobody set up a guillotine, and Louise’s children were never in any danger. She wrote to
me many times when I was at the seminary. I never got her letters. The priests read them,
then they burned them. Priests have to have fun, too. And then Louise confessed to Father
Chélan, who told her that all her feelings belonged to her husband, and that with me she
had been committing a great sin, and so forth and so on, and she stopped writing, and I
never knew about any of it. So there should have been nothing to disturb my tranquility at
the seminary. All I’ll say about the seminary is that it would have been an ideal subject for
Molière. I genuinely admired Monsieur de Rênal. He was honest, and had a good heart,
and stood out like a piece of gold in the mud of that pigsty Verrières, in which Valenod
was king of pigs. So naturally de Rênal was dismissed as mayor, and Valenod was
appointed in his place, and made a baron. Baron Valenod! And I never saw it coming.
God in heaven, will I always be a fool? I did get to see Louise twice more, once when she
came to a procession in Besançon, and once when I went back to Verrières to murder her.
(Music.) But all of that is still in the future. This was only the first step.